

Henrik Lawrence Keeler

“We! What Rubbish”

An Exploration of the Haunting and the Rupture of White Colonial Identity in
Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* and J. M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the
Country*



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Supervised by: Professor Irene Iversen
Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oslo
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Abstract:

In this thesis I analyse two novels from Southern Africa: *The Grass is Singing* (1950) by Doris Lessing and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) by J. M. Coetzee. I argue that they are anti-pastoral farm novels that employ uncanny narrative elements to oppose the ideology of pastoral literature and stage a haunting of white colonial identity and society. This haunting takes place on a thematic and a metatextual level, and the critical strategy of the novels is to dissect society while simultaneously dissecting themselves. The novels describe a culture and a society in a position in-between a European and a South African intellectual tradition, while correspondingly problematizing their own cultural *in-betweenness* by invoking a wide range of European intertexts. The invocation of these intertexts enhances the novel's critical potential by revealing the problematic relationship between power, identity and narration.

In *The Grass is Singing*, white colonial society is described as petty, racist and misogynistic, with a strong hierarchical structure. This structure is perpetuated intellectually through literature and discourse, and physically through violence and social coercion. By using Simone de Beauvoir's concepts immanent/transcendent from *The Second Sex* (1949), I claim that the pressure to play her part as a woman dooms the protagonist Mary Turner to an immanent life she is unsuited to lead. Only by living a life traditionally assigned to men, as independent, solitary and active, does she transcend her given conditions and experience moments of success and contentment. On the thematic level, the Gothic is present in the text through the houseboy Moses' role as a ghost representing the repressed black population sent to haunt the Turners. The sexually toned relationship he develops with Mary plays upon the colonial fear of miscegenation. It further challenges the dynamics between master and servant, and forces Mary to face subdued elements of both the society in which she lives and her own psyche.

On a metatextual level, I analyse the narration of the novel in detail. Through occasional shifts into a Gothic narrative mode, the novel creates an uncanny atmosphere that resists the textual white idyll so typical for the pastoral farm novel. By relating Mary's thoughts and the local gossip in free indirect style, the narrator tells parts of the story in the same racist discourse he is criticizing. This way, the narrator can enter into several discourses with incompatible value systems. This means that the text itself shifts between contradictory ideologies, which displays the novelistic ability to move seamlessly between the acts of dismantling and perpetuating ideologies, and draws the reader's attention to the difficulty for a novel to remain an ideologically neutral, aesthetic object in a colonial context.

In my second analysis, I claim that *In the Heart of the Country* seeks to articulate the intricate relationship between language and social structures. By conducting close readings of the Afrikaans dialogue in the 1978 Ravan edition I expose how these social structures are linguistically mirrored, for example, in the characters' use of pronouns. The novel's strong emphasis on sexual deviance, violence, the body and the scatological signals the presence of the Gothic while also juxtaposing the physical with the discursive. The protagonist, Magda, refers to language as a code, indicating that language is a structure put in place of reality, and that it is a systematic collection of laws. This questions the referential correspondence language has to reality and exposes a reciprocal but highly problematic relationship.

While the novel is a monologue performed by Magda, her confusing narration challenges the concept of authorial power and exposes that the writing subject always writes from a position of *situatedness*. This lays bare the unreliability of the narrative act, which is at the mercy of linguistic structures that dictates what the writing subject can articulate. This is emphasized when Magda's narration perpetuates the very notions of race and gender that she is trying to reject. When she starts having sexual feelings for her servant, Hendrik, she cannot imagine interracial sexual intercourse happening in any way other than by rape, which she fixates on compulsively. Thus, her narration perpetuates the stereotypical image of the black man as a rapist and confirms the social structures on the farm. Magda describes her initiation into these structures by using metaphors for incestuous rape, which makes Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical theories of the symbolic and the semiotic relevant. Magda is trying to overthrow these power structures, the symbolic, and to instate a new discourse, more closely aligned to the semiotic. But because she is trapped in the old structures, she becomes an incoherent *subject-in-process* that ultimately falls back on the pastoral discourse she is trying to reject.

I conclude that while *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country* are stylistically very different from each other, their critical strategy is similar. Their critical gaze looks both at society and back towards themselves, but demonstrate that metafiction, the exploration of literature, language and narration, carries societal relevance *in itself*. If language, power and identity are inseparably intertwined in a subtle but destructive relationship, metafiction gains critical potency in its contribution to the exposition of these correlations. By undermining the *imaginative command* and exposing the ideological positioning of the writing and narrating subject, these self-referential texts offer insights that are relevant far beyond their own textual limits.

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The image on the cover is painted by Bjarte Myhre and instantly made me think of the haunting of a split subject. It's probably something different entirely, but I thank him for letting me use it.

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Introduction: Literature from a Site of Convergence

“The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.” - Antonio Gramsci¹

“White writing is white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African.” - J. M. Coetzee²

In this thesis I will do a reading of two novels from Southern Africa: Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and J. M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). These novels constitute African white writing, which I will demonstrate is written in a cultural interregnum causing a range of morbid and Gothic symptoms. Both novels are early works of the authors. *The Grass is Singing* is Lessing’s debut and *In the Heart of the Country* is Coetzee’s second novel. The two novels differ from each other stylistically, but revolve around many of the same themes and motifs, making them suitable for a comparative analysis. The former takes place in Southern Rhodesia and the latter in South Africa, but they can both be considered attempts to rewrite the pastoral farm novel, an important novelistic tradition in white South African writing.

This tendency to rewrite the farm novel has become so common in South African writing that it actually constitutes a genre of its own, namely *the anti-pastoral farm novel*. I place the two novels in this tradition. Important characteristics of this genre are isolation from the world at large and a certain Gothic ambience. The Gothic often gives association to cheap and archaic European literature, but in this thesis I will argue that the Gothic is a complex literary term, that points to a type of literature in which repressed elements of society come back to haunt the texts and the fictional universes they describe. In other words, the Gothic is actually a literary criticism of society. For a European reader, the Gothic might not be the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of contemporary South African fiction, and I am not arguing that South African literature is *essentially* Gothic. In fact, not much literature is. The Gothic, in a literary context as opposed to an architectural context, is a modern term used mostly to describe dark literature from the 19th century, as well other types of literature that embody elements of horror, the grotesque and the uncanny. An important emphasis is that Gothic literature embodies *elements* of the Gothic,³ and needs not be *purely* Gothic in order to

¹ Quoted by Nadine Gordimer as the epigraph to *July’s People* (1981).

² (Coetzee 2007: 12).

³ Jack Shear writes that “the genre is a collection of narrative, thematic, and aesthetic elements such as madness, enclosure, monstrosity, the baroque, doubling, incest, discontinuous narrative, sexual predation, ruins, and, of course, haunting” (Shear 2006: 71). Most of these elements will be discussed in my thesis.

be part of that genre. For this reason, the term Gothic can apply to a wide range of diverse literature.⁴

The anti-pastoral farm novel can thus be said to be a *morbid* rewriting of the farm novel, in which the repressed elements of the former genre haunt the latter in order to subvert the racial and gendered power structures. But the Gothic is present also in the themes and the plot of the anti-pastoral farm novel. In order to stress a point I only allude to above, I argue that South African literature *in general* is explicitly morbid, with the aesthetics of violence, horror, death, blood, rape, incest and other sexual taboos being the rule rather than the exception. These aesthetics are particularly obvious in the anti-pastoral farm novel, making the quotation by Antonio Gramsci above especially relevant for this genre. The two novels I analyse, describe the inevitably morbid symptoms of a transition that is positive, but traumatic.

Partly due to this Gothic presence, the two novels I analyse become a critique of white colonial society, identity and mentality. The texts reveal that the racial hierarchy that colonial society is structured around is a porous and a contradictory intellectual construction. By employing a range of Gothic elements, focusing on subversive sexuality and describing the failure of the characters to enact the roles of the racial hierarchy, the novels stage a haunting, destruction and exposure of the supposedly natural hierarchy, demonstrating that it is a fragile construction upheld by a constantly enforced and policed performance.

Further common denominators is that the novels take place at isolated, poor farms, supposed to be agricultural Gardens of Eden, but where the white farmers in reality can barely eke out a living. Another similarity is that the protagonists in both novels are female, letting the novels lend themselves to analyses of women's position in the racial hierarchy. White women have a very complicated place in colonial Southern Africa as they become oppressed oppressors, and at least in these two cases, fail to see the link between the discrimination from which they suffer and that which they perpetuate themselves. Both Mary and Magda, the two protagonists, border on this understanding, but fail to achieve it due to their colonial language and mindset.

The two novels are also excellent objects for analysing the relationship between language/discourse and reality. Both deal with colonial psychosis, nervous breakdowns, controversial sexual relations, at least in a colonial context, and violence, all of which are

⁴Jack Shear writes that "Unrestrained by social positioning, the spirit of Gothic fiction is migratory; one can speak of a technological Gothic, a Japanese Gothic, or a postmodern Gothic". (Shear 2006: 73). And as we shall see: a postcolonial Gothic, a South African Gothic etc.

physical consequences of colonialism. But at the same time they expose how these issues are results of an intellectual notion of a racial and gendered hierarchy. In addition to this, the metatextuality of the novels informs the reader of the treacherous nature of the novelistic form itself as it can perpetuate and dismantle a certain ideology in equal measure.

This metatextual level displays the problematic nature of writing and the novelistic form in a colonial context. In her book, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, the South African postcolonial critic Elleke Boehmer states that her book is “about the writing of empire, and about writing in opposition to empire. It looks at a historical series of imaginative acts involved with colonization and its aftermath” (Boehmer 2005: 1). Here, she points to the Janus face of literature in general. Literature is a series of *imaginative acts*, with a highly problematic relationship to reality. It is separated from reality and thought of as something else: fiction. Yet, judging by the apartheid government’s tendency to banish and censor works of fiction, one can see that literature is feared, and that it has the ability to shape or affect society. Even though this displays an idea that literature goes hand in hand with reality, if not in a one-to-one relationship, I think that literature is a self-serving enterprise, loyal first and foremost to its own literariness, not to society. This is not an unproblematic claim in a South African academic context. However, reducing literature to be either or is unnecessary. Literature is both imagination and reality. In the same way, one cannot reduce literature either to be a subversive liberal arena for revolution or a conservative tool for spreading oppressive ideologies. As we shall see during the course of my work, it can easily be both.

However, if literature is a series of imaginative acts, as stated by Boehmer, then who imagines? Does everyone have the same ability and power to imagine or are some privileged? If so, what are the consequences for those who do not have this *imaginative command*? What happens when those without this power are imagined, and by that represented by others in these imaginative acts that constitute literature? And which strategies can the represented employ in order to escape being imagined? These are questions my thesis seeks to problematize, and it highlights that in a colonial situation this *imaginative command*, the power of fictional representation, is linked to the one who writes and is closely connected to race and gender. Writing is a powered act, which in itself becomes colonized in a colonial context. The texts I analyse demonstrate that the subversion of these power structures is staged through the haunting by and the revolt of those that the texts imagine and repress.

Die Suid Afrikaanse Plaasroman

In contemporary South African fiction, it is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to separate the English and Afrikaans versions of the anti-pastoral farm novel. The modern rewritings of the farm novel in both English and Afrikaans suggest that the two traditions have merged as a common genre that now questions the construction of national identity, the link between power and language, literature and the perpetuation of ideology, the construction of racial hierarchy, misogyny and the significance of sexuality. I will not so much pay attention to the separation between the Afrikaans and the English farm novel, but rather view the Southern Rhodesian *The Grass is Singing* and the bilingual edition of *In the Heart of the Country* as texts belonging to the same genre and as part of the same tradition

However, a look at the history and the significance of the genre is necessary. The farm novel tradition perfectly displays the novel's ability to be both subversive and instrumental in keeping conservative ideologies in place, and it demonstrates the potential internal conflict between different agendas within the novelistic structure. A central concept when I analyse the farm novel is *imaginative command*, as a critical reader can expose the complex agendas of the farm novel by analysing the narration and the narrative authority of the one who speaks. The idea of *imaginative command* also shows that the relationship between literature and ideology is a central theme in this thesis. In the anti-pastoral farm novel, there is a constant conflict between the liberal and equality-based ideology of that genre, and the racist and misogynistic ideology of its genre predecessor.

Another central element of this thesis is the relationship between literature and identity. The farm novel is closely linked to the attempt to build a white South African national identity. Olive Schreiner started the tradition when she published her famous novel *The Story of an African Farm* in English in 1883. *The Story of an African Farm* was the first distinctly South African piece of fiction, using South Africa, its landscape and South African life in its own right as material. However, South Africa's connection to Europe is central in the novel. Life on the Karoo farm is described as life in a cultural backwater, where European intellectualism is hard to come by and passionately yearned for, at least by the main protagonist, Lyndall and her friend on the farm, Waldo. Still, there is an aspect of rootedness in or distinctiveness of South Africa, which earlier literary attempts from the region failed to incorporate.

I referred to the two farm novel traditions above. However, while the Afrikaans version of the tradition, *die suid afrikaanse plaasroman*, is a proper literary tradition, its

English equivalent is not. The Afrikaans tradition consists of a large number of works,⁵ whereas in English it is actually only Pauline Smith, with her novel *The Beadle* (1926) and her collection of short stories *The Little Karoo* (1925), who is truly part of this literary “tradition”. In English writing I would rather call it a *trope* that is prevalent in many later liberal novels.⁶

A major difference in the past has been that while the English trope is usually present in liberal novels that criticize many aspects of the colonial endeavour, the Afrikaans tradition was central to promoting conservative ideas. These ideas were, for example, the Afrikaner’s God-given right to the Promised Land at the southern tip of Africa and a patriarchal societal structure and racial hierarchy that place the white man on top and the black man closer to the farm animals. The farm is often described as a Garden of Eden, a haven with fruitful lands in the midst of barbarians, safely stowed away from the temptations of the city.

However, also in liberal English novels, such as Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*⁷ (1948), there is a clear nostalgia for the pastoral and a demonization of the city.⁸ The main protagonist, Reverend Stephen Kumalo thinks to himself; “His son had gone astray in the great city where so many others had gone astray before him, and where many others would go astray after him, until there was found some great secret that as yet no man had discovered” (Paton 2002: 78). The city is then a place of devilish temptation that swallows innocent people, teaching Kumalo to be humble as he realizes how difficult it is to live righteously in the face of all this. In addition to temptation, the city becomes the scene of the country’s biggest problems; racial hatred, prostitution, crime and murder are all facets of everyday life in Johannesburg in Paton’s novel.

The Afrikaans tradition almost completely departed from the liberal currents that were to be found in Schreiner’s novel.⁹ However, to claim that the Afrikaans tradition is conservative and the English trope is liberal is also very reductive. In later years, the Afrikaans tradition has also turned towards itself, critically rewriting its dubious past.

⁵ Such as Jochem van Bruggen’s very popular *Ampie*-trilogy (1924, 1928 and 1942), Daniel Francois Malherbe’s *Die Meulenaar* (1926), the Oeuvres of Mikro (1903-1968) and C. M. van den Heever (1902-1957).

⁶ For example in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) where the shifting power balance on Lucy’s farm in the Eastern Cape can be read as an allegory for the shifting power balance in the country’s political sphere. To employ the farm as an allegory for the nation is a typical anti-pastoral literature trait and demonstrates its critical use of pastoral tropes. I will revert to this in “The Haunted Farm” in chapter 1.

⁷ *Cry, The Beloved Country* is unusual white writing because it deals with black characters, but is still considered white writing.

⁸ We also see this in for example J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), where the protagonist sees life in nature, growing his own food, as the only way to escape oppressive and totalitarian urban society.

⁹ Although not articulating any aspects of race issues (the silence is perhaps telling enough), the novel is strongly feminist.

Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Triomf* (1994) not only rewrites the Afrikaans tradition, but also deconstructs the urban/rural dichotomy *Cry, the Beloved Country*, upholds. While *Triomf* is a very urban novel that takes place in the suburb of Triomf in Johannesburg, it has strong affiliations with the farm novel. The novel depicts the deviant Benade family, who grew up on a farm but was forced to flee to the city, the last few months leading up to South Africa's first democratic election on April 27th, 1994.¹⁰ Although the novel also portrays racial hatred, crime, prostitution, sexual deviance and decay as part of urban life, it demonstrates how these issues are not specifically urban. It was not Johannesburg that corrupted the members of the Benade family, but rather they who brought their incestuous and abusive lifestyle to the city. So many things traditionally considered to be urban problems, started in this case in the Garden of Eden that was their farm. In addition to this, the city can actually offer something the farm cannot. While the isolated farm promotes an incestuous racial ideology of separateness and inbreeding, the city offers diversity and potential unity.¹¹ The Benade family is hateful to other groups such as Black Africans and homosexuals, yet it is only through interaction with them that the family members escape the suffocation of their isolated and abusive family structure.

In Marlene van Niekerk's second novel, *Agaat*, we see elements of the anti-pastoral farm novel that is particularly relevant for my analyses. A strategy to evade the *imaginative command* I mentioned above is for the characters to remain silent, refusing to participate in the colonial narrative. The strategy of remaining silent is a recurring theme in Coetzee's oeuvre, and also has significance in *The Grass is Singing*, in which there is an implicit colonial critique in Moses' silence. The act of remaining silent can be read as an effort to escape the *imaginative command* of the narrator. In *Agaat*, the position of the writer and the narrator, and *imaginative command*, is also connected to power, race and colonialism. The white protagonist, Milla Redelinghuys, is the narrator of the story. The only strategy her coloured maid, Agaat, can employ to subvert Milla's power, is to remain silent and by that resist being imagined.

¹⁰ In other words, the novel was published with an almost prophetic timing.

¹¹ Nicole Devarenne at the University of Dundee writes that: "it is in their exploration of the dynamic and vibrant city that surrounds them that the Benades are able to escape for a moment their ideologically over-determined lives" (Devarenne 2009: 640).

“We! What Rubbish”

The title of this thesis is taken from *Triomf*. This novel informs my reading of the other two in crucial ways because of its status as a different and more contemporary example of the anti-pastoral farm novel. As mentioned, the members of the Benade household abuse each other mentally, physically and sexually, and in their isolation do not understand that they are each other’s worst enemies. They are scared to death about what will happen to them if they are forced to spilt up, and in an effort to keep them all together Mol, the woman of the family, lets her two brothers and her son molest her, the son also being a product of this incestuous family structure. “We! What rubbish”¹² (van Niekerk 2009: 46) is uttered by Treppie, the most resourceful and self-reflexive member of the family. He is the only one among them to acknowledge that the community inherent in this *we* might not be a healthy one. If we read the incestuous family structure as an allegory for Afrikaner apartheid ideology, these two structures reflect each other negatively.

In this thesis I bring attention to different communities in a colonial context, mostly national, racial and gendered communities. We will see that the violence perpetrated in *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country* is committed against subjects attempting to transgress a community, and by subjects trying to uphold the separations of the communities. However, we also see violence committed as a rebellion against the hierarchical gatekeepers, by those trying to break through the boundaries. Most members of these communities feel a strong belonging to this *we*, and the community becomes defined by what it is not. It is important to keep in mind that *we* is a linguistic shifter, and its ability to include and exclude is potentially violent,¹³ which is particularly evident in a colonial context. White colonial identity is the basis for one such community, and Treppie’s words, that constitute the title: “We! What rubbish”, signals that the community usually upheld as an ideal, is actually a destructive and unfavourable community. By bringing attention to these communities in this context I aim to display their porosity, and advocate for a new, more inclusive meaning of *we*.

¹²Carrol Clarkson translates this sentence as “We! What shit” (Clarkson 2007: 364) in her article “Who are ‘we’? Don’t make me laugh”. “We! What rubbish (van Niekerk 1999: 46) is Leon de Kock’s translation. Clarkson claims that the Afrikaans word in question, *stront*, usually is translated as shit, although rubbish obviously has a similar connotation.

¹³ Clarkson writes that “any use of ‘we’ raises disturbing questions about the porosity of contingent cultural limit, about acts of violence perpetrated against those excluded from the we’ and, in some instances, against those coercively included within it (Clarkson 2007: 364).

Defining South Africa, South African Literature and its European Connection

As is the case with the word *we*, defining South African literature is a remarkably problematic feat. Due to apartheid censorship laws many canonical South African novels were banned,¹⁴ which led to the works having a stronger effect on reading audiences abroad than in South Africa. Also, the fact remains that most South African fiction continues to be published abroad first, and a huge number of South African scholars work in Europe and the US, meaning that a great deal of South African scholarship is also written outside the country. In addition to this, the English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho etc. canons function almost completely separate from each other, meaning that South African literature is not a homogenous field. With this in mind, and the fact that I merge the English and the Afrikaans versions of the farm novel, I will advocate that in the aftermath of colonialism, which has led to a globalized world and increased cultural hybridity, one should rather divide literature into different flexible and adaptable *areas of enquiry* rather than rigid categories such as national literatures. Leon de Kock writes that “[i]ntroductions to South African literary culture conceived as an entity have a peculiar trademark: they apologize for attempting to do the impossible and then go ahead anyway” (de Kock 2001: 263). In this thesis I do not look at South African literary culture as an entity. But I aim to say something about South African literary *cultures* perceived as a field. But before we look further at what South African literature is, I will approach what South Africa is.

The origins and demarcations of South Africa itself are similar to that of many African nations; the borders were created with European colonial interests in mind, forcing random ethnic groups together with settlers and slaves. Even though South Africa today has settled as a nation, there is no doubt that it offers a large variety of people, culturally united only by the concept of South Africa. The origins of this concept are still contested and debated and there are several dates that might represent the birth of modern South Africa. In 1910, The Cape and Natal colonies were united with the Boer republics further north. It is no doubt possible to argue that this union marks the creation of modern South Africa. Or perhaps 1931, when the commonwealth granted relative autonomy to its dominions including South Africa, is more appropriate. But then there is the issue of cultural differences because for many Afrikaans speakers, the victory of the National Party in 1948, which signalled the advent of the apartheid government, is undoubtedly an important, if problematic, element in the foundation

¹⁴ For example *Burger's Daughter* (1979) and *July's People* (1981) by Nadine Gordimer, but also many works of black resistance writing such as *Down 2nd Avenue* (1959) by Es'kia Mphahlele.

of modern South Africa. Then there is 1961, when the apartheid state was excluded from the commonwealth, meaning that South Africa was for the first time a completely independent state. For most people though, the election on April 27th 1994 marks the definite beginning of a modern, democratic and multiracial South African republic.¹⁵ No matter which event one chooses to mark the beginning of what we understand as South Africa today, there is no doubt that there is a nation called South Africa, and that this country has a rich literary scene. However, de Kock points to the largely “*unresolved* difference” (2001:264, emphasis his) of the South African cultural state. It is due to this unresolved difference that white writing is written in what Gramsci calls an interregnum.

This demonstrates that South Africa is a homogenous signifier put in place to mask a heterogeneous reality, and that South Africa seems more coherent from an outside perspective. In the same way, the country’s literature is deemed more homogenous and unproblematic for others outside the nation. The image of South African literature as a unitary field is largely constructed abroad as political literature specifically dealing with ethics in a country struggling to overcome a regime that is the very embodiment of oppression and injustice. This image is to a large extent perpetuated by the three literary giants Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and J. M. Coetzee, who seem to epitomize South African literature internationally.

In addition to this ethico-political image, internationally recognized South African literature is also overwhelmingly English. Not only because English is a world language, but also due to the already mentioned issue that many South African novels are edited and published abroad, then re-imported into South Africa.¹⁶ This made sense during apartheid, when the bulk of famous South African literature was banned and it was difficult to find publishers. Today this is largely caused by economic reasons. A large market for fiction is dependent on a strong purchasing power that many South Africans lack, although continuing strong ties to England is also a definite factor. However, because the access to South African literature was limited in South Africa during apartheid, and the interest for South African nationalist literature limited abroad, South African literature must inevitably mean something different in South Africa than it does internationally.

¹⁵ (van der Vlies 2007: 5). See Andrew van der Vlies’ book *South African Textual Cultures. White, Black, Read All Over* for more on this.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The Truth of Apartheid and the Politics of Discourse

One can pose the question of how to approach this complicated field of study with the added complication of being a foreigner. Looking at South African literature from a European academic perspective has been challenging, but also fruitful considering that I do not attempt to write a representation of South African literature in general. What interests me, writing as a European in Africa, is the literature that arises from that point of convergence and from that situation of *in-betweenness*. I am interested in the European canon brought to and transformed in Africa, bringing together elements of both continents and their canons.

My reading of *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country* is based on a poststructuralist and postcolonial understanding of literature. Linguistics, discourse theories and poststructuralism have had a troubled history in South Africa because of the country's sensitive past and because of these theoretical branches' complicated relationship with politics and truth. Louise Bethlehem, a literary scholar based in Israel, discusses in her article "A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger": The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture under Apartheid" (2001) the issue of literary commitment during apartheid, and points to how the trope of truth became the trope *as* truth. In other words, literature was no longer expected to *convey* reality, it was supposed to *be* reality. The political situation invaded the literature to such an extent, that literature had to be committed to the struggle, and was expected to relate the reality of that struggle unproblematically. The trope as truth completely disregards the removed relationship even realist literature has to truth.

My argument is then, that the underlying premises of the historical and societal concepts I deal with in this thesis were created in language, which laid the foundation for a society where these concepts could manifest. For example, the physical colonial society was structured around an intellectual concept of a racial hierarchy. In addition to this, apartheid and colonialism become linguistic constructs in retrospect, as history becomes intellectualized and put together to be a coherent narrative. In other words, these events were discourse before *and* after the events themselves. The most direct access to the event itself would be as an eyewitness, but one would even then participate or observe with a limited and subjective perspective. However, I do not disregard the truth of the events, but rather the supposed truth of the representation of them. History is a highly fictional narrative of subjective and random facts about the past. There is no doubt that *something* happened, but how it happened is a fiction read as a truth we in reality do not have access to. For example, colonialism is subject to interpretation. Its contemporary society condoned colonialism and considered it to be the

white man's grand mission, while today's society interprets it as a horror story of rape, murder and subjugation. Also, one cannot overlook the fact that this is a literary analysis, so it is these events in relation to text that is central. However, I believe that literary analysis, loyal first and foremost to an aesthetic practice that it is, or at least should be, can bring valuable insight to understanding the intellectual foundation of any event in history.

Michael Chapman does not share this view. In his article "The Writing of Politics and the Politics of Writing: On Reading Dovey on Reading Lacan on Reading Coetzee on Reading...(?)" written in 1988, before the fall of the apartheid regime, he attacks the Lacanian Coetzee-scholar Teresa Dovey and Coetzee himself for not taking into account the political and economic realities of South Africa:

These debates have special pertinence in a country like ours [South Africa], where history may certainly be regarded, poststructurally, as discourse, while to millions of the dispossessed it is more likely to manifest itself, concretely, as low wages or the police cell (Chapman 1988: 327).

A few years earlier, in 1985, a similar attack was launched at the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, after he republished a text he wrote for a catalogue for an art exhibition against apartheid in *Critical Inquiry*. The exhibition had been held in Paris in November 1983 and the text is called "Le Dernier Mot du Racisme", translated as "Racism's Last Word". The text is an appeal for not letting the word apartheid lose its current meaning as a historical testament to the violence of the South African Nationalist government. Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon attack Derrida for not taking the genealogy of the word into account, and thereby separating it from its history. The core of their attack is Derrida's lack of historical sensitivity and a tendency to lean against "such favored monoliths of poststructuralism as 'logocentrism' and 'Western metaphysics' [...] and a 'European discourse'" (McClintock/Nixon 1986: 154).

In both of these contributions there is a strong aversion to poststructuralist theory. Leon de Kock writes that in South Africa "engagement with poststructuralist paradigms has been belated and grudging" (de Kock 2001: 273), indicating that they do not stand alone in their disinclination towards European discourse theory. However, I would argue that poststructuralism is particularly relevant to apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Considering South Africa's colonial history and racial power struggle, the question of linguistic power and representation is particularly pertinent, as is awareness of the discrepancy between the homogeneity of the signifier South Africa and the heterogeneity of the signified South Africa that I outlined above.

This debate becomes even more important when dealing with an author like Coetzee, who has been criticized very heavily for similar issues throughout his career, when in reality his “academic elitism” forms the very basis for his political potential and agenda.¹⁷ Coetzee has been accused of having a very Eurocentric outlook on South Africa, when it rather seems that his fiction acknowledges that because of the power of the imperial English language, South African culture is not purely African, as no culture is ‘pure’ in this postcolonial age of globalization. However, South African culture is a particularly heterogeneous culture. Because of colonialism, European influences play a significant role in South African culture, and this, as I intend to show in my thesis, makes European academic theories relevant for South African textual production. This is not Eurocentrism, it is simply exploring a connection that history is responsible for. Derrida writes that apartheid would be unthinkable without a European intellectual foundation, with its Christian ideological background and its discourse on state.¹⁸ European colonialists brought European intellectual traditions to Africa and refused to assimilate the African intellectual traditions already there. So obviously, the European influences in the country would be long-lived, and apartheid, a white endeavor, would be partly a European construct. South Africa is characterized by its many, and until now, separate cultures. It is a cultural archipelago only slowly starting to fuse. Contemporary South African culture and literature speaks from the cultural seam to which Leon de Kock refers: the seam that is “the site of both convergence and difference. It is a representational ‘ridge of furrow’ whose sudden turns bring about the manifold aporia that J. M. Coetzee [...] has shown to be characteristic of what he calls “white writing” (de Kock 2001: 276). In this sense, white Southern African writing is a literature from a site of convergence and an interregnum. White colonial identity and ideology will almost inevitably rupture in these texts, as nothing can remain stable in a state of constant transition.

The reason why I outline this debate is that an analysis of *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country* will inevitably touch on both linguistic constructs and their physical manifestations. They demonstrate what happened when European constructs such as

¹⁷ Carrol Clarkson writes that “[s]tructuralism and the theories in its wake have been censured for a notorious [...] lack of interest in historical or political concerns. [...] But in many of Coetzee’s explicit references to structuralism, [...] the lessons learnt in these disciplines *give rise to* his own ethico-historical insights [...]. It is *thanks to* his immersion in generative linguistics and other forms of structuralism that Coetzee identifies his realization of the contingency of English as the most powerful imperial language” (Clarkson 2009: 15, emphasises hers).

¹⁸ [T]he history of apartheid (its ‘discourse’ and its ‘reality’, the totality of its *text*) would be impossible, unthinkable without the European concept and the European history of the state, without the European discourse on state – its scientific pseudoconcept and its religious roots, its modernity and archaisms – without Judeo-Christian ideology, and so forth (Derrida 1986: 165, emphasis his).

organized religion, the law, the state and notions of white supremacy were brought to the African continent, assimilated into the construction of the new colonial state as a hierarchy upheld by a sanctioned, but discursive, law and policed through physical *and* epistemic violence. Both novels advocate that in order to better understand the *real* consequences of colonial racism and misogyny, one must look at the language that allows for the articulation of the idea of a society that systematically oppresses the large majority of its population.

Chapter I: Hierarchical Ideology and Compulsive Whiteness in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950)

“No society can be reformed until its members can individually identify the forces and institutions that dictate and have dictated the course of their lives.” - Idries Shah¹⁹

“Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the “en-soi” – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions.” - Simone de Beauvoir²⁰

My main argument in this chapter is that *The Grass is Singing* critiques and destabilizes white colonial identity and society in Southern Africa on two levels. The first level is thematic. By describing white colonial society in Anglo-Africa, the novel displays a society based on a hierarchical structure and oppression of non-whites and women. The novel suggests that because of her gender, Mary is presented with a limited set of options, forcing her into a life of subjection to given conditions. On this level, the Gothic is present through the houseboy Moses, who functions as a ghost and represents the repressed black population sent to haunt the Turners. The relationship he develops with Mary challenges the dynamics between master and servant and forces Mary to face subdued elements of both the society in which she lives and her own psyche. The second level is metatextual. Through occasional shifts into a Gothic narrative mode, the novel creates an uncanny atmosphere that resists the textual white idyll so typical of the pastoral farm novel. Also, by using several classical narrative strategies such as conflating narrator and character voices and maintaining a textual dialogical structure, the text shifts between incompatible value systems. This displays the novelistic ability to move seamlessly between acts of dismantling *and* perpetuating ideologies, and draws the reader's attention to the difficulty for a novel to remain an ideologically neutral, aesthetic object in a colonial context.

A further metatextual element is that the text itself, like the society and the characters it describes, is in a position of *in-betweenness*. The narrator demonstrates an affiliation with colonial society through his²¹ intimate knowledge of it, yet he is distanced enough from it to offer a scathing criticism of the same society. Mary is at first glance a fervent racist, but

¹⁹ Idries Shah is here paraphrased by J. M. Coetzee in his essay “The Autobiography of Doris Lessing”. (2002: 294).

²⁰ (de Beauvoir 1989: xxxv)

²¹ There is nothing in the text to indicate the gender of the narrator. While it is problematic to perpetuate a notion that the neutral perspective is a white male, especially in a thesis that seeks to expose the problematic power dynamics of narration, I still refer to the narrator as masculine so as to avoid any confusion between the narrator and Doris Lessing.

appears to be on the verge of a more critical understanding of her ideological position, and her situation in-between a European colonial cultural heritage and an African reality. This insistence on *in-betweenness* points to the text itself. *The Grass is Singing* has affiliations with the South African anti-pastoral farm novel in addition to several European traditions. This emphasises my point that white African literature is writing from a site of convergence between two continents. Of *The Grass is Singing*'s European predecessors, I will focus mostly on the Gothic novel, the 19th century realist novel, in particular Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Greek Tragedy and to a lesser extent the detective novel. Because of this literary heritage, I can claim that *The Grass is Singing* deals with African concerns in a European genre.

The novel is about a murder mystery in Southern Rhodesia. In the first chapter, we are presented with a crime scene on a small farm, where we are told that Mary Turner has been murdered by her houseboy. While the motive is said to have been the theft of valuables, the reader is left with the impression that the murder is more complex than that. The novel then tells the story of Mary's life from her childhood leading up to the day of the murder. After unhappy years with her parents in a little dorp²², Mary leads a happy and independent life in town. In her thirties Mary begins to feel the pressure to get married to which she gives in. It is particularly one incident in which she overhears her friends talking about her that has devastating consequences for her. From there it chronicles her disintegration through an unhappy marriage to the farmer Dick Turner and their life on a farm she hates. She treats the natives harshly and is a merciless mistress. When Dick falls ill she successfully takes over the administration of the farm, but when Dick regains his health he resumes control over the farm. A native, Moses, is hired. He develops a mysterious relationship with Mary. After an incident during which she throws him out of her dressing room, he stabs her to death.

An Opinionated Narrator

The narrator in *The Grass is Singing* is a covert third person narrator and shares many traits with the narrator in *Madame Bovary*. The narrator in Flaubert's novel gives a scathing criticism of the self-important bourgeois society of 19th century France in much the same way as the narrator in Lessing's novel attacks the racist and petty colonial society of Southern Rhodesia. Both narrators seem to be a part of the society they are criticizing, which gives them the ability to dissect it in knowledgeable and informed ways. This knowledge enables

²² Dorp is an Afrikaans word for town. It is quite regularly used in South African English as well.

them to push our reading in certain directions, and to put the society on trial and destabilize it from the inside.

Another common trait is that both narrators focus on the emotional life of each novel's female protagonists, but are omniscient and therefore offer insights into the mentality of the other characters as well. Chapter 1 of *The Grass is Singing* describes the crime scene on the Turner farm, and is for the most part structured around a conversation between three characters; "the farmer who had been her [Mary] next neighbour [Charlie Slatter], the policeman who had been in her house on his rounds as a guest [Police Sergeant Denham], and the assistant who had lived there for some weeks [Tony Marston]" (19). The motive of the murder is by Slatter and Denham said to be theft. Tony Marston is not so sure about that, but is denied access to the conversation by the other two: "[i]t was a snub. He had been shut up" (13). In this chapter the narrator seems to sympathize and agree with Tony Marston²³ in that a "monstrous injustice was being done" (22) by Charlie Slatter and Sergeant Denham. By giving Tony Marston such a dominant voice in the chapter and describing the events from his perspective, the reader is invited to agree with him and not with the other men's desire to keep the incident under wraps. Slatter and Denham's treatment of Marston is described as a bypassing (18), and a threat (12) suggesting that the reader should perceive them as thugs.

Because Tony Marston is new to the country, he is less aware of the colonial thought paradigm. This gives him the ability to critically observe this denial of a more complex truth: "The fact he knew, or guessed, about Mary, the fact these two men were inspiring to ignore, could be stated easily enough" (17). It is suggested here that the murder itself is not the main concern. At several points the narrator indicates that what happened at the crime scene is only the manifestation of a more elaborate case, and he emphasizes that much more lies behind the scene and the actions of the characters: "The murder, in itself, was nothing. The struggle that had been decided in a few brief words – or rather the silences between the words – had had nothing to do with the surface meaning of the scene" (21). It is rather the context, the society, one needs to explore in order to learn the true nature and the meaning of the horrible incident. In a conflation with the voice of Tony Marston, the narrator says that "the thing that really mattered [...] was to understand the background, the circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary, and the patterns of their lives. And it was not so easy to do. He had arrived at the

²³ The fact that the narrator follows Tony so closely in chapter 1 is also a parallel to *Madame Bovary*. In both novels the narrators follow other characters before focusing on the protagonists. In *Madame Bovary* the narrator follows Charles Bovary before he begins to focus mostly on Emma from chapter 5. In *The Grass is Singing* the narrator aligns himself with Tony Marston before he centres on Mary from chapter 2.

truth circuitously: circuitously it would have to be explained” (17). This statement functions as a metacomment on what the novel seeks to do. In a circular composition it tells the story retrospectively by going back to Mary’s childhood and moving inevitably towards her brutal murder, explaining the background, the circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary and the patterns of their lives on the way.

Tony Marston functions as a catalyst for the exploration of the circumstances and is an important tool for the narrator. Through him, the narrator lets us see the colonial society from the outside and can describe it from the perspective of someone who does not necessarily accept colonial logic. Because Tony Marston is new to the country, he is not yet a victim of Viktor Shklovsky’s process of automatization.²⁴ This gives him a different perspective, enabling him to problematize what the other characters take for granted. When Charlie Slatter takes control over the situation after Mary is found dead, Tony asks: “Where were the police? What right had Charlie, who was a neighbour, to be fetched before himself, who was practically a member of the household? Why was Charlie quietly taking control” (12/13)? Throughout the chapter there is an almost constant juxtaposition between outsider and insider perspective. The narrator comments on the fact that Slatter handles everything that “people felt that to be right and proper. But to the outsider it is strange” (4). This suggests that colonial society is a closed community, following a logic that is not always clear to the outsider. Because the narrator has an intimate knowledge of the workings of the colonial society he can therefore explain the colonial logic Tony Marston fails to understand. By saying things like “It is worth while explaining in detail what happened that day, because so many things can be understood by it” (77) the narrator puts incidents in context and urges the reader to pay careful attention to certain details while explaining why the characters react in ways they perhaps do not understand themselves.

This intimate knowledge of the local community also entails a constant awareness of how people talk and what they talk about. Like the society Flaubert describes in *Madame Bovary*, the society in *The Grass is Singing* is heavily reliant on gossip. The narrator claims that this is an unavoidable aspect of life in the province, where people are so isolated that when they meet they are so “hungry for contact with their own kind, [...] [that they] talk and discuss and pull to pieces [...] making the most of an hour’s companionship” (2). Even the

²⁴ In his article “Art as Device” (1916), the Russian Formalist Viktor B. Shklovsky argues that when we do things often they become *automatized* and that it is literature’s task to make the ordinary seem extraordinary through the process of *defamiliarization*. In this context I use the term to demonstrate that the characters that live in the colonial society are not shocked by the logic it is structured around, as it has become *automatized*, or *habitualized*. An outside perspective like Tony Marston’s, however, can *defamiliarize* it.

Turners who kept to themselves, or perhaps because they kept to themselves, are discussed in detail by ‘the district’: “The Turners, who might have been living on the moon for all the thought they gave to ‘the district’, would have been astonished if they had known that for years they had provided the staple of gossip among the farmers round about” (192). By calling it the *staple* of gossip, the narrator indicates that gossip is a central element in the society. However, the narrator, usually so critical towards the gossip, engages in dialogue with it. By using inverted commas, the narrator indicates that he is perpetuating collective clichés from the society being dissected, also a trait in Flaubert’s narration.²⁵ The narrator does this regularly for example by repeating that “South Africa gets into you” (28) and that the natives are getting “cheeky” (33). This ironic re-appropriation of flawed colonial attitudes is at the heart of the text’s critical potential and gains power from forming such a grotesque contrast to the narrative’s usual anti-racist discourse. For example as an explanation for why Mary and Dick have to go to town themselves sometimes, the narrator says that “a native, although conveniently endowed by nature with the ability to walk long distances without feeling fatigue, cannot carry sacks of flour and meal²⁶” (90). Here, an attitude that objectifies native Africans is presented without explanation. The natives are obviously ‘endowed by nature’ because the colonialists refuse to acknowledge their suffering from doing hard labour. This way the narrator indicates that this society is built on repression of others, made possible from the refusal to acknowledge the natives’ humanity.

This re-appropriation of local views is also a technique for the narrator to demonstrate how limited the local knowledge and way of thinking is. The narrator is always aware of what people talk about and how they react. For example: “it is not done to say things natives do are ‘fine’. (Yet the fashion is changing: it is permissible to glorify the old ways sometimes, providing one says how depraved the natives have become since)” (6). Here we also see how the narrator comments on his own narration in parenthesis. In addition the narrator comments sarcastically on the characters’ flawed thinking or limited scope. For example when Dick tells Mary to go easy on the servants and ‘defends’ them by saying that “[t]hey are nothing but savages after all” (84), the narrator goes on to comment that “[t]hus Dick, who had never stopped to reflect that these same savages had cooked for him better than his wife did, had run

²⁵ For example the first Madame Bovary is sceptical to Emma because she deems Emma’s tastes to be “too fancy for folks like them” (Flaubert 2008: 39). Here the discourse becomes rough, simple and “un-literary”. When the Bovarys leave Tostes, it is deemed to be a shame because Charles was “just beginning to do nicely” (Flaubert 2008: 61). The use of inverted commas indicate that this is the local opinion in a society where a man’s success is measured only by his salary and professional accomplishments.

²⁶ Mealie meal, mealie meal or mielie meal is a chiefly South African term for a type of corn used as a staple all over Sub-Saharan Africa.

his house, had given him a comfortable existence, as far as his pinched life could be comfortable, for years” (84). Here Dick indirectly tells Mary that she cannot expect from the natives what she expects from other people, that they are more like children or animals and that they do not know any better. Yet they are much better equipped for running a house than Mary is. This way the narrator emphasises his ability to switch discourse and perspective.

A society so heavily reliant on gossip will necessarily be intrigued by Moses’ willingness to be caught after the murder. In the local discussion pertaining to this incident we see that the narrator not only engages in dialogue with the gossip, he even allows it to seep into the narration itself. The District Native Commissioner, who is supposed to study languages and cultures in order to understand the local native communities, explains Moses’ behaviour as a cultural trait. By reading accounts of the pre-colonial local society, one would see that “everyone knew what they could or could not do [...] [and] would submit fatalistically to punishment” (5). When the narrator goes on to say that: “that aspect of the affair was dropped, yet it is not the least interesting, for Moses might not have been a Matabele at all. He was in Mashonaland; though of course natives wander all over Africa” (6), it becomes difficult to discern what is the narrator’s opinion and what is local gossip. It is also unclear whether the narrator is opposing the District Native Commissioner’s knowledge, or ridiculing the locals’ need to keep on speculating even after being given a plausible answer. The last sentence in the quotation indicates that it is the latter. That sentence has a condescending and racist undertone, giving the impression that native Africans restlessly and aimlessly wander the continent like herds of animals with no sense of home or community. Either way, the District Native Commissioner’s theory is the only one offered in the text to explain Moses’ enigmatic behaviour after the murder. But also on a few other occasions the novel indicates that that lack of cultural awareness is what creates the mystery and some of the misunderstandings in the novel, for example when Mary misunderstand one of her servants because “she did not know it was part of the native code of politeness not to look a superior in the face; she thought it was merely further evidence of their shifty and dishonest nature” (72).

The difficulty of discerning whose opinion is related at all times arises from the free indirect style of the narration, although some minor dialogue is related directly and tagged. As mentioned we mostly follow Mary’s intellectual and emotional development, usually from a critical and ironic distance. However, in the same manner that the local gossip sometimes seeps into the narration, we also see that there is an occasional conflation between narrator and character. In this manner the narrator can portray different and incompatible value

systems in the same text. Flaubert uses the same device when the narration becomes Emma's, making the discourse switch from realist and ironic to sentimental and melodramatic. For example when Emma is looking at the Vicomte's cigar-case it is described like "[s]ighs of love had passed through the meshes of the canvas, and every thrust of the needle had stitched a hope or memory into them" (Flaubert 2008: 51). This flowery language is far removed from the narrator's usual wry tone.

In much the same way that Flaubert's narrator occasionally shifts into the sentimental discourse he is criticizing through Emma, Lessing's narrator occasionally shifts into the racist discourse he is criticising through Mary. This happens when a conflation between the narrator and the character takes place. When the narrator describes incidents from Mary's perspective without indicating that fact, it would have been difficult to discern whose perspective it is had it not been for the racist tone. For example when Dick is ill and Mary visits the worker's compound to get them working again, they are described in cliché images of African natives. Their houses are described as a natural growth more than man-made houses and "flies were everywhere" (122). The children are "pot-bellied and mostly naked" (122) and the native women are "draped in dirty store-stuff, and some naked above the waist with their black breasts hanging down, [...] commenting on her amongst themselves, laughing, and making crude remarks" (122). Given the dire poverty in the compound, the description might be accurate, but the perspective is condescending, as if it confirms the natives' otherness. As the text displays, Mary has a paranoid tendency to interpret looks and comments as deliberately and maliciously aimed at her. This is a consequence of the incident in chapter 2 when she overhears her friends commenting on her spinsterhood. It is also apparent in the first meeting with the Slatters in chapter 5. Mrs. Slatter feels only sympathy towards Mary, and "looks at her with real tenderness" (81) which she interprets as condescension. So when the native women make crude remarks, it is possible that it is a comment from the omniscient narrator, but it could also be Mary's paranoid interpretation of the native women's conversation.

Because the narrator is able to switch discourse and perspective, the narrator can also insert opinions and interpret incidents *for* the reader. The narrator often does this, as is apparent when reading about Mary's upbringing. There is condescension, but also a certain amount of pity in the description of her life and the people around her. A dull store is the background of her childhood in a little town with "Dust and chickens; dust and children and wandering natives; dust and the store – always the store" (31). It is as if the narrator is repulsed by the boredom of colonial life and keeps emphasizing the dullness of the characters and their surroundings. Also here we see connections to Flaubert's realism. Both novels are

constituted by what we can call a poetics of mediocrity and bear strong comic tones, which come about in the discrepancy between romantic illusion and harsh reality, and when mediocrity is compared to the fabulous. For example Charles Bovary's mother, the first Madame Bovary, is said to have big aspirations for her son: "In the isolation of her existence, she transferred onto this childish head all her crushed and scattered vanities. She dreamed of high positions, and could already visualize him as tall, handsome, witty, established in the civil service or the magistrate" (Flaubert 2008: 9). Charles is a normal and average man, and his achievements, while fine enough, seem pathetic in comparison to his mother's dreams for him: "By dint of working hard, he always managed to maintain his position in the middle of the class" (Flaubert 2008: 10). In other words, he works hard in order to be average and the narrator admits that "[i]t would be impossible now, for any of us to remember anything about him" (Flaubert 2008: 10). However, Charles is a respectable man, and Emma has a very decent lifestyle as a doctor's wife in a small town. It is only in comparison to her dreams of a consumerist and aristocratic life style in Paris that ordinary meals in a provincial town become the epitome of a deplorable and depressive lifestyle; "she could not bear it any longer, [...] that small ground-floor room with its smoking stove, its squeaking door, its sweating walls, and its damp flagstones" (Flaubert 2008: 59). This poetic of mediocrity is apparent in Lessing's descriptions of her characters. Mary's father "is a little man with dull ruffled hair" and "a baked-apple face" (30) and later when Mary moves to town she "was very happy: that was perhaps her only positive quality, for there was nothing else distinctive about her" (33). While there would be nothing comic about this in real life, as most people are ordinary, it becomes comic in literature because readers, even today, expect literature to deal with the extraordinary and the special. These are the literary conventions and expectations Flaubert and Lessing (as representatives of realism) write against. In *The Grass is Singing*, the comic potential arises in the discrepancy between the dream of imperialism and the colonial endeavour, and the frail and pitiful life of the Turners. On her last day Mary goes through Tony Marston's bookcase and sees titles like "*Rhodes and His Influence: Rhodes and the Spirit of Africa: Rhodes and His Mission*. [...] She knew he had conquered a continent. [...] She began to laugh; it seemed to her extraordinarily funny" (230). Here, Mary becomes aware of the discrepancy that forms much of the novel's comic potential. Cecil John Rhodes 'conquered a continent' for people like the Turners, for the white, supreme British, and yet there is nothing glorious about them. Mary is a "dried stick of a woman, her hair [...] bleached by the sun into a streaky mess falling around a scrawny face" (201), and the house they live in is described in much the same manner as Emma's meals, except that instead of

being written with a tinge of mediocrity, it is described as downright dreary: “The curtains were torn; a windowpane had been broken and patched with paper; another had cracked and not been mended at all; the room was indescribably broken down and faded” (202). This is the reality of the Turners’ life, far removed from Cecil John Rhodes’ colonial dream. As we shall see later, race in *The Grass is Singing* is a question of class and standards, and by describing the Turners’ standard of living, the novel exposes that there is no essential difference between the Turners and the natives who live on their compound.

If the narrator interprets some incidents *for* the reader, one becomes aware that there is an agenda behind the text, which leads our attention to the issue of agency. Seymour Chatman points out that “not to confuse author and narrator has become a commonplace of literary theory” (Chatman 1978: 147). Like Flaubert and, as we shall see, Coetzee, Lessing sometimes makes this distinction difficult by giving the narrator opinions that are coloured by her views. For example, the narrator says of Mary that “[s]he had inherited from her mother an arid feminism which had no meaning in her own life at all” (32). Claire Sprague writes that “[f]eminism’ is Lessing’s word, not Mary or her mother’s. It rings oddly because it is outside of the world of the novel – besides being used inaccurately to mean female hatred of males” (Sprague 1987: 25).²⁷ That an author’s opinions influence a text is inevitable, though Chatman’s point is still valid. However, the extent to which this happens varies greatly. Flaubert is known to have said “Emma Bovary, c’est moi” (Emma Bovary, it’s me), indicating that the distinctions between character, narrator and author that modern literary theory proclaims are not always clear. The narrator’s use of the word feminism also indicates the presence of an agent that does not necessarily belong to the fictional universe of the novel, and it demonstrates that the distinction between author and narrator is problematic. Flaubert’s famous words: “Emma Bovary, c’est moi” demonstrates that there are elements of the author in the protagonist. In the same manner, there are elements of Doris Lessing in Mary Turner. Mary marks a departure from Lessing in her extremely racist attitudes, and it can seem as if Tony Marston is more closely aligned with Lessing’s views on race, except that he has “[n]o guts” (26), but it can seem as though Mary Turner exemplifies Lessing’s views on the institution of marriage, as proclaimed in her oeuvre. A life with a husband and children is simply not for Mary, who “was made to live, by nature and by upbringing, alone and sufficient to herself” (114). Part of her damnation is submitting to society’s demands to get

²⁷ And she goes on to say that “[t]he phrase arid feminism initiates a long-term ambiguousness about feminism in Lessing’s work and in her public pronouncements, which the internal nature of her works often contradicts (1987: 25).

married. In chapter 2, Mary is described as a thriving and happy young woman. Her happiness is based on her independence, work and social network. If she had stayed unmarried, Mary would have saved herself: “If she had been left alone, she would have gone on, in her own way, enjoying herself thoroughly” (36). Mary disintegrates partly because she gives in to society’s pressures and relies on marriage to save her, something on which she reflects, on the day of her death: “Yes, long, long ago, she had turned towards another young man, a young man from a farm, when she was in trouble and not known what to do. It had seemed to her that she would be saved from herself by marrying him” (231). Here, the narrator establishes what seems to be a life long preoccupation in Lessing’s writing; namely that marriage is no solution, but rather a temporary flight.

Marriage is problematized even further in the text. The narrator says about Dick that “although their marriage was all wrong, and there was no real understanding between them, he had become accustomed to the double solitude that any marriage, even a bad one, becomes” (117). While there is little doubt that marriage is a problematic institution, it is still a little tendentious and arrogant to write that any marriage is a double solitude and to present that as a given. In contrast, an unmarried Mary is described as having no “love troubles, headaches, backaches sleeplessness or neurosis. She didn’t know how rare she was” (36). It seems as if the narrator puts forward Lessing’s view that marriage makes most women physically ill.²⁸ We see the same technique of the narrator inserting strong opinions in *Madame Bovary*. At one point the narrator describes Emma and says that “she was not at all tender-hearted or sensitive to other people’s feelings; in this she was like most children of country stock, whose souls retain some of the calluses of their parents’ hands” (Flaubert 2008: 60). Here, Flaubert’s opinion (or even repulsion) of simple people of country stock is apparent as an omniscient narrator should know the nuances of a whole socio-economic group of people too well to generalize like that. The use of a narrator like this enables Lessing to discreetly insert opinions that colour the narrative without the reader necessarily picking up on it during an initial reading, although one can hardly accuse *The Grass is Singing* of being discreet in its colonial critique. Seymour Chatman says that “[i]n covert narration we hear a voice speaking of events, characters, and setting, but its owner remains hidden in the discursive [sic] shadows” (Chatman 1978: 197). A narrator like this can repeat what the characters think and feel indirectly, giving him the opportunity to interpret them for the reader: “some interpreting person must be converting the characters’ thoughts into indirect

²⁸ I will discuss marriage in Lessing’s work further in “Mary: The Second Sex” later in this chapter.

expression, and we cannot tell whether his slant does not lurk behind the words” (Chatman 1978: 197).

The Characters and Their Tragic Fate in Colonial Society

Like *Madame Bovary*, *The Grass is Singing* can be said to be a tragedy, closely following the demise and death of its complicated and not necessarily sympathetic heroine. It also bears many elements of the classic Greek tragedy, the most central one being that the characters’ fates seem to be sealed, forcing them to act along certain grooves. This is enforced by the circular composition of the novel. Like Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* begins with the prophecy, *The Grass is Singing* also begins with the ending, meaning that the rest of the novel unavoidably will lead up to that event. Even though we follow Mary’s attempts to escape her fate: the reader knows what the outcome will be. By discussing the characters, I will also point out other tragic elements in the text.

On one hand it can be said that because of the opinionated narrator in *The Grass is Singing*, the characters are described tendentiously. While Tony Marston and Dick Turner are described sympathetically, Mary Turner and Charlie Slatter are described as obnoxious. However, while Mary perhaps can claim some innocence by her lack of understanding of the political and historical processes at work around her, Charlie Slatter can claim no such thing. Like the Apothecary, Homais, in *Madame Bovary*, Slatter represents modern, capitalist society, but also in many ways the fate to which they will succumb. “Who was Charlie Slatter?” (6) the narrator asks in the first chapter, and answers that:

It was he who, from the beginning of the tragedy to its end, personified society for the Turners. He touches the story at a half a dozen points; without him things would not have happened quite as they did, though sooner or later, in one way or another, the Turners were bound to come to grief (6).

Everyone’s destiny is decided beforehand, and is inescapable. Even though Slatter affects the narrative, his presence cannot change the outcome of things, as they are all a part of a larger process, and in that process the Turners are bound to come to grief. We also see in this quotation that the characters have different roles and are different representations. Tony Marston represents the world outside the colony, Moses represents the repressed black population and Charlie Slatter represents society. In this way the characters are never more than the plot of the tragedy allows for.

The characters attempt to escape their designated roles and sealed fates. The narrator gives Tony Marston a significant amount of responsibility, and criticizes his refusal to accept

his role as witness: “it can be said that Tony was the person present who had the greatest responsibility that day. For it would never have occurred to either Slatter or the Sergeant that they might be wrong” (21). The narrator expects Marston to do what an outsider would deem the ethically right thing, not being blinded by “the spirit of the country, the spirit in which [...] [Denham] was soaked” (21). Tony is in a special position, and can see glimpses of a slightly more objective truth, which gives him a similar role as that of the Greek chorus together with the narrator. The chorus in Greek tragedies would moralize and comment on the dramatic action, which both Tony and the narrator do. But unlike the narrator, Tony declines his role and says “I really can’t be expected to act as judge, and jury and compassionate God into the bargain!” (24). Acceptance in the country is too important to him, so during the trial “he said what was being expected of him. It was suggested that the native had murdered Mary Turner while drunk, in search of money and jewelry [sic]”(25). In an attempt to “wash [...] [his] hands of the thing” (25), he leaves the area and lets white civilization perpetuate itself. But something has changed for Tony Marston; “The murder, those weeks with the Turners, had affected him more than he knew”(25). After watching Mary disintegrate, the illusion of the white idyllic farm life has crumbled. It is lost, and he is unable to retrieve it. He wanders aimlessly from job to job, takes up drinking, and spends all his money. In the end he lands a poorly paid job as a manager. All the things he wanted to achieve in Africa have failed. The dreams of adventure and easy money have not come true, and the encounter with the rigid and oppressive white colonial society in Africa has left him totally disillusioned. “[H]e sat in an office and did paper work, which was what he had come to Africa to avoid”(26). Tony Marston is thus punished for not playing his designated role.

Flaubert is considered one of the finest masters of irony, and in *Madame Bovary*, the selfish, profit-seeking capitalist prospers, as he does in *The Grass is Singing*. Claire Sprague writes that “Slatter is no misfit in Southern Africa; he prospers because he is both racist and patriarchal” (Sprague 1987: 26). In *Madame Bovary* Charles and Emma’s daughter falls into poverty, and the apothecary takes over Charles’ business after he breaks down due to Emma’s death. In the same way, Slatter takes over Dicks farm, Dick also being broken down after the death of his wife. Both novels seem to criticize but deem inevitable the advent of a harsh capitalist society, and due to the realistic irony of the novels, the villains prosper and the sympathetic characters flounder about for a while before they go under. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is an implicit criticism of the societies that allow for this to happen.

If one chooses to see elements of Lessing in Mary, then it is perhaps strange that Mary is described as such a horrid and mean person. But one can trace a lot of pity and tenderness in the descriptions of her as well. Mary is always put in a situation *in-between*, exposing that she is split. For example “[f]or Mary, the word, ‘Home’ spoken nostalgically, meant England, although both her parents were South Africans and she had never been to England” (28). Her cultural heritage is in itself split, as she feels a belonging to a country she has never been to. It is the ideology of her upbringing she is struggling with in the tragedy that follows, and is the reason why Marston says that “one can’t really blame her either. She can’t help being what she is” (22). This *in-betweenness* complicates the question of blame and guilt. Mary is through the novel’s events urged to take responsibility for her actions, but she is also victimised and described as misunderstood. For example, she is considered by the local community to be arrogant simply because “‘they [Mary and Dick] kept to themselves’; that was all” (2). Yet that “was a slap in the face of everyone else; what had they got to be so stuck-up about?” (3). It is emphasized several times that Mary is shy. The narrator says that “[h]er shyness protected her from many spites”, but it also causes her a reputation as superior and arrogant. But Mary is actually a timid and considerate person. When she overhears her friends talking about her and by that betraying her, she rises “to go declare herself: it was typical of her that her first thought was, how unpleasant it would be for her friends to know she had overheard” (38). Mary’s behaviour towards the natives is therefore not necessarily characteristic of her, and must perhaps be explained in other ways than just reducing it to an inherent racism in Mary. Her attraction to Moses is an indication that her racism is not an essential part of her character.

In an unexpected moment of tenderness towards the end of the novel, the narrator says of Mary: “Her blue eyes which had once told anyone who took the time to look into them that Mary Turner was not really ‘stuck-up’, but shy, proud and sensitive, had a different light in them” (201). Here we also see juxtaposition between the outsider and insider perspective, which I discussed earlier. It is also indicated, that even though Dick is a kind man, he has a negative influence on Mary: “The women who marry men like Dick Turner learn sooner or later that there are two things they can do: they can drive themselves mad, tear themselves to pieces in storms of futile anger and rebellion; or they can hold themselves tight and go bitter” (98). Once again, Mary is faced with a very limited set of options, indicating that her context pushes her into a certain position. She “followed the course her upbringing made inevitable” (98). The most problematic aspect of this course is that Mary remains immanent. While she is described as a strong and independent woman, her first mistake lies in succumbing to

society's pressure to get married. Her second mistake lies in not using her skills to make the farm a success, which would mean transcending her given conditions and working her way out of the miserable life on the farm.

A big obstacle on the way off the farm is obviously Dick. Like Charles Bovary he is described as naïve, and is destined to end up as the narrative's great loser. The reader gains some insight into his emotional and intellectual life, but to a lesser degree than with Mary. He is described as a simple man who constantly whistles and is content with "the slow movements of the seasons, and the complicated rhythm of the "little crops" she [Mary] kept describing with contempt as useless" (138). Dick is idealistic and kind, but he stands without a chance in the harsh society in which he lives. Yet he is the only one described as having a real love for Africa, and when he sees the suburban Anglo-African society he feels as though they and "the cautious suburban mind was ruining *his* country" (44) This sense of belonging in the country, feeling that it is *his*, is one of Dick's redeeming qualities, and is in stark contrast to Mary's referral to England when she says "home" (28). The narrator criticizes the lack of belonging that the text indicates is prevalent in Anglo-Africa. The British Africans display a martyred sense of being isolated and foreign on a beloved or loathed continent. Part of Mary's disintegration is a refusal to immerse herself in and become part of the veld²⁹ around her. She remains a foreigner to her home country throughout the novel. This points to the British colonials' connection to England being an imagined tie used to set them apart from others. It demonstrates how the colonial society is structured around a notion of different groups with a strong sense of belonging to a particular group. These groups are connected to specific geographical areas, characterised by their landscapes. In this way the notion of belonging and landscape becomes politicized and ideologically tainted, and is closely connected to the construction of national identity and race. Dick unknowingly sets himself apart from his group because "he knew the veld he lived from as the natives know it. His was not the sentimental love of the townsman" (140/141). Dick demonstrates that it is possible for the white colonial to become part of his new country and not remain an exile. White Anglo-African society is a hindrance, demonstrating that it is the colonial societal structure that creates the differences between the colonials and the locals. Except for Dick's tragic ending, his love of the land is perhaps the most positive and hopeful element in the text.

²⁹ Veld refers to the open and flat rural spaces of Southern Africa, usually covered in low grass or shrub. In Afrikaans it literally means field.

However, in the harsh reality of colonialism, his love appears naïve. This reinforces the descriptions of him as a little boy, disappointed with Mary's realistic responses to his many rash farming decisions; "it seemed to her that it was not a tall, spare, stooping man whom she saw, only; but also a swaggering little boy, trying to keep his end up after cold water had been poured over his enthusiasm" (96). Often nicknamed Jonah, as a reference to the Biblical Jonah, it is clear that he is considered passive and unlucky, although Mary claims that "[i]t was not a question of bad luck, it was simply incompetence" (131). This is not entirely true. Dick is unlucky to the extent that it seems as if his farm is outside the normal weather cycles, making cultivation unpredictable and borderline impossible: "If there was a drought he seemed to get the brunt of it, and if it rained in swamps then his farm suffered most. If he decided to grow cotton for the first time, cotton slumped that year" (46). This fatalistic bad luck makes Dick a comic and ridiculous figure. His bad luck in combination with his inability to efficiently run a farm is part of his undoing. His fate also seems to be sealed from the start. Even when he tries to be sensible and not pile up unnecessary debt, it proves to be a mistake, as the narrator comments in one of his many ironical parentheses:

There were plenty of farmers [...] all over the country [...] who lived as they pleased, piling up debts, hoping for some windfall in the future to rescue them. (And in parenthesis, it must be admitted that their cheerful shiftlessness was proved to be right: when the war came and the boom in tobacco, they made fortunes from one year to the next – which made the Dick Turners appear even more ridiculous than ever) (139).

Although Dick can be said to represent idealism, he is almost from the beginning described as defeated. "She [Mary] saw on his face that queer grin of his, that was more a baring of teeth than a smile: self-critical, assessing, defeated. She hated to see it" (91). After Moses has murdered Mary he ignores Dick because he "was unimportant, since he had been defeated long ago" (237). If Moses' role in the tragedy is that of the avenger, he can leave Dick alone as the job has been done for him by white society. There is no room for idealism in the harsh capitalist society of Anglo-Africa.

We have seen that Slatter has a similar role in *The Grass is Singing* as Homais in *Madame Bovary*. However, Dick and Mary's roles are also similar to those of Charles and Emma. While Dick is described as a simple, average and kind man who loves his wife, like Charles, Mary seems to be suffering from a similar condition of the bovarism to which Emma has given her name. Like Emma, Mary judges her social condition to be unsatisfactory, and experiences a deep longing and anxiety to escape her situation. Mary has read many romantic

books, and struggles at times to make reality fit into the fictional universe to which she has been exposed. The narrator notes that while Mary had “access to all knowledge of her time [...] she read nothing but bad novels” (43). On her way out to the farm she tries to convince herself that moving away from town will be a nice change of pace. “‘Get close to nature’. It was a phrase that took away the edge of her distaste for the veld [...] [and] was sanctioned, after all, by the pleasant sentimentality of the sort of books she read” (51). Even though she hates nature, she tries to reassure herself with the memory of romantic fiction. As we shall see later in the chapter, she also reads romantic colonial fiction, which contributes to the discrepancy between the colonial dream and the Turners’ reality. Cheap fiction contributes to building certain expectations in Mary that are not met by reality. But while both women have read many romantic novels, Dick being flattered that “he had married a woman who read books” (66) but fails to see the triteness of the fiction Mary reads, Mary’s deep unhappiness is not a result solely of sentimental fiction. It is a result of being forced to lead a life she does not want, not because she expects an aristocratic lifestyle filled with adventure and insatiable passion.

The Murder Mystery of the Unsolvable Detective Novel

While a conventional detective novel is structured around the solving of a mystery, *The Grass is Singing* evades the simplistic schema of that genre. The narrative is shaped like a detective novel, but the murder is solved in the first chapter, indicating that it is in itself of little importance. The answer to the question only raises further questions, thus presenting the reader with a much more complex and vague mystery.³⁰ Several central questions, such as what evil Mary has known, how literally her incestuous dreams of her father can be read, what exactly drives Moses to kill her other than Mary being disloyal to him, “and at the bidding of an Englishman” (236), remain unanswered. In the first chapter it becomes clear in the conversation between Marston and Slatter that Moses’ motive was not actually to steal valuables. It is something else, something Marston claims makes sense: “When he came to think of it, the murder was logical enough, looking back over the last few days he could see that something like this was bound to happen, he could almost say he had been expecting it, some kind of violence or ugliness”(13). He thinks that “[t]he fact he knew or guessed, about Mary, the fact that these two men were inspiring to ignore, could be stated easily enough”

³⁰ Not only is *The Grass is Singing* then a forerunner in the field of postcolonial fiction, it is also a forerunner to the postmodern detective novel, which Paul Auster would later develop in his signature work *The New York Trilogy* (*City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986) and *The Locked Room* (1986)).

(17). That fact is, however, never stated, making Moses' motive and Mary's submission to a just, but horrible fate, the core impetus for interpretation in the novel. Also here a comparison to Greek tragedy can help shed light on this interpretative impetus and the structure of the novel. Throughout the novel we follow Mary's hopeless struggle to escape her own destiny. The turning point in the novel occurs when Mary leaves the farm in an attempt to get her old life in town back. But she has changed, and her old life is no longer open to her. When Dick comes to get her, she goes back with him. The narrator comments that "[t]his was the beginning of an inner disintegration in her" (113). It begins with the realization that all other possibilities have ceased to exist, and that the dusty farm is her destiny. Because the murder is inevitable, it *must* happen, leaving neither her nor Moses with any control over the outcome of things.

The narrator describes how Mary does not have enough of an overview to interpret her own destiny in the larger scheme of things, which links the novel back to Idries Shah's philosophy. Mary turns out to be unable to individually identify the forces and institutions that have dictated and continue to dictate the course of her life. She fails to grasp the fact that the natives she treats with repulsion and hatred are the ones she depends on in order to stay alive in the veld. This is perhaps her hubris and the evil she cannot in the end identify, but only feel the presence of. Mary's incapability to understand her fate is repeatedly mentioned, for example: "She was fighting against something she did not understand" (191). However, towards the end of the novel she seems to be on the verge of a deeper understanding, gaining tragic insight: "For the evil was a thing she could feel: had she not lived with it for many years" (224). Here Mary acknowledges that something is evil in the way she has lived, and that she has always felt it, underneath the surface, but her reoccurring passiveness has stopped her from reflecting on it. It is this passiveness that reinforces her position as a character in a tragedy. She is controlled by something larger than her: "But what *had* she done? Nothing of her own volition. 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. And justly – she knew that" (224). In other words, she agrees that she deserves her fate, yet points to her lack of participation in the actions that have brought her to it and "her feeling [...] of having been propelled by something she did not understand" (224). On a literary level, this is an indication of a tragic plot. Like in a Greek tragedy she has been propelled by something she cannot understand, but gains the tragic insight of when it is too late. On a more sociological level it points back to Shah's quotation. Mary would have had to gain insight into the workings of the society in which she partakes and her own responsibility

in it in order to escape her tragic destiny. However, her colonial language and understanding keep her from transcending into a different understanding and value system. She can only allude to and see vague shadows of something else. Still, it is suggested that it is Mary's failure to see this something else that is the reason she is killed. In chapter 1, Tony reflects on the murder and partly blames Mary and partly excuses her:

If you must blame somebody, then blame Mrs. Turner. You can't have it both ways. Either the white people are responsible for their behaviour, or they are not. It takes two to make a murder – a murder of this kind. Though one can't really blame her either. She can't help being what she is (22).

This brings us back to Mary's *in-betweenness*. Mary is both innocent and guilty. She is responsible for her hubris and her behaviour. Yet she cannot be blamed because of her upbringing and the ideology that has been instilled in her from her childhood.

A greater mystery surrounds Mary's houseboy and murderer, Moses. Another example of how the text engages in contradictory discourses and value systems is that it is an anti-colonial narrative that in no way deals with the emotional life of the marginalized. One reason for this is that Moses speaks English poorly, meaning that he can only participate in dialogues with broken sentences such as "If Madame cross, I go" (174) and "Madame never coming back?" (216). The narrator demonstrates that this lack of insight into Moses is intentional when he, usually omniscient, suddenly says that: "what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say" (238). This indicates that the thoughts of a black man simply are beyond the authority of the narrator, no matter how omniscient he is in other respects. Here the novel plays upon other supposedly liberal anti-pastoral novels, for example Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African farm*, which is incredibly progressive in its feminist views, but seems reluctant to engage with the issue of race. Like in Pauline Smith's *The Beadle*, black and coloured people in *The Story of an African Farm* exist in the background as servants and indications of an African setting, but not as subjects or protagonists. By this *The Grass is Singing* demonstrates a critical awareness of its own literary tradition.

The only possible explanation the text offers pertaining to Moses' behaviour is the District Native Commissioner's theory that it is a cultural trait for the Matabele to submit to the law they have broken. However, his reasons for murdering Mary are never made clear. If the text is shaped like a Greek tragedy, Moses is as locked into his role as the other characters, his role being the ghost and the avenger of the repressed black population. He *has* to play his

part. But Moses does not necessarily have to remain a mere symbol. Like the District Native Commissioner points out, there could be cultural explanations. Also, while it is difficult to understand and justify murder, it is perhaps not so strange that murders happen in the tense climate of this colonial society. Charlie Slatter “had once killed a native in a fit of temper” (7), and violence is surely an important component in the construction of colonial society. That the life-long subjugation Moses has experienced results in a violent response is not necessarily difficult to grasp, and as I quoted above, we are not told what thoughts of regret, pity or even wounded affection torment Moses. Also, if the Native District Commissioner is right, in that the Matabele have a strong sense of right and wrong, and will submit fatalistically to punishment, then one can assume that this is a culture with a strong emphasis on the notion of honour. Mary was wrong in offending Moses’ honour, and like he would after the murder, expects Mary to fatalistically submit to punishment. Either way the text refuses easy answers regarding the murder and seeks to keep the process of interpretation going. My analysis does not seek to reduce the complexity of the text, nor does it try to solve the murder mystery once and for all, but rather to explore some of the many possible interpretations to which the text lends itself.

Although Moses is denied access to the discourse of the novel, his silence is one of the many voices in the novel and needs to be interpreted. *The Grass is Singing* confirms that a dialogic structure is part of the novelistic nature. The characters are in a constant dialogue and while the narrator has a sense of authority over the text, he is not the only one allowed to speak. The analysis of the narration has demonstrated that *The Grass is Singing* features both liberal and racist discourse, criticism of the colonial condition and clichés to justify that same condition. The characters all represent different counter voices to the narrator, which problematize narrative authority in fiction. Charlie features as the ultimate colonialist, Mary as an unaware culprit to colonialism, Dick as the romantic idealist, Tony Marston as the voice from outside, Moses as the voiceless native and the gossip represents the local community. Because Moses’ silence is in such stark contrast to the myriad of other voices in the text, his silence gains critical potency and becomes loud. The narrator’s reluctance to engage with the inner life of black people, subverts his true authority. But even though his authority is not absolute, he does have the power to organize the different voices in the text, and shape them into the harsh critique of colonialism that the text after all can be said to be.

Mary: The Second Sex

By looking at the content of the novel, we see that the text also criticizes this colonial society on a thematic level. The novel gives a very detailed description of a misogynistic, as well as racist, society. While Mary perpetuates the subjugation of the native population, she fails to see that the same society she is perpetuating also subjugates her, forcing her into a life she does not want.

The Grass is Singing was published the year after Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* was published in 1949. Although *The Second Sex* was written in metropolitan Paris, and used middle to upper class European women as subjects, it still bears relevance to Mary Turner's "peripheral" existence in the African veld. Since white colonial society is the transference of a European reality to Africa, many European cultural traits of the time also apply to Mary's context. I will now focus on Simone de Beauvoir's concepts of immanence/transcendence, but also gender roles, marriage and work, to demonstrate this.

De Beauvoir analyses with great detail what it means to be a woman, and by looking at art, literature, psychoanalysis, history and every stage of a woman's life, she draws up a schema that shows how 'woman' is a constructed category, and how individuals who fall into this category are expected to perpetuate the image of that category. While de Beauvoir wrote her philosophy before the poststructuralist turn, her ideas follow some similar paths. For example she indirectly deconstructs the man/woman binary. While she points out that there is something called woman in modern society, she demonstrates that it is a construct of mythical proportion, and that it relates negatively to the other part of the binary. Woman is the second, other, object defined in relation to man, to the first, the universal, the subject. It is based on these ideas of woman as category that a widely accepted separation between biological sex and culturally enacted gender came about. In addition to this, men are assigned to a realm of active work and transcendence into an open world, while the woman is assigned to a realm of repetitive chores, defined by society as meaningless, and immanence in the home.

Mary Turner is what Simone de Beauvoir would call trapped in immanence. For de Beauvoir transcendence "into an indefinitely open future" (de Beauvoir 1989: xxxv), which women are systematically denied, is the only possibility of happiness a subject has. Transcendence means the possibility of realizing one's own projects, usually through work: "Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects" (de Beauvoir 1989: xxxv). This is also

the case with Mary Turner, who only displays contentment when she is active, either when working as a secretary, when her only quality is said to have been that “[s]he was very happy” (33), or when she runs the farm and “the sensation of being boss [...] gives her new confidence; it was a good feeling” (125). It is through not controlling her own life, and being confined to the house, the traditionally female realm, that Mary falls back into immanence and misery.

That the house is considered the female realm brings our attention to a well-established fact. In a conservative society, different roles belonging to different realms are assigned to different genders. When Dick falls ill, Mary has to run the farm until he recovers, something that makes him uneasy. “He did not like to think of Mary close to the natives all day; it was not a woman’s job” (125). It is no longer controversial to dissect and display the falsity of a notion that some jobs are suitable for men and some for women, but the colonial society in which Mary lives is based on this division between gender and race. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, these roles are forced upon the subject through social coercion and are not linked to biology. She writes that “[w]hen women are called upon for concrete action, when they recognize their interests in their designated goals, they are as bold and courageous as men” (de Beauvoir 1989: 603). Mary displays the same characteristics. Not only is she as bold and courageous as Dick when it comes to running the farm, but she actually surpasses him by far in terms of efficiency and economical insight. When Mary goes over the books, she is appalled by what she finds: “Her attitude towards Dick, always contemptuous, was now bitter and angry. It was not a question of bad luck, it was simply incompetence” (131). Just like Mary thrives in her power over Dick, she thrives even more when controlling a large group of workers. She oversees their work always carrying her leather whip. “It gave her a strong sense of authority, and braced her against the waves of hatred she could feel coming from the gang of natives” (124). This feeling of authority turns into pleasure; “it was a good feeling, keeping them under her will, making them do as she wanted” (125). We see then how women in this colonial society hold a position *in-between*. They are oppressed oppressors. They are subjected to oppression in the colonial society because of their gender, but gain power over the native population because of their race.

Through this division between female and male work, the genders are split into categories and given different characteristics. This separation of the genders is very obvious when Charlie Slatter and his wife come to visit the Turners’ farm and Dick automatically assumes that Mary will get along with Mrs. Slatter. “But you must talk women’s talk sometimes” (82) Dick tells her, thinking that their shared gender binds them together and

gives them a common ground, as if they can bond over the shared experience of being women. Mary fails to understand this, and as a result they have completely different perceptions of the visit. The narrator comments that Dick

felt as though he had been given an injection of new vigour, because of that hour spent in that little room, the two men on one side, discussing their own concerns, and the two women on the other, talking, presumably, about clothes and servants. For he had not heard a word of what Mrs. Slatter and Mary had said. He had not noticed how awkward it had been for both of them (83).

In any social setting in this society people divide into homogenous groups, in this case men and women. Dick assumes that Mary and Mrs. Slatter talked about things concerning the house or fashion, typically 'harmless' and 'female' subjects. Unfortunately their common femaleness is not enough to give the two women a natural meeting point. The awkwardness in the conversation with Mrs. Slatter is, however, largely Mary's fault. She is not socially tuned. Already early in the novel the narrator says of Mary that "she was not playing her part" (35). Mary's social aloofness and resulting failure in acting the way she is expected demonstrate that the gender roles are constructed. If these roles were natural, she would have played her part naturally. In this way, Lessing's novel does not only confirm that white identity and superiority is a performance, it also shows that womanhood is. Mary fails to enact her role and live up to the notion of womanhood.

This obliviousness to her surroundings characterizes Mary throughout the text. This gets worse as she deteriorates towards the end of the novel when "Dick bec[omes] used to the way she would say three words, and then, her face becoming suddenly null and empty, lapse into silence" (169/170). Although her obliviousness and detachment increases when she becomes sick, she also shows a complete unawareness of the norms around her and the expectations people have of her earlier in the novel. The narrator says that "South Africa is a wonderful place: for the unmarried white woman. But she was not playing her part, for she did not get married" (35). Mary lets the years go by, working and socialising, but even she cannot in the long run ignore "that impalpable, but steel-strong pressure to get married" (38). Mary overhears some cruel remarks about her age and spinsterhood made by a friend: "she will never marry. She just isn't like that, isn't like that at all. Something missing somewhere" (38). Thus Mary is forced to face the fact that she has transgressed the limits for what is socially acceptable in colonial Southern Rhodesia. The situation there is the same as in de Beauvoir's Europe where "marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not

being” (de Beauvoir 1989: 425). Mary Turner is made painfully aware of this. Her existence alone is not valid, and she must start looking for a husband, no matter how pointless that feels. And on the day of her death Mary reflects back on her reasoning for marrying Dick. “Yes, long, long ago, she had turned towards another young man, a young man from a farm, when she was in trouble and had not known what to do. It had seemed to her that she would be saved from herself by marrying him” (231). Marriage is an escape. In this case an escape from herself and her stagnated situation. Lessing’s perhaps most famous character, Martha Quest, does the same. She marries Douglas Knowell to escape from her dominating mother in *Martha Quest*. Her second marriage to Anton Hesse in *A Ripple from the Storm* is also poorly thought through, as is Mary’s marriage to Dick. It is simply the practical thing to do. Marriage in Lessing’s novels is often either a desperate last resort, or something meaningless women do automatically without being able to answer for why they did it exactly. It is expected of women to marry, and is often the only door open to them.

Thus, in *The Second Sex* we see a notion of marriage as an immanent opposition to transcendent work. This is also a recurring theme in Lessing’s Oeuvre. Like Mary and Martha Quest, Anna Wulf from *The Golden Notebook* find meaning through work and other projects. Martha does so through her work with the communist group before she is disillusioned with it, and Anna through her writing. Mary is only happy when at school, or working in town (but also momentarily when *working* on the farm). These three characters are all disappointed with or indifferent to marriage, often considered to be a woman’s ultimate goal and happiness. But unlike Martha and Anna, who are able to keep transcending throughout their lives, Mary is degraded into the brutish life of subjection to given conditions. She tries to flee from it, when running back to town to get her old job back, but it is too late. The biggest source of depression for her is realizing that there is no way off the farm. Her only source of desperate comfort becomes her dreams of a child she does not want.

This leads us to another failure on Mary’s part to fill her designated role. After a woman is married, she is expected to have children. In fact, female sexuality is often defined by its reproductive abilities. Mary’s aversion towards children indicates a repulsion she feels towards sex. She hates the idea of maternity. When Dick apologises for their poor economic situation, and explains that they will have to wait before having children, “she [Mary] had assented with a look of relief. He did not miss that look” (88). Mary seems to project her frustration with her own situation onto the native population, as if the more subjugated she is, the more she perpetuates her subjugation of others. Her anger against her servants is actually anger against the limitations that have been set in place for her, her entrapment in the store

Dick makes her run, her marriage and the prospect of her own maternity looming. Claire Sprague writes: “Her visceral rejection of sexuality, marriage, and motherhood, her hatred of being female, is most fully and intensely projected upon black women” (Sprague 1987: 27). She hates them because she interprets their nakedness as sexuality, something that repulses her.

[S]he loathed the [native] women.[...] Above all, she hated the way they suckled their babies, with their breasts hanging down for everyone to see; there was something in their calm satisfied maternity that made her blood boil. ‘Their babies hanging on to them like leeches’. [...] The idea of a child’s lips on her breasts made her [...] involuntarily clasp her hands over her breasts, as if protecting them from a violation (104).

Children are for her leeches. They hijack her body and her life, an alien life form that violates her and holds court in her gut³¹. Mary has little insight into the workings of her own psychology, and therefore finds black women’s maternity disgusting and strange, rather than analysing her own issues and feelings for children and maternity. She “did not think of herself, but rather of these black women, as strange; they were alien and primitive creatures with ugly desires she could not bear to think about” (104). The only time Mary wants a baby is when in desperation she is looking for something that will change her life. She is so desperately looking for a way out of her monotony that she disregards her own aversion and begs Dick for a baby. He says that they are too poor. “‘Just one child?’ persisted Mary. [...] It had taken weeks of slow despair to bring her to this point. She hated the idea of a baby, when she thought of its helplessness, its dependence, the mess, the worry. But it would give her something to do” (152). Just like she had escaped into marriage, she is now trying to escape into maternity, still probably knowing that it will not really help or change anything, because it is not what she wants, but the only destiny on offer.

Mary is a complicated protagonist. She is a deeply tragic figure, who conjures sympathy in the reader because of her situation and gruesome destiny, but her hatred for the natives surpasses that of the most extreme racists, making her repulsive in a modern, postcolonial context. In this analysis I argue that Mary is not actually essentially racist, but that she has been raised to follow a certain ideology, and that her bitterness and anger at being immanent cause an intense hatred in her that she can most fully take out on the natives. Before she came to the farm the natives were “outside her orbit” (33), and except for having

³¹ As formulated by Ani Difranco in her slam poem *Tip Toe*.

been raised to be afraid of them “of course” (60), the narrator goes on to comment that “[e]very woman in South Africa is brought up to be” (60), she has had nothing to do with them. When she comes to the farm she is “rather outraged at his [Dick] stockmarket attitude” to his servant Samson (he calls him a “bad old swine” (59) in a bantering manner), indicating that she has at least superficial notions of the native’s humanity. Her anger towards the natives is proportional to her own misery throughout the text.

Simone de Beauvoir’s theory can offer further insight into Mary’s intense racism. She writes that while men can transcend the hegemonic ideology, women become more trapped in it as they do not have the means to create new ones: “she can offer no way of repopulating the heaven; she rushes wildly to the defence of the old gods” (de Beauvoir 1989: 601). Women do not have sufficient power in society to lay the foundation for new ideologies. Mary embraces the racial hierarchy to a greater extent than Dick and is outraged by the fact that Dick treats the servants with some semblance of dignity, instead as machines. When Samson gives notice, in part due to Mary’s behaviour, Mary observes with disgust that Dick cares whether Samson goes or not. “She was filled with wonder, and even repulsion. Dick was actually sorry to see the end of this nigger! She could not understand any white person feeling anything personal about a native. It made Dick seem really horrible to her” (68). Simone de Beauvoir exemplifies her argument regarding women and the defence of men’s ideology with the American War of Secession, the Boer War in South Africa and the Commune in France in 1871, saying that it was the women who “were most belligerently inflamed. They seek to compensate for their inactivity by the intensity of the sentiments they exhibit” (de Beauvoir 1989: 601). She goes on to describe men’s condescending and overbearing sentiments of the women’s passionate appropriation of their ideas: “A man will sometimes smilingly encourage them, for it amuses him to see their fanatical reflection of ideas he expresses in more measured terms; but he may also find it irritating to have his ideas take on such a stupid, stubborn aspect” (de Beauvoir 1989: 601). Dick is at times very frustrated and annoyed with Mary’s behaviour towards the natives. After losing Samson he tells her: “Mary, listen to me for a moment. If you get yourself into a state over your boys, then you are finished. You will have to let go of your standards a little. You must go easy” (71). Usually Dick is the underdog in the marriage, but Mary’s passionate hatred towards the natives causes a great power struggle between them. Her hatred is so intense and irrational that it borders on psychosis.

The Haunted Farm

In *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing makes use of several Gothic elements to create an uncanny atmosphere that symbolizes the haunting of this demanding white idyll. My argument is that the Gothic ambience of the novel makes the reader aware of the fact that colonial society is built on the repression of others. Gothic literature has been criticised for being easy and banal,³² dealing with fictional universes with simple and obvious moral oppositions. A colonial society is a society in which the moral and social oppositions are, at least seemingly, simple. This has led the apartheid system to be the ultimate example of the unfair and morally wrong, and postcolonial criticism to become a very moralistic field.

Another typical aspect of Gothic literature is that there is often a big house or castle, around which the plot evolves. The equivalent of this in the anti-pastoral farm novel would be the farm. The house gains significance in Gothic literature, as it becomes an extension of the characters. This is for example the case in *Jane Eyre*, where the hidden secrets of Rochester's past are hidden in the attic. But the house need not only be extensions of the characters, it can also be a microcosm of the society surrounding the characters. In the anti-pastoral farm novel there is a correlation between the haunted house/farm, and the haunted colony.³³ This is the case in *The Grass is Singing*, where the house is a hot, decaying, claustrophobic and isolated prison, set down in the midst of African vastness.³⁴ In other words, it is a poignant allegory of the colony.

In chapter 3 we see an allusion to the classical Gothic image of the arrival of the bride at the unknown and isolated house described above. When the narrator describes Mary's arrival to the farm, the discourse switches into a Gothic narrative mode.³⁵ The house is described like a ghost house. Besides being dark and shut it has "a dark, musty smell" (53), giving associations to the atmosphere and smell of a tomb. Throughout the novel the house is described as being in decay, with candles as the only source of light and a ceiling that "was shrouded in cobwebs" (169). When Mary arrives for the first time, the narrator says that

³² David Punter problematizes this and says that "[t]he world of this lesser fiction was one which dealt in simple moral and social oppositions; one in which there was always a central heroine, abandoned by her parents and cast adrift on the mercies of a savage world" (Punter 1996: 9).

³³ See Jack Shear's article; "Haunted House, Haunted Nation: *Triomf* and the South African Postcolonial Gothic" for more on this.

³⁴ Not to say that vastness is something African, or that vastness is different in Africa than in for example in America, but to emphasize the opposition between her white and suffocating safe haven and the open African continent around her.

³⁵ See Sheila Robert's article "Sites of Paranoia and Taboo: Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Gordimer's *July's People*" for more on this.

[t]he moon had gone behind a great luminous white cloud, and it was suddenly very dark – miles of darkness under a dimly starlit sky. All around were trees [...] looking now like vague dark presences standing about the small clearing where the car had stopped (52).

The feeling of unease grows as Mary realises what kind of life she has accepted. Inanimate objects become threatening, and the trees almost come to life as dangerous creatures, much like the topiary in Stephen King's *The Shining*.³⁶ The darkness becomes imposing, except for the thin beam of ghostly moonlight that lights up the little farmhouse. I will quote a part in length in order to convey the gothic atmosphere of the scene. Mary shivers as

a cold breath blew out of the trees and down in the vlei beyond them hung a cold white vapor. [...] She glanced round at the house [...], under that white streaming moonlight. [...] Then a strange bird called, a wild nocturnal sound, and she turned and ran back, suddenly terrified, as if a hostile breath had blown upon her, from another world, from the trees. (53).

Here, the narrator draws a connection to another realm, a frightening and strange world she mistakes for the realm of the dead, brought on by the white vapour, haunting trees and nocturnal sounds. This other world is simply the veld, nature, the unestablished. Although she has grown up in Africa, she has always been within the protected realm of her parent's house, the boarding school, the girls' club and the city. She has never been confronted with what lies beyond the manmade Edwardian Gardens of Anglo-Africa.

This conflict between wilderness and society is constantly present in *The Grass is Singing*. The image of the farm in relation to a powerful bush is closely aligned with Camille Paglia's idea that established society is a pathetic defence against an all-encompassing and powerful Mother Nature, a bush that is awaiting its revenge. When Mary is given an almost prophetic vision on the last day of her life, she looks at the little farm house and thinks: "It would be killed by the bush, which had always hated it, had always stood around it silently, waiting for the moment when it could advance and cover it, for ever, so that nothing remained" (225). By this Lessing once again inserts her feeling of doom regarding both Mary

³⁶ The topiary surrounding the playground at the Overlook hotel is shaped like different animals, and has an ominous tendency to change positions. When the young protagonist, Danny, is playing, he notes that the hedge animals look different: "They were no longer protecting the path; they were blocking it", and later: "Staring at the hedge animals, he realized something *had* changed while he had his hands over his eyes" (King 1977: 195). This image of moving bush runs through the entire narrative in *The Grass is Singing*, from when "[t]he jungle crouched, humped in silence" in the first reference to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, to the last moment when "the bush avenged itself" (236).

and the colony that created her. Mary realises instantly upon her arrival that the farm is a frail, pathetic and doomed attempt to feign culture.

Part of what creates the sensation of horror for Mary upon her arrival at the farm, is the feeling that she is taken back to the childhood she has been trying to escape ever since she left for boarding school. Living on the farm she will realise that the ghost of her childhood has returned, never to leave her again:

she began to feel, slowly, that it was not in this house she was sitting, with her husband, but back with her mother, watching her endlessly contrive and patch and mend – till suddenly she got to her feet [...]; possessed with the thought that her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead (55/56).

She is again connecting with a world she mistakes for the world of the dead, when it really is her own life haunting her. She is trapped and surrounded, if not by a mould, then by the immense veld.

In his essay “The Uncanny” (1919), Sigmund Freud calls the sensation of recurring events and helplessness a source of the uncanny. He uses an example of when he was walking the streets of a provincial town in Italy, and after a while discovers that he is passing the same quarter time and time again against his own will. This creates a feeling of not controlling the situation, as if something pulls you back. For Mary this recurrence has much larger consequences as dreaded parts of her childhood repeat and manifest themselves in her adult life. This also brings our attention back to the elements of Greek Tragedy in the text. The elements of recurrence and fighting a predestined fate are the tragic elements that also create the uncanny atmosphere.

The repetition of events begin when Mary arrives at the farm and feels her father’s control from beyond the grave, as quoted above, and it increases throughout the novel. Mary is constantly comparing her life on the farm to the grim realities of her childhood, a life she had escaped. Through this, the novel seems to promote an idea that marriage for women is equal to moving back home to the parents. Freedom becomes limited as women lose their own authority and become helpless. She quickly realises this, and it is confirmed when Dick later opens a store, and makes her run it: “It seemed to Mary a terrible thing, an omen and a warning, that the store, the ugly menacing store of her childhood, should follow her here, even to her home” (102). It is emphasized repeatedly that Mary has no control over her own situation. “But she felt as if she were in a dark tunnel, nearing something final, something she

could not visualize, but which waited for her inexorably, inescapably” (191). Like in a horror novel the danger is hidden and unknown, but definitely present.

While the shifts into a Gothic narrative mode create an uncanny and ghostly atmosphere in the fictional universe of the novel, it is important to note that the haunting also takes place on a more specific level in the plot. Moses functions as a ghost in the text; he is the representative of the repressed native population sent to haunt Mary. However, he is also a Gothic character on several other levels.

On the first level he functions as the Gothic villain. In gothic themed writing it is often the mysterious villain who offers a possibility for the heroine to transcend her situation and experience love. Heathcliff (from *Wuthering Heights*), Rochester (from *Jane Eyre*) and Dracula are all frightening but attractive, as is Moses. Punter writes that “[t]he villain was always the most complex and interesting character in Gothic fiction” (Punter 1996: 9/10). This is also the case in *The Grass is Singing*. Moses is dark, quiet and brooding. He is mysterious and complex and seems to be controlling the situation from the start.

On the second level he is a voiceless other. While this obviously is not a Gothic trait in itself, it contributes to his eeriness as we never know what he is thinking or planning. He does not attack Mary when she whips him across the face, as if he knows he will get his revenge in due course. When he is hired as a houseboy he becomes an ever-present reminder of Mary’s wrongdoing. This incident is a source of power for Moses. Mary is afraid of him from the moment he starts working in her house: “She was unable to treat this boy as she had treated all the others, for always, at the back of her mind, was that moment of fear she had known just after she had hit him and thought he would attack her. She felt uneasy in his presence” (161). The unspoken truth that he is by far superior to her in strength, and the possibility that he might just be biding his time until he strikes back, is always between them. This tension, combined with the taboo of Mary’s attraction, builds the pressure leading up to her breakdown.

Because Moses is a voiceless other, he remains an anonymous “automaton, his body serving them because it must, his mind not there” (166) and, as quoted above, “a machine without soul” (174). This is the third level on which Moses is Gothic. This leads us back to Freud’s notion of the uncanny. He refers to E. Jentsch’s study of the fearful, which claims that “waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata” (Freud 2003: 135) are all examples of fearful things. Automata is plural for automaton, meaning a moving mechanical device made in imitation of a human being. These concepts that Freud is paraphrasing from Jentsch are thus uncanny because they appear to be real, are almost normal, but not quite.

This relates well to Moses, as he appears to be a normal man, but still is not quite so. His anonymity creates mystery and contributes to his ghostly aspects. Moses is at several times described as a creature of the shadows. When he leaves the house for a moment during Dicks' illness he is described as "vanish[ing] into the dark alone" (184) as if he is an apparition that dissipates. Mary feels his presence even when he is not visible. "She could not see the African, but she knew he was waiting for her there in the shadow" (187). This is also foreshadowing that points to Mary's murder, where he is awaiting her in the darkness. He is also part of the bush that avenges itself, and after having murdered her, he returns to "the soaking bush" (238). Moses' monstrosity is also alluded to when Mary hears movement on the iron roof, and associates the noises with "a vast black body, like a human spider, [...] crawling over the roof, trying to get in" (234). Moses is frightening on many levels, and resembles several figures in horror fiction. Mary's fear of him ranges from a feeling of unease to "a paroxysm of fright" (189). Slowly but surely this fear breaks Mary down.

Gothic Miscegenation

The primary strategy for subversion in the novel is sexuality. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argues that interracial sexuality is a specific trait in the postcolonial Gothic. When Lessing uses racist literary traits in the creation of Moses, she also plays upon the fears of colonial society by describing this sexual relationship followed by the murder of Mary. Paravisini-Gebert states that "[t]he fear of miscegenation, with the attendant horror of interracial sexuality, enters public discourse at about the time Walpole began the Gothic novel" (Paravisini-Gebert 2002: 230), demonstrating that it is an old trait growing with the fear of slave rebellion and subversion of the colonial hierarchy. These are the fears Lessing ridicules by letting Moses be a black, ripped, sexual being whom in the end lurks in the shadows and murders the white mistress.

Moses is constantly described through a conflation of the narrator's and Mary's voices, and it is because of her presence in the narration that Moses is sexually objectified. Mary is fascinated with his body from the moment he starts working for them; "The powerful, broad-built body fascinated her. [...] [H]is muscles bulged and filled out the thin material of the sleeves until it seemed they would split" (161). The two characters obtain an interesting, yet understated sexual dynamic early, and we see that Moses is aware of this and challenges Mary with it. Mary knows when and where Moses washes himself everyday, because she often catches "a glimpse of him bending over, sluicing himself, naked from the waist up (162). Yet she conveniently forgets it and surprises him one day while he is "rubbing his thick

neck with soap [...] [which] was startlingly white against the black skin” (162/163). At this point, Moses is the one who is stripped and invaded, but he “stopped and stood upright” (163), in effect challenging her. The remainder of this scene is described from Mary’s perspective, and she is “furious that perhaps he believed she was there on purpose” (163). It can seem as though that is the truth, and that she is defending herself from it by projecting this idea as cheek from Moses. She comes across as paranoid because there is no real reason for Moses to believe she did this on purpose, and her concern that he would think so suggests that she did. The narrator says at a later stage that Mary feels, “though this she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledge, [...] some dark attraction” (176). Towards the end of the novel, Tony Marston observes Mary and Moses being so intimate that he even dresses her, meaning he has access to her body and the most intimate parts of her routine. Considering that he is her servant, she must be the one to arrange these scenes with a sexual undertone. In this way, Moses is objectified through a white female gaze. This is then a reversal of their colonial and gendered roles. The narrator says that Mary was afraid of natives “of course. Every woman in South Africa is brought up to be. [...] When she had asked why, she had been told [...] they were nasty and might do horrible things to her” (60). Mary is brought up to be afraid of the over-sexualized, rapist black man. Because of this she reads Moses as sexual, and forces him into a sexual role. Yet she is the one who feels the desire, and she is the one initiating the rituals that emphasize the sexual undertones of their relationship.

In this manner the relationship between Mary and Moses evades the strict colonial rules laid down to control the interaction between native men and white women. This intimate relationship subverts the hierarchy so carefully kept in place, and Mary speaks to him as “she might have done to a white man, with whom she was flirting a little” (189/190). In other words Mary is unable to treat white and black men differently. Charlie Slatter is outraged to hear her speak to Moses “with exactly the same flirtatious coyness she had spoken to himself” (203). Her desire and intimate relationship with Moses has irreversibly exposed his humanity, as she exposed her humanity when she broke down and sobbed in front of him; “It was as though the act of weeping before him had been an act of resignation – resignation of her authority; and he had refused to hand it back” (176). Here, it is indicated that she is no longer in command of Moses.

In other words, their relationship blurs and crosses the lines of the colonial hierarchy and proves it false by demonstrating the humanity of both characters. In an African colonial context, sexuality will necessarily have a devastating potential. The mixing of races will

destroy the colonial hierarchy completely through hybridity, which is why it needs to be contained in order to keep the pretention that the hierarchy is natural and unavoidable. This explains why The Immorality Act and The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act³⁷ were some of the earliest and most important laws during South African apartheid. In the same way as homosexual relations have been feared as they subvert the heteronormative system, sexual relations between races have been feared as they prove that the hierarchy, on which the whole colonial system is based, is fraudulent.

Compulsive Whiteness

We have through this analysis seen that *The Grass is Singing* subverts colonial society through irony and a range of Gothic elements, of which miscegenation is the primary one. However, the novel also offers a very complex meditation on how this society is created and perpetuated, which is what I aim to explore in the last sections of this chapter.

The colonial society in the novel displays a phobia of knowledge, and that knowledgeable people are stigmatized. Dick Turner dislikes Mission boys as it is stated that most South Africans do because “they ‘knew too much’” (177). It is also, as depicted in the way Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant deal with Mary’s murder, a society built on denial, repression and “facts”, not nuances. A society built on racial segregation and gender hierarchy needs straight lines and clean cuts. Tony Marston does not understand this yet. He sees some of the complexities that underlie Mary’s murder. He tries to present his theory to the two other men, but is met with the response that “we don’t want theories. We want facts. [...] Anything that is definite. Not something in the air” (17). This is emphasized later in the novel when it is insinuated that Mary was disliked because “she’s got ideas in her head, that’s what’s wrong with her” (87), as if ideas and thoughts are too vague to have any meaning, and that having them means that you think you are better than everyone else. Direct experience and power is what counts, not the ability to reflect on the experience and the so-called facts on which this society is based.

The Turners fail to enact their part in the racial hierarchy Which brings us back to the comic potential of the novel; the discrepancy between the ideal they are supposed to enact and the reality of their failed performance. This demonstrates the false nature of the supposedly natural, inherent hierarchy. Charlie Slatter is the character most aware of the workings of the

³⁷ The apartheid government rose to power in 1948. Already a year later the prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 was put in place. The Immorality Act of 1950 prohibited further sought to eradicate sexual relationships between people of different races.

colonial society, and how to keep power in the hands of the white, preferably the British. However, his awareness is also limited. Because he “personified society” (6), the steps he takes “were taken apparently instinctively and without conscious planning” (2). In other words he acts out of compulsion. When he visits Dick and Mary it is said of him that “he was obeying the dictate of the first law of white South Africa, which is: ‘Thou shalt [sic] 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’”(205). It turns out that in order to keep the hierarchy in place one needs to put on a thoroughly calculated performance, in which the whites act out the power they supposedly already have. This performative act of power and superiority creates the power it is supposed to demonstrate.

To maintain distance it is also essential that people from different groups do not engage in personal relationships. As a child Mary is not allowed to play with the little Greek girl next door because “her parents were dagoes” (29). So she must spend her days alone. Most importantly are the separation, distance and depersonalisation between the two greatest opposites, the ultimate racial dichotomy, black and white. This is what Tony Marston learns by listening to the conversation between Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant. He is suddenly filled with insight about the workings of the Rhodesian Society. He sees 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 evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it “ (21). This is part of the problematic nature of Mary Turner’s murder and the reason for it being kept under wraps. It destabilizes the colonial hierarchy so carefully kept in place by the colonial masters. It is the undoing of an individual, a family, and potentially a society.

Judith Butler writes: “I would offer this insight into heterosexuality as both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself” (Butler 2007: 166). In Lessing’s novel the colonial hierarchy becomes the compulsive system and intrinsic comedy. While the novel is deeply tragic and gruesome, humour and irony are two of its primary strategies. However horrible the subject matter of the novel is, the characters’ failure to enact the colonial hierarchy is comic, although more of a black comedy or tragicomedy. The fact that Mary does not understand what she is fighting against, and why she has sinned, shows that the role of the colonial master is a compulsory (and compulsive) one, in the same way heterosexuality is compulsory in Butler’s theory. Butler asks: “To what extent does gender hierarchy serve a more or less compulsory heterosexuality, and how often are gender norms policed precisely in the service of shoring up heterosexual hegemony?” (Butler 2007:

xiii). The same question about colonial hierarchy is what this chapter has sought to answer. *The Grass is Singing* demonstrates how colonial society calls for a compulsory whiteness³⁸ that is policed in order to maintain white hegemony.

Towards the end of the novel Mary's failure to enact her role becomes less comic and more grotesque. She has always treated the Slatters with a proud distance, but when Charlie comes to visit, Mary tries to treat him with congeniality, but ends up laughing and "twisting her shoulder in a horrible parody of coquetry" (201). If she has failed to play her part in society earlier, it was because of obliviousness to the expectations of the people around her. Now the events of the novel have made her aware of what is expected of her and she attempts to play her part, but ends up parodying her female flirtatiousness and her role as a white supremacist. She is supposed to have power over Moses, but we are told that she lets him dress her: "she stood up and held out her arms while the native slipped her dress over them from behind" (213), thus revealing the complete dependency on Mary's part.

The Role of Literature in Ideological Perpetuation

An important area of enquiry is how this colonial ideology is spread. The text suggests that literature can be a powerful and dangerous tool in coercing people to adapt to certain ideologies. In the introduction I pointed to the two-faced nature of literature. It can convince people of the validity of certain ideologies, as well as subvert them. Mary is an overt and extreme racist, yet she is fairly well read, although as mentioned, in 'bad' novels. Early in their marriage Dick picks one of Mary's books up, *The Fair Lady*, and reads a passage. The passage he reads is about the Great Trek, about love between Afrikaans people and their love for South Africa. Even though these constitute Afrikaans cultural myths, it is worth noting how British colonials in this case also read Afrikaans literature and are probably affected by it. "The trekkers trekked North, towards the Land of Promise where never the cold grasping hand of the hated British could reach them" (66). Here we see that South Africa is compared to Kanaan, the Biblical Promised Land. Further down the page Dick reads: "Piet Van Friesland watched her, his heart throbbing in time to the great blood-stained heart of South Africa itself" (66). This is in other words not a novel directly dealing with colonial conquest and white claim to African soil. It is rather a love story depicting the love between Piet Van

³⁸ It should be mentioned that heterosexuality and whiteness are different, as one cannot hide race the way one can hide sexuality. However, compulsory whiteness is supreme within one system in the same way heterosexuality is (in the same but also in other systems), and certain cultural attributes are attached to the whiteness that have to be enacted in order to maintain its supremacy. While I do see many similarities between these two constructions, I agree with Butler when she says that "[n]o single account of construction will do" (Butler 2007: xvii).

Friesland and Prunella Van Koetzie, set against the dramatic backdrop of an important historical event for the Afrikaans people. This masks the agenda of spreading colonial romanticism.

The passage from Mary's romantic colonial novel also brings our attention to a very central ideal in Afrikaner identity, namely the allegorical link between The Great Trek and the wandering of the Jews through Egypt in *Exodus*. Biblical Philosophy has been extremely central in the colonial project and in the construction of a colonial identity. In *The Beadle*, Pauline Smith writes that

in the Aangenaam valley, as in every other South African community, the Dutch retained their own direct Biblical interpretation of life. [...] For these early settlers, as for many generations of their descendants, the literature of the world was limited to a single book, the Bible (Smith 1979: 27/28).

It is the Afrikaans population, more than the English, who read their life and situation biblically. Being chased into foreign lands by the English, they venture into the unknown with their families, herds, Bibles and guns, and interpreting this biblically see that their situation "closely resembled that of the Patriarchs of the Old Testament" (Smith 1979: 28). In this allegory the English become the hated Egyptians chasing the Afrikaners, the slaves, towards The Transvaal, which then becomes The Promised Land, a common reference to South Africa in Afrikaans culture.³⁹ Smith writes that

they were, like Israel of old, a people chosen of God for the redeeming of this portion of the earth. [...] and with each succeeding act of injustice towards himself the Dutchman has been driven to a deeper, fiercer belief in his race as a persecuted but chosen people whose pilgrimage is not yet over (Smith 1979: 28).

Benedict Anderson points to the link between persecution and nationalism by saying that "it is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny" (Anderson 1991: 12). Out of this horrible tale of persecution a new narrative is created that includes a God-given ownership of the land, and a reason for the hardships. A strong bond to Africa is created, a bond the English to a much lesser degree had. As we have seen, home for the English was England, while for the Afrikaners it was South Africa, not Holland.

By demonstrating how this is lodged into the literature Mary reads, we see how colonial ideology spread throughout the colonies through literature. This point is enforced by

³⁹ In *In the Heart of the Country* Magda also refers to South Africa as The Promised Land on several occasions (see for example §24 and 40).

Tony Marston's many books on Cecil John Rhodes. This shows the validity of Boehmer's point that "Colonial spaces – from company offices to the guest-rooms of government houses to the libraries of hill-stations – became flooded with the same kinds of literature. The imaginations of readers across the British Empire were led along parallel grooves" (Boehmer 2005: 52). Mary as British, reads colonial Afrikaans literature, which shows that, although different, the Afrikaans and the British missions are similar enough for people of the two groups to relate to each other, and that the same literature helped lay the ideological foundation for both.

By emphasizing what kind of literature the characters read, and by shifting between different discourses and value systems in the narration, *The Grass is Singing* deftly demonstrates that although it is part of a liberal and subversive novelistic tradition, the novelistic form can also be used to perpetuate conservative ideologies. Lessing's novel thus points to its own nature as an ideological tool, suggesting that, at least in a colonial context, a novel can never be ideologically neutral or simply an aesthetic object.

Mary's *In-Betweenness*

By looking at *The Grass is Singing's* many European literary predecessors it becomes clear that the novel, as part of Southern African literary culture, is culturally *in-between* two continents. The novel deals with an African content in a European form. This *in-betweenness* permeates the text and is obvious on several levels for example by the narrator is both a part of, and distanced from the society he describes. In conclusion, I will explore Mary's *in-betweenness*.

Mary is such a complicated protagonist because she conjures sympathy *and* repulsion in the reader, and she comes across as both the abused and the abuser. In the end she realizes that she has acted wrongly, but fails to acknowledge how: "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" (224). The wholeness of her vision cracks because she is both guilty and innocent. This acknowledgement is the first foundational crack in her white colonial identity.

The second crack becomes obvious when Mary, in one of the many instances of uncanny re-occurrence, starts dreaming about her childhood. In the dream she enters the house to see her parents playing with a strong sexual innuendo: "Her mother was struggling in mock protest [...]. Her father bent over her mother" (186). Later in the dream, her father catches her, and the activity changes from play to violation: "Her father caught her head and

held it in his lap with his small hairy hands [...]. She smelled the sickly odour of beer, and through it she smelled too – her head held down in the thick stuff of his trousers – the unwashed masculine smell” (186). The dream insinuates that her father forces her to perform oral sex, which exposes taboo sexual undercurrents in her relationship to her father *as well* as to Moses. When she wakes up she starts looking for Moses. Mary is at this stage struggling to separate dream from reality so when Moses advances, she thinks of her father; “He approaches slowly, obscene and powerful, and it was not only he, but her father, who was threatening her. They advanced together, one person, and she could smell, not the native smell, but the unwashed smell of her father” (188). This haunting image is crucial in understanding Mary’s madness and disintegration. Mary is here caught in-between her father and Moses, but is unable to reject what either one of them represents. Yet what they represent is two incompatible value systems.

Mary’s inability to escape her colonial ideology foreshadows my analysis of *In The Heart of the Country*. Both Mary and, as we shall see, Magda, seem to be on the verge of transcendence into a new understanding, discourse and value system, but in the end fail to follow through. I read Mary’s growing sexual feelings for Moses as synonymous with a subconscious attraction to an intellectual re-evaluation. Her attraction to a black man indicates that her views and feelings towards the natives are changing. Because of this, Mary’s father and Moses can be said to represent two different discourses and I suggest that Mary’s madness is increasing partly because she is on the borderline between the two. The figure of Moses is “consoling her protectively; but at the same time it was her father menacing and horrible, who touched her in desire” (188). Because she is on the borderline between two discourses she cannot think or speak coherently. This situation *in-between* ruptures Mary’s white colonial identity, which leads to a split subject, and subsequently, madness. When the figure of Moses and her father combined advances, it causes such a fright in her because they symbolise irreconcilable differences within her that she knows she must unite somehow. In the end Mary fails to do so, leaving this crucial union unsuccessful and Mary not enough intellection to answer her own question as to why all this is happening.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Pp. 215/216.

Chapter II: Subversion of Narrative Authority and Linguistic Rape in J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977)

“[T]he calling into question of the place of writing, has intimately to do with the positioning of a colonial subject, with the testing of the authority of the one who writes” - Carrol Clarkson⁴¹

“End of story. There are inconsistencies in it, but I have not the time to track down and abolish them” - Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*⁴²

My primary argument in this chapter follows the grooves of chapter 1: *In the Heart of the Country*, like *The Grass is Singing*, destabilizes white colonial identity and society on both a thematic and a metatextual level. On the thematic level, the text describes the ramifications of a hierarchical social structure on a little farm in the Karoo, and demonstrates the violent consequences the transgressions of this structure can have in a colonial society. The main protagonist, Magda, is like Mary Turner a woman on the verge of a breakdown *and* a breakthrough. The Gothic is present in the deviant sexual interactions on the farm, such as rape and incest, and in the detailed descriptions of the scatological and the gruesome. On a metatextual level, the novel shifts between a pastoral and an anti-pastoral discourse, the latter being a dark and Gothic rejection of the white idyll of the former. The text also exposes the potential violence of novelistic narration and discourse, by exploring the implications of a linguistic hierarchy and the issue of narrative perspective, especially in a colonial context. Magda is “a woman determined to be the author of her own life” (§122), yet the second quotation above makes us aware of the fact that she is a highly unreliable ‘author’ and narrator. Through this unreliability and subversion of narrative authority, a colonial critique emerges that enables us to explore the role of language in the colonial enterprise. It illustrates the intricate relationship between language, reality, social structure and body, and the potential violence of narrative *situatedness*⁴³ and *imaginative command*. The novel was published in England and the US in 1977 before the Ravan Press published it in South Africa in 1978. The international and the South African editions were different as the dialogue in the

⁴¹ (2009: 137).

⁴² (§93). When I quote from *In The Heart of the Country* I will refer to sections/vignettes, not pages. For the most part I quote from the Vintage 2004 edition and will therefore refer to this only by using the paragraph symbol (§) and the number of the section. When I use the Ravan 1978 edition I will indicate this by writing an R instead of § in front of the number of the section.

⁴³ The term *situatedness* is central to this analysis. I use it to refer to the positioning of the writer and the narrator. By narrative convention there is often an expectation of narrative omniscience unless it is indicated otherwise. The term *situatedness* draws our attention to the fact that this omniscience will always be a fictional construct, as no subject can ever escape his/her position, situation, language or perspective.

latter was rendered in Afrikaans. This has been changed in later editions, meaning that aspects of the novel's local specificity have been lost. I will therefore refer to both editions.

The novel is a fictional monologue performed by Magda, a spinster living with her father and a few servants on an isolated little farm in the Karoo, presented in 266 vignettes. The monologue consists of Magda's thoughts and descriptions of life on the farm, her childhood and of several events that dramatically change the lives of the people living there. The narration is not always chronological and is sometimes even contradictory, making a summation of the plot difficult. The novel starts with Magda's father bringing home a voluptuous new bride to the farm. Crazy with jealousy, Magda murders the couple with an axe. This proves to be fantasy, and that it is rather the farm worker, Hendrik, who has brought home a new bride, the young and pretty Klein-Anna. Magda's father becomes infatuated, and initiates a courting that breaks the colonial rules. Magda shoots him while he is sleeping with Klein-Anna. He takes a very long time to die, and Magda then struggles to bury him, ultimately succeeding. Without the patriarch to run the farm, it falls apart and Magda fails to pay the servants. Hendrik rapes her in retribution, and this evolves into a voluntary sexual relationship. After the servants leave, Magda starts imagining that airplanes fly over the farm and communicate with her. Towards the end of the novel it is insinuated that her father might be alive after all.

Structure and Narrative *Situatedness*

The Karoo is a common backdrop in the pastoral farm novel. Magda describes it as "a theatre of stone and sun fenced in with miles of wire" (§8). When she describes it as a theatre, she gives the reader a feeling of being a spectator, and that what happens on the farm is a performance. Several themes will be staged for the intellectual benefit of the spectator/reader. In §1 Magda sets the scene, by introducing the characters and saying "[t]hose are the antagonists". However, it quickly becomes apparent that the reader does not enjoy the overview a spectator of a play would. We view the actions from Magda's point of view, and follow her "blind, subjective time of the heart, with its spurts of excitement and drags of tedium" (§9). Because of this, *In the Heart of the Country* is structured discontinuously and confusingly, and while this has led to the novel being received as elitist, politically evasive and difficult, I view this as a central element in the text's critical potential. This confusion undermines the reader's faith in Magda's narrative authority, through which a colonial and metafictional critique emerges.

The narrative structure of the novel demonstrates an affiliation with the French *nouveau roman*, in particular Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* (1957), and a glance at this text illuminates aspects of *In the Heart of the Country*. Seymour Chatman points to *La Jalousie* and writes that the said narrative confusion "mystify us about the order in which events occur, the mystification being a function of the unreliability of the narration" (Chatman 1978: 66). This unreliability is a key to understand *In the Heart of the Country*, and points to central concepts in this thesis such as *imaginative command* and narrative authority in a colonial context. This narrative confusion is partly a result of the *nouveau roman*'s cinematic heritage, resulting in a disrupted and repetitious montage effect. What the narrators have in common, in addition to jealousy being the impetus for their narratives, is that they are both writing from an extreme *situatedness*.⁴⁴

At first glance, the narration in *La Jalousie* is hyper-realistic, with an almost clinically detailed style, and it seems to form a contrast to Magda's extremely subjective narration. However, what *La Jalousie* demonstrates is that even the most realist and apparently neutral narrative will always be written from a physically *and* psychologically situated perspective. It is this *situatedness* that I will pursue in this analysis as it exposes the subjective nature of narration and destabilises the authority of the narrator. In *In the Heart of the Country*, this narrative strategy exposes the colonial power structures of the novel, making the reader aware of how thought paradigms can be perpetuated through fiction, also in apparently neutral fiction.

In *La Jalousie* several small incidents are repeated several times, like when the narrator's wife, A..., brushes her hair, or when their neighbour, Franck, crushes a centipede. There is no coherency of time and the incidents are described randomly. Thus the narrative jumps in time without alerting the reader,⁴⁵ making it difficult to discern whether incidents are flashbacks or if the former recounts were flash forwards, and therefore where the incidents fit into the narrative.

⁴⁴This is a recurring theme in Coetzee's oeuvre. In his novel from 1990, *Age of Iron*, the main protagonist and narrator is Elizabeth Curren. She is, like Magda, performing a monologue, or writing one, as the whole novel is an extended letter to her daughter who fled apartheid South Africa many years before and now lives in North America. After relating a specifically horrific morning, in which Elizabeth found herself in the middle of a township riot, she reminds her daughter of her own bias and limited perspective: "I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see" (Coetzee 1998: 103).

⁴⁵For example, after one of the many lunches (or perhaps the same lunch retold obsessively) with Franck, A... sits down on the veranda to read. The narrator then starts the next paragraph saying: "The veranda is empty, the house too" (Robbe-Grillet 2008: 106), indicating, but not stating, that time must have passed.

We encounter similar confusion in *In the Heart of the Country*; for example §38 is the same incident as §1, except that it is now Hendrik who brings home a new bride, and not Magda's father. §67, 68 and 69 tell different, but similar versions of Magda's father flirting with Klein Anna, §78, 79, 80 and 81 tell different versions of Ou-Anna and Jacob's departure and so on. Since there are so many versions available, it is impossible to establish certainly which ones, if any, are true. One can read the latter versions as corrections, and therefore as *more* true, but constant revisions make the reader uneasy as the narrator seems confused and casts the entire narrative project in doubt.⁴⁶ Also, since the sections are presented in numerical order, one expects narrative logic and coherence, only to be confused again and again. Sometimes Magda admits that she has fabricated things, for example in §36 when she says of her father that "he does not die so easily after all. [...] The old days are not gone [...]. He has not brought home a new wife". Other times it is up to the reader to try to separate fact from fiction, a rather hopeless task in a text that tries to annihilate that distinction.

While any novel is an imaginative act, Magda's monologue is a constant reminder that narration is at all times subjective, limited and therefore at least partly fictional. This aspect is emphasized when Magda, in addition to telling different versions of the same events, also starts several sections (e.g. 80, 81, 83) with "or perhaps". By starting several sections with this uncertainty, the reader is kept in the dark as to whether or not what she is saying really happened or if they are mere fantasies. Furthermore, when these paragraphs are told in succession, each starting with perhaps, it seems as if Magda is just entertaining several possibilities, giving no single possibility privilege. This is also a parallel to the narrator of *La Jalousie*, who, when A... hums a dance tune to which he cannot hear the words, says "But perhaps Franck understands them, if he already knows them, from having heard them often, perhaps with her. Perhaps it is her favourite record" (Robbe-Grillet 2008: 14). Here everything is based on assumption and the narrator does not say anything for certain. These uncertain narrations pose the question of how we can take any narrative authority for granted. Due to narrative convention, the reader almost automatically trusts the narrator, expecting the narrator to be a source of (paradoxically fictional) truth. While few narratives are as openly flawed as these two, they question this trust and suggest that storytelling will always be both subjective and situated. In *La Jalousie*, the clinical descriptions are seeped in green; "[t]he light itself has a somewhat greenish cast" (Robbe-Grillet 2008: 28). While this could be a

⁴⁶ Derek Attridge says; "once having read (for example) paragraphs 1-35 in the good faith of the novelistic consumer, only to find them a fantasy, we can never quite achieve the same confidence in the scenes presented to us thereafter. The question 'What really happened?' becomes unanswerable" (Attridge 2005: 23).

reflection of the banana trees around the house, it rather becomes a reflection of the narrator's jealousy when read in conjunction with the obsessive and almost compulsive retelling of the same events. The clinical and objective description is thus suddenly seeped in subjective emotions.

While *La Jalousie* mostly points to the psychological *situatedness* of narration, *In the Heart of the Country* also focuses on the cultural *situatedness*: in this case, colonial culture. The latter advocates that it is not the subject who controls the discourse, but the discourse that sets the rules and the limits for what the subject is able to say. In addition to this, the narrations also problematize the reader's role as an accomplice. For example, *In the Heart of the Country* is told so completely from Magda's point of view that the reader internalizes her opinions, and is almost forced to sympathise with a subject that one would perhaps disdain had one not had to witness the incidents that constitutes the story from her point of view. In a rhetorical turn, the narrator's bias is transferred to the reader through the narration. This effect also takes place in *La Jalousie*, when the narrator, who at first glance narrates with such objective detail, inserts semi-racist opinions like "he is wrong to trust modern trucks to the black drivers, who will wreck them just as fast" (Robbe-Grillet 2008: 11). Similarly, any reader of *In The Heart of the Country* is forced to read Magda's world from a racist perspective. When her father brings home his new bride, she is filled with repulsion and hatred. She looks at his new wife and describes her with classical racist imagery: "The new wife is a lazy big-boned voluptuous feline woman with a wide slow-smiling mouth. [...] She sleeps and eats and lazes. She sticks out her long red tongue and licks the sweet mutton-fat from her lips" (§2). Magda makes her out to be some cliché Mama Africa character who is fat and lazy. Her wide slow-smiling mouth creates an image of a sedated and half-dozing woman. She eats her meat with filthy eating habits, suggesting that she has no manners. However, everything we read is already interpreted for us and filtered through Magda's perceptions of the world around her, as any narration will be. The colonial context makes this narrative aspect acutely obvious.

Symbolic Rape and Semiotic Psychosis

Following this, a central question becomes how this *situatedness* arises. How is the subject placed and positioned? In my analysis of *The Grass is Singing*, I discussed the role of literature in perpetuation of ideology. Literature as a discursive practice spreads culture and ideology, which is then kept in place by physical violence and social coercion. In this analysis we will see that Magda's monologue is written in a discourse containing culture, ideology and

power structures that Magda cannot escape, but is rather forced to perpetuate. Magda does not call Afrikaans her mother tongue, but rather her “father-tongue” (§195), demonstrating an idea that her language is masculine. The notion of the father tongue carries psychoanalytical connotations and plunges us into a theoretical realm thoroughly explored by the French-Bulgarian theoretician and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva and the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan before her. In this linguistic field, symbolic language is considered to be masculine and dominated by the law of the father. In her article “From One Identity to Another” (1975) Julia Kristeva proposes the idea of semiotic language, in opposition to symbolic language.

Semiotic language is that which is “unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently maternally connoted to such an extent that it merits ‘not even the rank of syllable’” (Kristeva 1980: 132). If it does not even merit the rank of the syllable, the semiotic must emphasize the sound of language, poetic discourse, musicality, rather than reason and meaning. The phrase *maternally connoted* also brings associations to the body, meaning that this is the musical language of the body. Both the musicality of language and the body in language are central for Magda, as we shall see.

A common misinterpretation of Magda is that she is mad, which indicates that her monologue is closely connected to psychotic discourse. Kristeva points out that symbolic language is characterized by an attempt to unify all meaning, reducing all signifiers to signify one thing, defined by the master, or the father, or as Magda calls him, “the dark father” (§8). Semiotic language advocates for a more democratic right of definition and seeks to explode and liberate established definitions so that a word can mean many things. “Consequently one should begin by positing that there is within poetic language (and therefore, although in a less pronounced manner, within any language) a *heterogeneousness* to meaning and signification” (Kristeva 1980: 133. Emphasis hers). This is apparent as small children are learning to speak, when sounds, rhythms and intonations are made before they are defined and reduced to one specific meaning, before the father has *named the sounds*. Kristeva goes on to say that “this heterogeneousness, which is later reactivated as rhythms, intonations, glossalalias in psychotic discourse, serving as ultimate support of the speaking subject threatened by the collapse of the signifying function” (Kristeva 1980: 133). Magda is then not necessarily insane, but is rather trying to break out of the symbolic, which is not the language she wants, but the only language that is available to her. A subject transcending the symbolic would necessarily be deemed crazy as it leaves the subject’s language unintelligible, having broken down symbolic meaning. Symbolic language is primarily used to communicate, which is why it is “one system, perhaps even one ‘structure’, always *one meaning*” (Kristeva 1980: 126.

Emphasis hers), semiotic language is not, at least not to the same extent. Symbolic language is then a language of power and authority, while semiotic language is revolutionary and transcendent.

Thus, the symbolic father tongue carries violence and oppression, and Magda describes initiation into it in terms of rape: “Wooed when we were little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life. The childhood rape: someone should study the kernel of truth in this fancy” (§9). Magda goes on to describe the law’s possession of her: “The law has gripped my throat [...], it invades my larynx, its one hand on my tongue, its other hand on my lips” (§163). This law has gripped her throat, which gives connotations to violence, and something involuntary, enhanced by the description of the *invasion* of her larynx. She goes on to say that “the eyes of the law [...] stare from behind my eyes, [...] the mind of the law [...] [occupies] my skull, leaving me only enough intellection to utter these doubting words, [...] and see their fallaciousness” (§163). That the law stares out from behind her eyes signal that it has possessed her. It occupies her skull, meaning her intellect, and it leaves her just enough intellection to realize that she is possessed, but not enough to liberate herself from it. This is one of the most important statements in *In the Heart of the Country*, and is at the core of my interpretative project of Magda. She seems mad and self-contradictory because the sparring between her effort to transcend her discourse/ideology and her inability to do so makes her a split subject. She asks: “How can I say that the law does not stand fullgrown inside my shell, its feet in my feet, its hands in my hands, its sex drooping through my hole” (§163). Not only is she possessed, but the law’s sex drooping through her hole emphasizes that it is masculine, and that it rapes her from within, emphasizing the extent of the violation, and pointing back to the childhood rape early in the novel. This also signals that she is not raped from some force external to her body, but rather by something that is in her and is part of her. In the end the law is “grinning and triumphant” (§163), while Magda lies “sloughed, crumpled, abandoned on the floor” (§163) like a used and dirty piece of clothing.

The Grass is Singing exposes how this linguistic ideology is passed down through literature and upbringing. Magda demonstrates a similar idea when she describes the schoolteacher who once worked on the farm “in order that the children of the desert should not grow up barbarian” (§92). This illustrates an idea that anything non-European is barbarian, and that an education system is necessary in order to perpetuate the *right* culture. Magda is taught her culture, which includes “the rotation of the earth, Napoleon, Pompeii” (§92) signaling European science, history and antiquity. She goes on to name “the seven days

of creation, the immortal comedies of Shakespeare, geometric and arithmetic progressions, Rumpelstiltskin” (§92) symbolizing European religion, literature, mathematics and folklore. That she includes “the reindeer herds of the frozen wastes” (§92) emphasizes how irrelevant this culture is to a desert child of the Karoo. Magda has spent her entire life in the Karoo, and yet is a cultural stranger to it. Magda says that “[n]o one is ancestral to the stone desert, no one but the insects, among whom myself a thin black beetle with dummy wings who lays no eggs and blinks in the sun, a real puzzle to entomology” (§40). Here Magda says that the insects are the only natural inhabitants in the desert. She likens herself to an insect as she lives there, and always has, so in a sense belongs there. But her body is not adapted to life in the desert as she is not *naturally* part of it. She lays no eggs and is therefore not a part of the circle of life, she has dummy wings so she cannot fly like the other insects, and her eyes are not made to resist the strong Karoo sun.

This European heritage is part of the symbolic language, as is hierarchy. Having murdered and overthrown her father, Magda seeks to transcend her colonial language, and in order to do so she must avoid the Master-Slave dialectic in which she is trapped. Magda cannot be free because she cannot gain reciprocity. In this linguistic system, the I is defined by the you. It is an I because it is not a you. “I who living among the downcast have never beheld myself in the equal regard of another’s eye, have never held another in the equal regard of mine” (§18). After having killed her father, Magda seeks reciprocity, which turns out to be impossible in a society where no one is equal. Magda seeks to redirect her love to the other people of South Africa, but in the same way Magda has internalized a misogynist discourse that subjugates her, Hendrik and Anna have internalized a hierarchical discourse that subjugates them. Thus the subjects versed in this colonial hierarchical discourse in effect subjugate themselves *and* others. Magda tries incessantly to get Klein-Anna to say her name, but all she gets back is Miss (Mies)⁴⁷. “Tell me, Anna, [...] [w]hat is my name?” [...] ‘What do you call me in your thoughts?’” (§203). Magda asks her what Anna calls her in her thoughts, assuming that inner thought is a refuge from the societal power structures. Anna replies “‘Miss?’ ‘Yes; but to you am I only the miss? Have I no name of my own?’ ‘Miss Magda?’” (§203). This demonstrates that inner thought is no sanctuary from the power structures in society. Coherent, symbolic thoughts will be articulated in the same language, meaning that one cannot think outside the power structures of the law inherent in that same

⁴⁷ I will revert to the significance of the word miss (mies in Afrikaans) in Magda’s context in “Colonial Structures in Afrikaans” later in this chapter.

language. Anna tries to say just Magda, as she understand that is expected of her, but cannot separate the name from the hierarchical position of power; Miss. Magda tries to dissolve the hierarchy: “But now I am just Magda, and you are just Anna. Can you say Magda?” “No, miss, I can’t” (§203). In a colonial discourse Anna does not have the power to name.

The abstraction of speaking of linguistic constructs can potentially remove focus from these constructs’ manifestation in society, de-valuing the reality of them. However, *In the Heart of the Country* also describes the more material and specific abuses for which these linguistic power structures are responsible. Magda’s father is abusive and uses physical violence to keep her in her place. He beats her when she makes a ruckus: “I am hit. That is what happened. I am hit a heavy blow on the head. I smell blood, my ears ring. [...] I have been dealt with. I was a nuisance and now I am dealt with” (§112). She is, in other words, physically forced to keep her place. When she is in her father’s way she is locked up in her room. Klein-Anna also experiences the linguistic hierarchy directly on her body. When she is first brought to the farm Hendrik treats her nicely. But Magda knows that the reality of the power structures in the marriage will set in soon enough: “While the idyll lasts he will make his own coffee. Then the girl, from fairy visitor grown to wife, will learn to get up first, and no doubt soon be shouted at and beaten too” (§52). After she has been forced to be in a sexual relationship with Magda’s father, her husband beats her: “Hendrik is kicking at her rhythmically [...]. If there were a stick to hand he would be using it” (§142). These are examples of how linguistic constructions manifest as physical violence. Just like Mary Turner could control large groups of strong workers in spite of her physical inferiority, the men on the farm in *In The Heart of the Country* can beat and rape their women without questions or repercussions. When Magda’s father desires Klein-Anna, he can take her. Even being married is not a valid reason for her to reject him, as he is above Hendrik in the racial hierarchy.

Even though Magda wishes to unlearn her language it repeatedly proves to be fruitless. “My lost world is a world of men, [...] a long tale of dead heroes in a language I have not yet unlearned” (§16). Here Magda displays ambivalence. She is nostalgic towards her lost colonial world of simple hierarchy and distinctions, but still sees the necessity of unlearning it and escaping from the law of the father. The long tale of dead heroes seem to suggest a colonial grand narrative with male protagonists that conquered the wilderness and made it habitable for white men and their families. The world was a simpler place when those grand narratives carried authority. Magda refers to her childhood as a period when she engaged in a semiotic discourse: “I grew up with the servants’ children. I spoke like one of them before I learned to speak like this” (§16). She was able to communicate with the

servants' children in a semiotic phase, when they communicated in children's language with no real coherence between signifier and signified. After entering the symbolic, they all found their place within the linguistic hierarchy, losing their ability to communicate as equals.

Magda is however not a coherent subject, which sometimes makes an analysis of her reductive because the opposite of what one says about her could be equally true. One can read her as a mad and jealous racist who commits murder in order to uphold the colonial hierarchy or as a liberal rebel that overthrows the law of the father in order to create a new system based on equality and reciprocity. However, it is important to note that Magda is never either or. She is what Kristeva would call a *subject-in-process*. It is a trait of the symbolic, as mentioned earlier, to create the impression of unity, and the semiotic to display language and the subject as a site of heterogeneousness. Kristeva says that “[i]t is poetic language that awakens us to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language, a feature that univocal, rational, scientific discourse tends to hide⁴⁸ – and this implies considerable consequences for its subject” (Kristeva 1980: 135). It is impossible to remain a unified subject when tackling semiotic language. This follows the idea that the subject is lingual. Language is not something outside the subject that the subject can communicate *through*, the subject communicates *in* language as it is created there, just like Magda creates the words that create her. “Is it possible that I am a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert but of my stony monologue” (§27) she asks, referring to the stony colonial monologue in the discourse of her father, not the unstable and revolutionary language in which she seeks to speak. Kristeva goes on to say that “[i]f it is true that there would unavoidably be a speaking *subject* since the signifying set exists, it is nonetheless evident that this subject, in order to tally with its heterogeneity must be, let us say, a questionable *subject-in-process*” (Kristeva 1980: 135). Magda is a *subject-in-process* because she is moving from the colonial homogenous signifier towards heterogeneity.

If Magda is created in her language, then becoming heterogenic must entail being a *subject-in-process*. She is in a constant state of becoming. Magda displays the same notion of *being* her language to Hendrik, and the following exhaustion of being the puppet for her father's language, a language she does not wish to use, but which uses her. She refers to “these lips of mine which I must wrestle into place over every syllable. The lips are tired” (§163). This indicates that her use of language is a constant struggle, an effort to be obedient and to say the right thing. When her lips were babies “it was revealed to them that there was a

⁴⁸ See Paul de Man's “Rhetoric of Tropes” for a discussion on this phenomenon.

law, [...] they could no longer simply part themselves to make way for long *aaaa* which has, truth been told, always been enough for them, enough of an expression of whatever this is that needs to be expressed” (§163). Here she is referring to the semiotic discourse of her childhood, of the rhythms and intonations of her earlier language, which at the time seemed sufficient, the long *aaaa* is an inarticulate sound that has not been named or placed in a system, meaning that it is not subject to the law. Magda yearns for “the long satisfying silence” (§163) which is a narrative strategy that is present in several places in Coetzee’s oeuvre.⁴⁹ Silence evades language and thereby the law.

I would, however, say that it is fair to argue that Magda’s emancipatory project is a failure. She does not gain reciprocity from her father, her servants or even the enigmatic sky gods. But why does Magda fail? In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler critiques Kristeva’s theory, which will also help us to understand Magda’s failure. The semiotic is posed as something *before* culture, or before meaning, as is apparent when Magda plays and communicates with the servants’ children. It is also posed as something *after* meaning, as in psychotic discourse, when the subject rejects the forced and supposedly irrevocable connection between signifier and signified, again exemplified by Magda after her father has demonstrated the fault lines of his own discourse. Kristeva suggests that the maternal, or the semiotic, is the real and original culture, repressed by the falsely unifying symbolic. What Butler seeks to do is to “consider whether or not what Kristeva claims to discover in the prediscursive maternal body is itself a production of a given historical discourse, and *effect* of culture rather than its secret and primary cause” (Butler 2007: 109). Butler rejects the notion of the semiotic as something completely different from the symbolic. Any semiotic concept, such as the maternal body and cultural subversion will necessarily be symbolic terms, and therefore subject to historical context. “(S)ubversion, when it appears, emerges from beneath the surface of culture only inevitably to return there. Although the semiotic is a possibility of language that escapes the paternal law, it remains inevitably within or, indeed, beneath the territory of that law” (Butler 2007: 119). This is also what Magda realizes when she admits that the law leaves her just enough intellect to understand her entrapment, but not enough to escape it. If the semiotic is something subjugated by paternal law, the semiotic is then really the power of the symbolic masquerading as something emancipatory and subversive. In a Foucauldian turn, Butler suggest that if “the female body that she seeks to express is itself a construct produced by the

⁴⁹ See Karen Jennings’s Master Dissertation at the University of Cape Town and Tonje Vold’s PHD Dissertation at the University of Oslo for in depth discussions on Coetzee and the interpretation of language/silence.

very law it is supposed to undermine (Butler 2007: 126) then “the female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law’s self amplification and proliferation” (Butler 2007: 126/127). The end of *In the Heart of the Country* then seems to advocate the same.⁵⁰ Magda experiences a breakdown of will to escape the language she can never unlearn.

Magda’s Feminist Strategy

Even though Magda cannot unlearn her language, she makes an attempt to transcend it. While Coetzee’s relationship to feminism has been vague and debated, I argue that the association between gender and language ties the novel to the academic feminist struggle.⁵¹ Magda seeks liberation and asks: “Without liberation what is the point of my story?” (§12). This indicates that she speaks in order to gain a sort of freedom, or a shift. In other words, the text is a transcendent project and attempts to resist and rebel through language. But while Molly Bloom erupts in an orgasmic liberation at the end of *Ulysses* (1922) with her famous “yes I said yes I will Yes” (Joyce 1998: 732), Magda remains her “dowdy self [...] that will not transcend itself” (§12). This scathing irony exposes that no feminist project will properly succeed as long as it is written in a language that perpetuates misogyny.

Magda’s linguistic feminist strategy will necessarily have limited revolutionary potential. It is a dark vagina monologue that offers no sexual liberation or masturbatory release. She echoes Molly’s question “whats the idea making us like that a big hole in the middle of us” (Joyce 1998: 694) when she calls herself “a hole with a body draped around it” (§87). This emphasis on the vagina as a hole makes it sound like something is lacking, that the hole is a void, and because “there is a hole between my legs that has never been filled” (§87), meaning she is a virgin, sex can offer no transcendence for Magda. Magda’s discourse on the vagina demonstrates that a vagina monologue written in a patriarchal language will reduce the vagina to either a mythological sphinx or a void. Magda says “I am a hole crying to be whole” (§87) indicating that she is fragmented, or that something is lacking. She is a negation, and needs a man to be filled or whole. She cannot fill herself. “If I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman” (§87). By saying that she is sometimes persuaded, she indicates that she is in a constant dialogue with the hegemonic

⁵⁰ I will revert to this in “The Return of the Pastoral”, the last section of this chapter.

⁵¹ I have explored the link between gender and language in *In The Heart of the Country* before, in an article for the literary magazine *Bøygen* at the University of Oslo. The article is called “En feminist eller en patriarkalsk ulv i färeklær? Et blick på J. M. Coetzees forhold til feminisme”.

discourse, but that she lets herself be persuaded even though it does not ring true, simply because she has no counter discourse. However, Magda is only persuaded sometimes. At other times she demonstrates that she rejects the hegemonic consensus. The hegemonic discourse traps her in value systems with which she does not agree: “how galling, after meditations that would do credit to a thinker, to find myself worked into the trap of conceding that if only I had a good man to sleep at my side, and give me babies, all would be well” (§87). In other words, Magda wants to be the agent of her own liberation, therefore sexual communion is of limited value.

While the reader is faced with strong temptation to interpret Magda’s many exclamations academically, she says that: “I am not a philosopher. Women are not philosophers, and I am a woman” (§230), which undermines this temptation. She is after all merely a “poor provincial blackstocking” (§38). However, her argument displays that this is only true if we accept the misogynist premises for her conclusion. It is her gender, rather than her lack of higher education that stops her from looking at herself as a philosopher. She considers being a woman and a philosopher as mutually exclusive, and since she is the former she cannot be the latter. This displays that she has internalized misogynist attitudes in her society as she in effect undermines *her own* intellectual authority because of her gender. She refers to her monologue as a “frantic, spurious babble” (§116) and as “prattle” (§95). Here, she perpetuates the gender notions of a society that does not value ‘women’s talk’. In misogynist contexts babble and prattle are often used to describe conversation between women, indicating that it holds no important meaning and is pure interruption. In the same way, Magda’s monologue is just ‘babble’ describing everyday banalities, such as “[I]f on the farm” (§8). She is not an intellectual who can write her way to freedom. While one can argue that the personal is political, and by that bringing a domestic realm into the collective, Magda is not happy with being restricted to the realm of the personal. She asks “[w]hat is there for me in the kitchen? The patter of maids, gossip, ailments, babies, steam, foodsmells, [...] what kind of life can I make of these?” (§42). She is disgruntled by the limitations of her situation, experience and therefore subject matter.

However, Magda is not entirely powerless, and takes power through her monologue, apparently well aware that in a monologue the speaker has absolute *imaginative command*. At one point she says that “[t]his is not going to be a dialogue, thank God, I can stretch my wings and fly where I will” (§203). In other words, she does not have to let any one else speak or challenge her point of view. But, this *imaginative command* also comes with a responsibility, and Magda asks “[w]hy is it left to me to give life not only to myself, minute after surly

minute, but to everyone else on the farm, and the farm itself, every stick and stone of it?" (§137). This points to the power inherent in the novelistic form as it indicates that the farm and its people cannot exist without her narration. Thus, the other characters are not free to imagine themselves, but must be imagined by her. She holds the fictional power, which exposes the issue of representation in a colonial context.

Even when analysing the physical and violent revolt of her unpaid servant, Hendrik, the question remains whether or not he is simply at Magda's linguistic mercy. Especially the rape scenes in §206 and §209 can be read as a revolt on Hendrik's part, but if it really is Magda who gives life to everyone else on the farm, one needs to pose the question as to how Hendrik *can* revolt. While it is quite speculative to attempt to analyse whether or not Magda *wants* to be raped, she does say towards the end of the novel that "Hendrik may take me, but it is I holding him holding I" (§227). Here, she admits to her own *imaginative command*. While Magda is presented as the victim of these violations, Hendrik might be the *actual* victim. Like Moses in *The Grass is Singing*, he is reduced to a narrative tool. He represents a growing attraction and demonstrates a limited imagination on Magda's part. Her imagination is limited because when she begins to feel this attraction towards her black servant, she cannot imagine a sexual relationship between a white woman and a black man except as rape. Thus, when her fascination for him turns into sexual fantasies, they will inevitably be, at least in the beginning, fantasies of rape. In this way, inherited notions of the black man as a sexual predator seep into the narration and perpetuate a certain image, turning the perpetrator into a victim.

The fact that she cannot imagine a sexual relationship between a white woman and a black man unless it is rape is another indication that she is perpetuating inherited notions of race. In the same manner her de-valuation of her own female monologue indicates that she is perpetuating internalized notions of gender. The problem is that she, in spite of her *situatedness*, holds complete *imaginative command* and is the reader's only source of 'truth', meaning that she inevitably passes on her notions to us. She says to Klein-Anna that "[i]t has always been that the word has come down to me and I have passed it on. I have never known words of true exchange" (§203). The word, in this instance gives association to *The Bible*, in other words a message of authority, which we can read as her colonial understanding. She has received a racist notion that she passes on to the reader. That she does not know words of true exchange is yet another indication that there is no room for other perspectives in her monologue. There is no polyphony in the text, only her commands, imagination and colonial notions. Thus, the image of Hendrik as a rapist is perpetuated and offered as a given.

In other words writing in a colonial misogynist language offers a limited revolutionary potential for Magda. Already early in the novel she says “I [...] overvalue the imagination and expect it to make the mundane glow with an aura of self-transcendence” (§32). But it does not because writing is language and language is the crux for Magda. “Is it possible that I am a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert but of my stone monologue” (§27)? The colonial power structures that hinder her from having a reciprocal relationship to Klein-Anna and Hendrik, and the internalized and misogynist attitudes are all passed down through language, meaning that it is an intellectual cage, shaping her perception of her life. “This monologue of the self is a maze of words of which I shall not find a way until someone else gives me a lead” (§35). Magda’s colonial isolation results in a lack of resistance for colonial discourse. It is not challenged by other discourses with different perspectives. Magda cannot speak herself to liberation because it is through mutual, reciprocal dialogue that that which is considered sensible in a discourse is challenged and shifted.

Colonial Structures in Afrikaans⁵²

While the Afrikaans dialogue has been translated into English in later editions of *In the Heart of the Country*, some words that carry a special resonance locally, like *baas*, have been left un-translated. Because the colonial hierarchy is particularly obvious in Afrikaans, and because Afrikaans is the language spoken on the farm, I will rather analyse the original dialogue in the Ravan edition. The importance of the Afrikaans dialogue is emphasized when Magda says: “All of this in our own language, a language of nuances, of supple world-order and delicate particles, opaque to the outsider, dense to its children with moments of solidarity, moments of distance” (§58). This points to language as a linguistic community. The solidarity of which she speaks is the solidarity of sharing a culture through language, meaning that the language creates a *we*. The distance is the distance that is created when that same language

⁵² By her name and situation as the daughter of a white sheep farmer in the Karoo, we can assume that Magda is Afrikaans. While Afrikaans is considered to be the language of the apartheid government, and therefore a *white* language, its origin was actually Creole. It developed as an easier version of Dutch dialects in order to communicate better with servants, hence its old nickname *kombuistaal*, or kitchen language. Afrikaans is then perhaps what Mary Turner refers to when she uses the term Kitchen Kaffir for the language with which she communicates with her servants. Its Creole origin indicates that Afrikaans is not a specifically white language. For one thing, it borrows syntax from several native African languages, and for another, it is also the mother tongue of the vast majority of the coloured population in the Cape Provinces. Hendrik and Klein-Anna are coloureds, not black (judging by their names and Magda’s reference to them as brown (§51)), meaning that their language is also more than likely Afrikaans, not a native African language.

categorizes and places subjects in a hierarchy. Only the insiders in this community are aware of these subtle power structures.

As an insider, Magda is well aware of them: “I was born into a language of hierarchy, distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have” (§195). As already mentioned, the fact that she refers to her language as her father tongue instead of a mother tongue indicates that it is a patriarchal language. Also, because it is not the language her heart wants to speak, we become aware that that she is taught her language. It is a structure into which she is initiated, not something that represents her “deepdown I beyond words” (§35). The hierarchy and distance of the language points out that the power structures in a society can be located in the language of that society. The structure inherent in the language is the reason “that in all our years on the farm he has kept his station while I have kept my distance [...] We have our places, Hendrik and I, in an old code” (§48). The word code is here given a triple entendre. A code can mean words or letters substituting something else, but it can also mean a system of words, a series of letters that classifies. A code categorizes and separates. A third signification of a code is a systematic collection of laws and regulations. In other words, a linguistic code deposes, categorizes and regulates.⁵³

This code is also apparent when Magda describes the day Hendrik arrives at their farm as a young man of sixteen seeking work. The interesting aspect in this dialogue is the hierarchy established by the use of pronouns. Magda’s father asks Hendrik where he comes from, and Hendrik replies: “Van Armoede, my baas. Maar nou kom ek van baas Kobus, baas, baas Kobus sê baas het werk”⁵⁴ (R41). Hendrik does not address Magda’s father by using his name or the personal pronoun *jy* (you). Magda’s father, on the other hand addresses Hendrik directly: “Hoe oud is jy? Kan jy tel”⁵⁵ (R41)? As in the first example, Hendrik addresses Magda’s father in the third person, when he replies: “Nee baas, ek is sterk, ek sal werk, baas

⁵³The fact that Magda and Hendrik’s relationship is regulated by linguistic structures is reminiscent from Nadine Gordimer’s novel *July’s People* (1981). The main protagonist, Maureen Smales, realizes at a point that the discourse she keeps with her servant, July, is very limited due to the English he has been taught: “his was the English learned in kitchens, factories and mines. It was based on orders and responses, not the exchange of ideas and feelings” (Gordimer 1982: 96). The language in this case reinforces the master-servant dynamic, as there is no room for personal relationships or feelings in this language. It is a depersonalized language that categorizes and regulates the nature of their relationship.

⁵⁴ From Armoede (Poverty), my boss. But now I came from boss Kobus, boss, boss Kobus said that boss had work. (My own translation. So are the following footnotes).

⁵⁵ How old are you? Can you count?

sal sien”⁵⁶ (R41). This way the hierarchy is apparent in every single daily interaction between coloured and white. The white person can use the familiarizing and intimate *jy*, while the coloured person must always use the distancing *hy* (he) or *baas*.

This hierarchy is the cornerstone of the settler-colonial culture on the farm. However, Magda’s father breaks down this hierarchy when he falls in love, and uses intimate language with someone that this language is trying to hold separate. This infuriates Magda: “My father is exchanging forbidden words with Klein-Anna. [...]. *Ons*, he is saying to her, *ons twee*; and the word reverberates in the air between them. *Kom jy saam met my*”⁵⁷ (R74). It is important to keep in mind that *ons*, meaning *we* in Afrikaans, is a complicated and contested linguistic shifter in a country like South Africa, a country still struggling to create a notion of *we* and *us*. By using *ons* in relation to Klein-Anna, Magda’s father is rethinking that *we*. In a country where *we* by definition is racially homogenous, he allows it to include a coloured girl. In her article “Who are ‘we’? Don’t make me laugh”, Carrol Clarkson argues that in several post-apartheid novels⁵⁸ there is a sense of loss of community connected to the word *we*, as the boundaries between racial and cultural groups are blurring. However, the same novels also propose a *new* community. Nevertheless, this reconfiguring of *we* Magda’s father proposes is not unproblematic when one considers the potential violence of and the power relations within *we*. Klein-Anna is forced into a *we* to which she does not necessarily want to belong, but because Magda’s father has epistemic power, she has to let herself be spoken for and included in this new *we*.

We is thus potentially violent due to exclusion *and* coercion, and Magda experiences both. She is excluded from the new *we* of her father and Klein-Anna, a multi-racial *we*: “lines have been drawn, I am excluded from communion” (§98), but she is also coerced into a white ruling class she wishes to reject. With increasing frustration she says that “I am not simply one of the whites, I am *I!* I am *I*, not a people. Why have *I* to pay for other people’s sins?” (§228). She wants to be an *I*, not part of a *we*. She is trying to reject her position in society, and rather be an individual responsible for her own actions. But not only is she automatically part of the whites due to her skin colour and economical position, she also involuntarily perpetuates their ideology.

⁵⁶ No boss, I am strong, I will work, boss will see.

⁵⁷ We. The two of us. You come with me.

⁵⁸ The three novels she bases her article on are three Johannesburg novels: Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf*, Ivan Vladislavic’s *The Restless Supermarket* and Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to our Hillbrow*.

Magda calls the words passing between her father and his servant forbidden, indicating that they are breaking taboos by uttering them. Magda respects this prohibition and is outraged by her father's disregard for it. He and Klein-Anna are addressing each other directly, even though they are of different races and therefore different places in the hierarchy: "He believes that he and she can choose their words and make a private language, with an I and a you" (§74). When he tells Klein-Anna to come with him, he disbands the separateness that is supposed to be between them. "There are few enough words true, rock-hard enough to build a life on, and these he is destroying" (§74). Here Magda seems to suggest that her Afrikaans constitutes her truth, and that ambiguity undermines the easy truths for which she paradoxically yearns. Her father's behavior proves that her rock solid words are not truths, but constructions that can be filled with new meanings. After they have broken the linguistic taboos, physical indications of their new intimacy soon follows: "She is going to sit at table with him" (§98) and "[h]e lies with her and rocks with her in an act I know enough about to know that it too breaks codes" (§75). This points out sexuality's subversive potential, and demonstrates that while language manifests as physical acts, physical acts also manifest in language. This is exposed after the rape scenes. After having struggled to maintain a tone of mutual reciprocity, not being able to escape the hierarchy and distance of Afrikaans, Magda automatically changes her tone towards Hendrik after the violations: "'You have been sleeping'. They are my words, soft, from me. How strange. They just come" (§212). Because they have had intercourse, albeit forced, the hierarchy and distance between them has been reversed. She is no longer able to speak to him in the commanding voice of his ruling mistress, but rather in the intimate tone of his lover.

One very interesting aspect of this linguistic code of conduct, or placement within a system, is that, as Coetzee points out in *White Writing* (1988), that both master *and* servant seem to incorporate it in their understanding of the world around them. In his analysis of the Afrikaans writer, Mikro⁵⁹, Coetzee writes that it is common in Indo-European languages to distinguish between human and animal features. For example, humans have feet while animals have paws. He goes on to say that "animal terms are not used of human beings without insult" (Coetzee 2007: 135). In Afrikaans, Coetzee points out, there is a further sub-categorization that "marks off whites from *anderskleuriges* (people of colour)" (Coetzee 2007: 135). For example one would say *vrou* for a white woman and *meid* for a nonwhite woman. Coetzee continues:

⁵⁹ The pen name for C. H. Kühn.

Again, nonwhite terms are not transferred without insult. [...] What is significant about these racially defined distinctions – which inevitably convey hierarchy as well as separateness – is not that Mikro's whites use them, or even that his Coloured people use them in their dealings with whites – power has a way of inducing compliance – as that his Coloured people use them among themselves, even in their inner discourse (Coetzee 2007: 135/136).

What is particularly interesting here is that *vrou* not only means white woman, but also wife. This establishes a structure not only based on colour, but also on heterosexual marriage. In other words, it is a heteronormative system. Further, a white woman is by definition a wife or *Mies*, the mistress of the house. A white man is by definition *die baas*, the boss, the one with power, the master. *Meid*, on the other hand, does not only mean nonwhite woman, but maid. A black woman is by definition a slave, maid or the help. A subject's colour dictates its position in the hierarchy, and this hierarchy is part of the subject's language, therefore ingrained in its world-view. Because of this, your race does not only dictate your class, it is your class, which Mary Turner also confirms in her thinking in *The Grass is Singing*. The narrator says: "Class' is not a South African word; and its equivalent, 'race', meant to her [Mary] the office boy in the firms where she worked, other women's servants, and the amorphous mass of natives in the streets, whom she hardly noticed" (33). Black and coloured people are for Mary by definition workers, servants or poor people in the streets and she does not even really notice them because they are amorphous and depersonalized.

Another factor in Coetzee's argument is that the term *anderskleuriges* does not simply mean people of colour, but people of *other* colour, meaning that nonwhite people are automatically othered and categorized as a deviation from the norm, even though the norm in this case is a minority. This creates a notion of inferiority in the victims of the system that makes it easier for the masters to keep it in place, as it is considered to be natural also by the people subjugated by it.

Performing Language

The focus on the materiality of language in this novel emphasises that language is not just words. It is a physical entity that interacts with society. While Magda is a highly literary construction, problematizing the role and practice of the colonial writer, this construction also refers to someone not living in a literary society, and can therefore perhaps not really be read as an intellectual character. She functions in a society far removed from academia, in which language is a necessity to function and communicate, not an aesthetic or philosophical

practice. In a non-literary situation, such as life on the farm, discourse is performed, not written. Therefore one cannot only analyse the grammatical structure of a language, but also the subject's performance of it. While I have analysed the power structures inherent in the *words* of Afrikaans, I will now analyse the power structures inherent in the *tones* of Afrikaans. If language, in Magda's context, is a convergence of word and voice, both will be equally important to analyse in order to understand how colonial language creates and functions in a colonial society.

Communication on the farm is articulated sound. The voice gives body to language in the convergence of voice and words. Magda says "[m]y learning has the reek of print" (§92). The word reek, meaning stench, indicates that written language is of less value in her context, as opposed to spoken language. While her complex problematizations of language are important, and expose the true nature of the colonial language she uses, it is the everyday *use* of language on the farm that is the most immediate experience of language. She says "I am a torrent of sound streaming into the universe" (§23). This points out that Magda's monologue is not only text, but also interaction, a torrent of sound emphasising that language is a physical force.

Magda confirms this idea earlier in the novel when she says that "I am spoken to not in words, which come to me quaint and veiled, but in signs, in conformations of face and hands, in postures of shoulders and feet, in nuances of tune and tone, in gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded" (§18). The true meaning of words is here described as veiled, and that if one is to interpret what is being said, to find this true meaning, one has to interpret body signs, the facial conformations, movement of hands, and the nuances in tones.

Hendrik can therefore communicate his hatred for Magda without her being able to retaliate. When Hendrik speaks to Magda, she asks herself: "is that finally hatred I hear in his voice?" (§196). His articulation of detest for his mistress would not have been tolerated in a colonial society, but when he conveys it through a *tone*, Magda can pick up on it, but not castigate him for it. Yet, the tone is so clear that later in the dialogue she confirms that "[w]hat I hear in his voice is certainly hatred" (§196). Because the grammar of tones has never been recorded she has no proof of his hatred, even though that is beyond a doubt what he is communicating.

This communication is mutual, meaning that Magda and her servants read and interpret each other: "Reading the brown folk I grope, as they grope reading me: for they too hear my words only dully, listening for those overtones of the voice, those subtleties of the eyebrows that tell them my true meaning" (§18). In addition to words, language is also

physical body movements and sound. At one point, while Magda is daydreaming, she can hear her father speak to the servants. “The voices are at the far end of the house. One is my father’s, issuing commands, I know the tones though I can make out no words” (§97). Also here words are irrelevant. The tones convey the message rather than the words. Because Magda’s father is the great patriarch, he is used to issue orders. When he is preparing a meal for Klein-Anna, “[h]e tells her to eat. His voice is gruff. He cannot express tenderness. He expects people to understand this and allow for it. But no one understands it, no one but I” (§98). It is indicated that the tenderness he wants to express would not have come through the words. The words would still have asked Klein-Anna to eat with him. But with a more tender tone, he would have offered her to break bread with him in a romantic communion, instead of ordering his servant to eat, which is the result of his commanding tone.

Magda gains more and more insight into the importance of tones, and to which extent they convey power and demand obedience. “When one truly means what one says, when one speaks not in shouts of panic, but quietly, deliberately, decisively, then one is understood and obeyed. How pleasing to have identified a universal truth” (§133). The concept of a universal truth is used ironically as it is only a truth for Magda. Because of her colonial language of hierarchy and distance, she cannot imagine a language built on reciprocity and mutuality. For her, language is a tool one uses to obtain obedience from others. This power, like the sound, constitutes language as a physical force that manifests itself in society.

Body in Language and Linguistic Landscape

While there is a strong focus on language in relation to the physical in the novel, language itself gains materiality in the text. Magda says: “I creak into rhythms that are my own, stumble over the rocks of words that I have never heard on another tongue” (§18). Here, language sounds like a physical landscape for Magda to traverse. Language becomes a world of its own, and is described as something other than physical reality. This emphasizes that the Karoo landscape she articulates, and that the reader imagines as physical, is just a linguistic landscape.

If the landscape Magda describes is a linguistic landscape, then there arises a question pertaining to language’s referential relationship to reality. Magda says “[w]ords are words. [...] I deal in signs merely” (§51). Words are words signal that words only refer to other words. They cannot transcend themselves or refer unproblematically to anything else. “I deal in signs” signals that when Magda speaks in this language, she is caught in an immanent

system and a closed, separate landscape. Language is a code that exchanges the physical landscape with a linguistic landscape.

In other words, language is put in place of reality: “I hold the goats and stones, the entire farm and even its environs [...], suspended in this cool, alienating medium of mine, exchanging them item by item for my word-counters” (§50). This conveys a negative view on the referential quality of language. It is a cool alienating medium. In §48, Magda calls her language “an old code”. I mentioned earlier that a code can mean a system of words, letters or other symbols that *substitute* something else. In this perspective, all language is actually code as the word always *substitutes* the object. Language is not transparent, it is a system put in place of that which it seeks to articulate. Following this idea, language does not capture what it is supposed to articulate, but rather depose it. Magda *exchanges* what she is describing with words, putting words in its place. But the words do not articulate the object, they only articulate themselves. The word articulates the word.

However, saying that there is a complete separation between word and object, or language or reality, is obviously not to say there is no physical reality. The text is well aware of the subtle connections between these two landscapes. Magda says that she yearns for a “life unmediated by words: these stones, these bushes, this sky experienced and known without question” (§260). This emphasises the real and factual existence of what she is describing. Reality as a separate sphere is in itself unproblematic. The problem lies in the linguistic representation of this reality, the translation of reality into language. We cannot experience reality without it being filtered through perception, thought and language. And it is our limited scope; subjective understanding and highly narrowly constructed language that fail to relate this reality unproblematically. This way, there is too much reality for language to hold, causing a constant displacement of reality in language.

This will necessarily have great consequences for the subject, who also is articulated, emphasised when Magda says “I create myself in the words that create me” (§18). This follows a poststructuralist notion that there is no outside of the text, which in Magda’s case can be read literally as she is a fictional construct. Still, she identifies a complex and problematic relationship between language and subject. While Magda refers to the impossibility for language to capture both subject, the I, and object, for example the farm, the stones or the desired Klein-Anna, she still refers to “the deepdown I beyond words” (§35). In other words, there is a subject somewhere. This also confirms that while language determines what can be said, thought or understood, there still is something beyond the words, the unmediated reality. Language is a failed attempt to articulate that which is beyond, namely the

unmediated subject or physical reality, and it is this *beyond* that Magda seeks. In other words, she has to transcend the language she has been given. The question remains how this is possible if it remains true that one cannot think beyond the thought, or speak beyond the word.

Thus, if language is put in place of reality, then it must also be put in place of the subject, deposing it from the subject position. While there is a subject somewhere, a deepdown I, the textual I must necessarily be an intellectual construction. But what is the I beyond the words to which Magda refers?

Am I, I wonder, a thing among things, a body propelled along a track by sinews and bony levers, or am I a monologue moving through time, approximately five feet above the ground, if the ground does not turn out to be just another word, in which case I am indeed lost (§122)?

Here Magda tries to articulate the relationship between body and intellect. For even though she is created in language, she, as a subject, experiences the world through her senses as well. This quotation can be read as a critique of too literal readings of the concept of discursive constructions. Even though Magda points out the discrepancy between language and reality, she also says that “I am no phantom. [...]. I touch this skin, and it is warm, I pinch this flesh and it hurts. What more proof do I want? I am I” (§100). The experience of discursive constructions will inevitably feel very real and specific, which is also the danger of them. Yet, when she asks if perhaps she is not just a monologue, moving above ground, which might just be another word, this demonstrates that she doubts the reality of herself. Which part of her is intellect and which is body is not so easily defined. *In the Heart of the Country* states very carefully that while language shapes our perception of reality, the physical aspect of being a bodily subject cannot be ignored. Magda emphasises this when she says “I think of tea and rusks and my saliva flows. There is no doubt about it, I am not just spirit” (§77).

But while Magda is not just spirit, the body is also not just substance. The body is also a sign or a message to be interpreted and read. In one scene, Magda describes sexual intercourse between Hendrik and Klein-Anna as a bodily dialogue. Spying on them while they sleep, Magda experiences their sexuality through smell. “They have lain naked all night, [...] giving off their complex odours: the smoky sourness of brown people” (§51). Magda can smell their race. This is an example of self-constituting racism and displays the mutual relationship between the physical and the abstract. She smells their race due to an intellectual notion of different races *essentially* smelling differently, and the experience of their different

smells reinforces this intellectual notion. She sniffs again and can detect “the iron smell of blood certainly; coming piercingly through the blood the thin acrid track of the girl’s excitement; and finally, drenching the air with milky sweetness, the flood of Hendrik’s response” (§51). When their intercourse is described like a dialogue between their fluids, body and discourse merge into one.

We see then that through this exploration of the relationship between body and discourse, there arises an occasional conflation between the two. Magda refers to herself as “a poetess of interiority” (§73), signalling that the main concern of her monologue is the subject: the intellect, the body, and how an individual reads/perceives reality. The subject is both intellect and body and Magda demonstrates that while discourse shapes how we read our bodies the body also shapes how we use language. There is a reciprocal relationship between the two. In this conjunction there arises a new meaning of body language, as literally the conflation of body and language: “Oh father, father, if I could [...] creep through the honeycomb of your bones, listen to the turmoil of your marrow, the singing of your nerves, float on the tide of your blood” (§136). Here the body is so integrated in a poetic discourse that one cannot really separate the one from the other. The body, like language is given spatial dimension one can explore physically. In this sense both language and the experience of the body creates (fictional) rooms, and perceptions. One can experience both so clearly that the separation between reality and fiction, body, mind and language becomes difficult to uphold.

Resurfacing Bodies and the Gothic

Magda’s detailed descriptions of the body are often grotesque. Magda asks whether or not “there [is] something in me that loves the gloomy, the hideous, the doomridden” (§44), which draws our attention to the fact that many of her descriptions are dark and foul. This creates an uncanny atmosphere that makes ‘life on the farm’ seem anything but idyllic. This quotation also highlights that Magda’s fascination of the grotesque is quite compulsive, which forces us to pose the question of whether the murder and the burying of her father really were such a struggle, or if she rather relished the details.

After she has avenged herself, and her father is dying in his bed, covered in blood and crusty faeces, Magda says that “[b]ehind every door there is a new horror” (§145) making the house sound like a house of horrors, which is emphasized when she lies awake “listening to the cries [...] of sorrow and disgust and anguish [...] that swoop and glide and tremble through this house” (§49). In Gothic fiction the house often gains the role as a microcosm of the society around it, meaning that the colony in this case becomes a colony of horrors. This

also invokes the mysterious words of Mr. Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Just before he dies deep in the Congolese jungles, Mr. Kurtz "cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'" (Conrad 2006: 69). It is never stated what this image of horror is. It is often suggested that it is the horror of death, but also perhaps the horror of Mr. Kurtz's colonial project in The Congo, a project that implies the murder of the locals and the rape and theft of the country's resources. In Conrad's novel, colonialism *might be* perceived as a Gothic horror story. In *In the Heart of the Country*, the Gothic elements certainly emphasize the horror of colonialism. In fact, the title itself plays upon *Heart of Darkness*, which is, after all arguably the most famous colonial text of all.⁶⁰ However, Conrad's plot is reversed in *In the Heart of the Country*. The reader is not taken on a journey into darkness together with Marlowe, but is in the dark centre, with Magda, throughout the text. Due to the Gothic elements, it remains a dark country even after the process of civilization. Or rather, the repression of the majority *made it* a dark country.

Through this allusion to Conrad, Magda is emphasized to be an incarnation of the colonial writer. *Heart of Darkness* has been subject to one of the fiercest debates within the field of literature. Because of the text's ambiguity, it is difficult to discern whether the text is very colonial, or anti-colonial. I argue that *Heart of Darkness* is a literary attempt to oppose colonialism, and write beyond the contemporary notions of race and Africa. The text remains ambiguous because of the impossibility of writing beyond contemporary discourse, meaning that racist notions of black people, and of Africa as darkness is perpetuated even in a linguistic attempt to expose white colonial violence. In this manner, Magda's struggle echoes the struggle of the colonial writer, whether this is Conrad, Schreiner or Coetzee himself. *Heart of Darkness*, *The Story of an African Farm* and *Disgrace* are all examples of liberal novels, accused, some more rightly than others, of perpetuating dubious notions of black people. In a similar manner, Magda's literary project will perpetuate notions she does not agree with herself because her colonial discourse defines the limits of what she can say. So even if she wants to describe a different or new reality, she does not have the linguistic tools to do so.

There are many aspects of Magda's narration that emphasize the horror and the darkness of her surroundings. She relishes the details of the descriptions of her father's

⁶⁰ The darkness of Conrad's title is lost in Coetzee's allusion. The Norwegian translation is, directly translated back into English: *In the Dark Country*, emphasising the play on Conrad's title. While the heart is lost in the Norwegian translation, the darkness is kept intact.

misery: “I open the sickroom door and am hit by the sweet stench. [...] He is lying in a sea of blood and shit that has already begun to cake” (§145). Like in *Ulysses*, the waste products of the body play a central role in the text. Magda seems to find sensual enjoyment in describing faeces: “we are driven to the intimacy of relieving our bowels [...] in the malodour of the other’s fresh faeces, either he in my stench or I in his” (§64). Magda seems to compare this to an intimate communion between father and daughter. That they inhale each other’s stench is a symbol of their affinity. Their individual faeces is compared to their personality: “I straddle his hellish gust, bloody, feral [...] flecked I am sure, with undigested flesh barely mulled over before pushed through” (§64). The use of the word straddle connotes sexuality, turning the description of defecation and excrements into a sexual metaphor. She straddles his bloody and feral gust, meaning he is strong and wild. The undigested flesh signals his restlessness. Magda’s faeces is “dark, olive with bile, hard-packed, kept in too long” (§64). The fact that her faeces is packed with bile indicates that she is sour, and the fact that it has been kept in too long suggests that she is stale. The personified faeces merge in sexual union: “somewhere on the farm there is a pit where, looped in each other’s coils, the father’s red snake and the daughter’s black embrace and sleep and dissolve” (§64). The image of their faeces metamorphoses into an incestuous image of his phallic, red snake penetrating her vaginal, black embrace.

There are many incestuous references throughout the text. As usual, the difficulty with Magda’s monologue is figuring out how literally to interpret this. Early in the text Magda says: “The childhood rape: someone should study the kernel of truth in this fancy” (§9). To a large extent, that is what this analysis seeks to do. But because the narration is so unreliable, I read it in a more Lacanian sense as initiation into the symbolic, as I already have analyzed. However, the text’s almost constant juxtaposition between body and discourse signals a refusal to separate the two. One of Magda’s duties is to draw her father’s bath. When Magda describes his bathing process, she emphasizes the perceptual experience of it; “I would hear the wash of his entry, the sucking of the water under his armpits and between his buttocks, and inhale the sweet heavy miasma of soap and sweat” (§21). After this detailed description of the bodily experience of bathing, the next sentence: “Later this duty ceased; but when I think of male flesh, white, heavy, dumb, whose flesh can it be but his” (§21), seems to function as a warning not to reduce literary violence to abstract literary tropes. The Gothic elements then function to give this metaphysical text a physical grounding. The corporeal and foul Gothic elements remind the reader of the intricate connection between language and body.

This is also relevant when she struggles to bury her father and his concubine after the first murder. She worries that the bodies will resurface:

What of the bodies? [...] if buried in the riverbed they will be washed out in the next spate, [...] and return to the world [...]. If weighted and sunk in the dam, they will contaminate the water and reappear as chained skeletons grinning to the sky in the next drought [...] lolling in each other's rotting arms (§34).

The bodies thus function as extremely physical and specific evidence of Magda's crimes. The trope of resurfacing bodies is a recurring one in South African literature,⁶¹ and articulates an idea that Edgar Allen Poe explored in his short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843). After he has killed an old man, the narrator buries him underneath the floor. But during the following investigation he gives himself away because of the imagined incessant beating of the dead man's heart: "It grew louder – louder – *louder!* [...] They heard! – They suspected! – They knew! – They were making a mockery of my horror!" (Poe 2002: 167). This is a parallel to Magda's struggle to rid herself of the bodies. Similarly the second time she has killed her father, she struggles for a very long time to bury him. The crimes she commits come back to haunt her and the murder victims get revenge by revealing their rotting bodies, poisoning the drinking water and exposing Magda. And if this turns out to remain tentative, they get revenge by giving her uneasy sleep.

Magda also describes herself rather darkly, for example as a ghost living in a haunted house. She asks: "am I simply a ghost [...] floating" (§38) and says that she is "a turbulence, muffled, grey, like a chill draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful" (§6). This image is strengthened by her constant emphasis on her black outfits. She comes across as a neglected, silenced and repressed girl haunting the house like a ghostly draft. Magda also emphasizes her own monstrosity. She asks "who would give me a baby, who would not turn to ice at the spectacle of my bony frame [...], the coat of fur up to my navel, the acrid cavities of my armpits, the line of black moustache, the eyes, watchful, defensive" (§24). Here, Magda makes herself out to be a monstrous half-human, so ugly that she is dangerous by turning anyone who looks at her into stone. This lack of humanity is highlighted towards the end of the novel when the descriptions move away from the monstrous and closer to those of a witch. Magda is aware enough to understand how she is perceived in her isolated (apparent) madness. "You know what they call me, the witch of Agterplaas!" (§228). This gives

⁶¹ E.g. *The Conservationist* (1974) by Nadine Gordimer, *Age of Iron* (1990) by J. M. Coetzee and *Triomf* (1994) by Marlene van Niekerk.

associations to the European witch construct, perpetuated by the fairytale tradition. Magda identifies with the fairytale villain, the witch. When the little boy, Piet, brings Magda a letter from town, Magda emphasizes her role as a witch, in this case with a specific allusion to the German fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel”. Like the witch asks Hansel and Gretel “Nibble, nibble, I hear a mouse. Who’s that nibbling at my house?” (Zipes 2001: 714), Magda asks, a little less rhythmically, “Who is stealing my fruit?” (§238). When the witch comes out “Hansel and Gretel were so tremendously frightened that they dropped what they had in their hands” (Zipes 2001: 714). Similarly “[t]he child [Piet] stared back goggle-eyed [...] at the crone in the black dress [...], with the big teeth pointing in all directions and the mad eyes and the mane of grey hair” (§238). Here she is again emphasizing her black dress, signaling death and sorrow, but also that she is a mad old crone or a witch. The “Hansel and Gretel” parallel continues when she says “[Piet] knowing in that instant that all the stories were true, [...], that he would never see his mother again but be butchered like a lamb, and his sweet flesh be roasted in the oven” (§238), referring to the original witch who wants to fatten Hansel up to enhance his tastiness before she eats him. In the same way that Hansel and Gretel ate away at the witch’s gingerbread house, Piet has eaten Magda’s oranges from the orchard and now has to pay the prize by being eaten himself.

Magda also mentions the German fairy tale “Rumpelstiltskin” (§163) as part of her education, and draws on European fairytales at several points throughout her monologue. What is particularly pertinent with the invocation of the fairytale tradition is that it was used specifically to contribute to national identity building in Europe. Recording old tales and legends became a quest to find what was specific to each nation. Fairytales constitute specifically *local* folklore. When Magda repeatedly invokes this tradition, she demonstrates yet again that she is versed in a culture that is not specific to her region. Another aspect of these invocations is that Magda does not invoke fairytales from only one tradition. When Magda says: “What huffing and puffing there would have to be before my house could be blown down!” (§25), she alludes to the English fairytale “The Story of The Three Little Pigs”, specifically when the wolf says menacingly: “Then I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house in” (Jacobs 1967: 69). Similarly, when she says that she has a coat of fur up to her navel, she invokes an image of the troll from Scandinavian folklore. In other words, she invokes Scandinavian, English and German fairytales. This reflects the colonial culture mix that arises in a colonial state where several European states have economical interests. Magda does not belong to one *specific* European culture, whether it is Dutch, French or English. Rather, she reflects the cultural *mélange* that is South Africa. In the same manner, Magda

interprets the language of the sky gods as Spanish: “all those crystal Spanish vocables” (§246). However, the language seems rather to be a hodgepodge of Romance languages, indicating that Magda’s notion of the European is vague and imprecise.

Magda’s grotesqueness is emphasized by the contrast of the descriptions of herself as a witch, hairy monster or a ghost, and the descriptions of her as a child. Her father reduces her to childhood when he hits her or “locks me up. I am a child again” (§97). This effect also takes place when she acts submissive in order to please Hendrik sexually: “Am I doing it right, Hendrik?” (§217). The uncanny effect is created when we recognize the shape of a little girl yet imagine all the other images of Magda that the text provides. She embodies her own description as “a sinister old child full of stale juices” (§167). On the one hand Magda is the child in the fairytale who fears the villains. But she is also the monster or the witch, demonstrating that she has not chosen her own role. She says early in the novel “I am I. Character is fate. History is God” (§12). This brings our attention to Magda’s historical context. Character is fate because Magda cannot escape the role into which her historical context casts her. Also, by invoking fairytales we are reminded of a genre with very strict notions of good and evil, and of a genre where someone *has to* play the villain. In a glimmer of understanding and sympathy for her father’s situation, and thus indirectly her own, she says that the worst enemy was “the enemy who walked in our shadow and said *Yes baas*. To the slave who would only say *Yes* my father could only say *No*, and I after him, and that was the start of all my woe” (§248). The historical context, and linguistic relations *force* Magda into the position of villain. She is defined in relation to those around her, and since they are forced to be submissive, she is forced to be oppressive. Thus Magda demonstrates the oversimplification of the types of literature that make easy and total distinction between good and evil as she embodies both. She is both involuntary victim and involuntary perpetrator.

We see, in relation to villains in fairytales, that interpretation also carries with it potential violence as madness in literature displays for example. It has been very common to interpret Magda’s monologue as a woman’s descent into madness. The element of madness is a classic Gothic theme, as it signals that the character’s psyche is uncontrollable and potentially dangerous. But madness is also a very reductive interpretation and has a tendency to demonize the character. An example of this is Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847), the ‘madwoman in the attic’ who in the end kills herself and burns down Thornfield Hall. She is likened to a vampire; her brother Richard Mason claims that “[s]he sucked the blood” (Brontë 2006: 246) after she attacked him, and Jane later says to Rochester that Bertha reminded her “[o]f the foul German spectre – the vampire” (Brontë 2006: 327). She is also described as a

wild animal: “it grovelled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal [...] with [...] dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane” (Brontë 2006: 338). While novelists like the Dominican Jean Rhys⁶² and theoreticians like Indian Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak⁶³ have tried to save Bertha by analyzing how she was forced into the position of the madwoman in the attic, the text itself seems to reduce her to being Jane’s *other*. Also she is forced to function as a narrative tool. The interesting part of the quotation above is that Bertha is not even given a subject position. Jane refers to her as an *it*, an object. This is, of course, the strength of Magda’s monologue. One *can* read her as mad, but one can never objectify her as everything is written from her perspective. Also in relation to madness Magda displays a high level of self-awareness: “A mind mad enough for parricide and pseudo-matricide and who knows what other atrocities can surely encompass an epileptic Führer” (§24). Magda then effectively pre-empts interpretations of her as mad, as she is sane enough to acknowledge her own madness.

By interpreting Magda as mad, her struggle to shift what is sensible in her language and culture can be reduced to a madwoman’s ramblings. “I have gone around with these words dinning in my ears, nagged by their air of significance, irritated by their lack of coherence” (§260). This points to Magda experiencing her monologue in the same manner as the reader; she is trying to articulate the *‘un-articulate-able’*. Her words have an air of significance because she is pushing linguistic boundaries. The words become self-aware, acknowledging their limitations and pointing towards the unarticulated. Her words will necessarily be incoherent in their attempts to articulate what is outside language. However, by reading her as mad this attempt at transcendence remains immanent and insignificant.

The Return to the Pastoral

When Magda returns to the romantic pastoral discourse, we see that her subversion, when it appeared, emerged from beneath colonial culture only inevitably to return there. Shortly before this occurs, she says: “The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries could be reconciled” (§256). The intimation of an egalitarian language and a democratic society is a vague idea she acknowledges, but which still evades her. There is no egalitarian language available to her in her specific historical situation. In the novel’s final moment, Magda draws the reader’s attention to the literary genre she is trying to transcend: “What have

⁶² See *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

⁶³ See “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985).

I been doing on this barbarous frontier? I have no doubt, since these are not idle questions, that somewhere there is a whole literature waiting to answer them for me” (§266). Here, she indicates that the pastoral farm novel’s function is to idealize the colonial project and to romanticize the white farm idyll. Magda goes on, saying: “Unfortunately I am not acquainted with it; and besides, I have always felt easier spinning my answers out of my own bowels” (§266). She distances herself from that idealizing genre, and indicates that her own personalized and bodily monologue spun out of her bowels, offers a grittier perspective on life on the farm. “I have uttered my life in my own voice throughout” (§266) indicates that she has tried to resist the pastoral thrust and attempted to say something, in her context, new. Yet, in the end she seeks refuge in the same literature she is criticizing when she shifts into a romantic discourse in order to describe the surrounding landscape through the lens of pastoral literature:

There are poems, I’m sure, about the heart that aches for Verlore Vlakte, about the melancholy of the sunset over the koppies, the sheep beginning to huddle against the first evening chill, the faraway boom of the windmill, the first chirrup of the first cricket, the last twitterings of the birds in the thorn-tree, the stones of the farm house wall still holding the sun’s warmth, the kitchen lamp glowing steady (§266).

Here she draws on cliché images of life in the Karoo. The sun is giving way to a pleasant evening, the crickets are singing and she evokes the image of the windmill, almost as iconically South African as the image of Table Mountain from Bloubergstrand. It seems as if Magda is trying to embrace a pastoral mode that she already has rejected. She also emphasizes that the pastoral mode is elegiac and nostalgic, not real. She says that there are poems about the heart that aches for Verlore Vlakte which is Afrikaans for *the lost plain*, meaning that the pastoral mode pertains to something lost, distanced and therefore out of focus. The distance romanticizes what the pastoral is describing and when Magda retires into this elegiac nostalgia, it seems naïve and pathetic after all her efforts to escape the falsity of that same mode. She has demonstrated to the reader all too well how white idyll is built on the repression of others, and also of Magda herself.

At the very end, Magda refers to her farm as ”paradise [...], a space echoing with hymns I could have written but did not because (I thought) it was too easy” (§266). She has attempted something more difficult, namely “to be the author of her own life” (§122). But the fact that she inserts ‘I thought’ indicates her predicament. Her old pastoral discourse is too easy and inadequate while the execution of an egalitarian discourse is beyond her ability. She

is caught *in-between*, meaning that even though she can see the contours of something else, the pastoral hymns are, in the end, all that are available to her. This brings me to Plato's Analogy of the Cave, with which I would like to conclude. Like the people sitting trapped and chained inside the cave, Magda can see the flickering shadows of the world outside (the cave, the farm, the colony), the suggestion of something else; a better society. Carrol Clarkson writes that "this is surely what constitutes the *pathos* of Coetzee's fiction: the characters [...] write from inside the cave, from a position of historical *situatedness*, and their intimations of freedom or justice seem remote from the society in which they live (Clarkson 2009: 190. Emphasis mine). Because Magda does not have the language to transcend her own situation, she can only allude to ideas of freedom and reciprocity, but not properly articulate them, and certainly not execute them. Clarkson continues by saying that "even in the recognition that they speak for ideals that may be untenable in their time and place, the transcendent imperative [...] is to give voice to those intimations" (Clarkson 2009: 190). However faulty and self-contradictory Magda's monologue is, I do believe that it is this transcendent imperative that is the impetus for her entire project. She gives voice to these intimations, even though she has to admit in the end that "[w]hat I long for, whatever it is, does not come" (§225).

Conclusion: A Janus Faced Strategy

“Let me tell you, when I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces.” - Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*⁶⁴

Elleke Boehmer’s claim that literature is “a historical series of imaginative acts” (Boehmer 2005: 1) highlights that literature is not reality. Yet by referring to “writing in opposition to empire” (Boehmer 2005: 1), she indicates that these acts are involved in society and act *in* reality. In this thesis I have conducted a reading of two novels from Southern Africa, *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing and *In the Heart of the Country* by J. M. Coetzee, on the basis that they are written in opposition to colonialism, and therefore act in reality. Yet, due to a Janus faced critical strategy, they constantly problematize their own capacity as novelistic texts and imaginative acts. To claim that literature functions in society is perhaps not radical, and certainly not in South Africa where literature has been considered an important tool, both in the construction of a national identity and in the resistance against the apartheid government. However, I have sought to demonstrate that these texts acknowledge the intricate but subtle connections between society and even the most abstract literature, and to expose that a text that is *more* literary is not necessarily *less* political.

While *The Grass is Singing* is difficult to place in the literary landscape, I have argued that both novels can be considered examples of the anti-pastoral farm novel. In other words, they are part of a genre that is written in opposition to colonial society, but also in opposition to another literary genre, the pastoral farm novel. The farm novel was central in perpetuating a white colonial identity, defined by the white man’s right to African soil, earned through hard physical labour and divine destiny. It did also, however, perpetuate a patriarchal and hierarchical structure in which the black and coloured population were portrayed as peripheral and unimportant at best, and certainly not as the ones carrying the burden of the white idyll. This Janus faced critical strategy acknowledges that there is a link between a national/political identity and literature, and that because of this link rupturing pastoral literature must necessarily entail a rupture of white colonial identity.

While the anti-pastoral farm novel destabilises the white idyll and the white colonial identity set forth by the pastoral, this destabilisation comes from a position *within* the societal and identity structures perpetuated by the former genre. I argue that this is why Mary and Magda break down and become incoherent and split subjects. Like the literary genre of which

⁶⁴ (Coetzee 1998: 125).

they are a part, they see the intimations of something new while exemplifying the ideological limitations they are unable to transcend. By interrogating these colonial structures, the anti-pastoral exposes them as porous and flawed and simultaneously reveals the link between literature and the perpetuation of ideology, power and the construction of a racist and misogynist hierarchy. The anti-pastoral lays bare the dubious agenda of the pastoral.

In order to do this, the anti-pastoral farm novel must necessarily embody a high level of intertextuality and self-referentiality, something I discovered in both *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country*, although slightly more surprisingly in the former than in the latter. While *In the Heart of the Country* is demonstrably structured in such a way as to work against narrative convention and the impulse to arrange narrative events realistically and coherently, *The Grass is Singing* is seemingly a more traditional novel. However, this text displays that although a realist novel hides its literariness better, it is still an imaginative and narrative act. In other words, while the novels take place in different countries and are stylistically very different from each other, their farm setting is corresponding and they work in similar ways on a fundamental level, both in terms of themes and in terms of strategy.

The primary strategy of both novels is to expose and dissect aspects of white colonial society while simultaneously exposing and dissecting aspects of themselves. For example, while they describe a culture that arose at the intellectual conjunction between Europe and Africa, the use of European intertexts reveal that they themselves arose at that same conjunction, and in that state of *in-betweenness*. Because of the focus on this cultural conjunction, the notion of home and belonging becomes essential in the two texts. In *The Grass is Singing* for example, the narrator states that for “Mary, the word ‘Home’ [...] meant England” (28), which is ironic considering that “both her parents were South African and had never been to England” (28). Similarly we see that Dick build beehives based on the pattern proclaimed by a book about English bees. This demonstrates that European writing, even instructional writing on beekeeping, which is subject to the biological specificity of locality, is assumed to be universal. In much the same way, Magda is taught about “the reindeer herds of the frozen wastes” (§92) and Shakespeare rather than for example the cultivation of fynbos or the Xhosa aural traditions. Thus the white characters of the two novels demonstrate that they are versed in a European intellectual tradition far removed from the continent on which they live. To an extent, an African novel will always be culturally *in-between* as the novelistic form is itself a European construct, but the plentiful use of European intertexts plays up this European heritage. One can obviously pose the question as to how relevant novels that play up a European literary heritage are to an African colonial context. I have argued that it is the

invocation of this heritage that *enhances* these texts' critical potential. By displaying narrative techniques from this heritage, the novels problematize themselves *in relation to* the society they are describing, thus simultaneously exposing problematic societal *and* novelistic structures.

The Uncanny Tragedy as Social Critique

One such intertextual reference that runs through both novels is the reference to Gothic literature. In the introduction I referred to the epigraph from Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. The epigraph is a quotation from Gramsci saying that "[t]he old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms"⁶⁵.

White South African literature is from such an interregnum. It is a literary field that reflects a culture in transition, and which is characterised by an unresolved difference that is causing symptoms of morbidity in South African society as well as in South African literature. The anti-pastoral farm novel exemplifies the Gothic elements of South African literature particularly well and reveals that this interregnum is multifaceted. It arises because of unresolved differences between a European heritage and a South African national identity. However, *within* that South African national identity there are unresolved differences between white identities, coloured identities and black identities. I write white identities in plural to signal that there is also an unresolved difference *within* white South African identity, namely between the English and the Afrikaans.

In the two novels I have analysed, the Gothic thereby becomes a social critique. While the Gothic is often associated with cheap and ornately dark literature, it is employed here as a literary device to highlight that something, or someone, is being repressed, which comes back in the form of the uncanny.⁶⁶ Freud says that the uncanny "is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open" (Freud 2003: 132). This indicates that while the pastoral farm novel portrays the white farm as the Garden of Eden, the anti-pastoral farm novel exposes the snake.

In *In the Heart of the Country*, the Gothic takes on a very corporeal form. The most specific image of resurfacing secrets that were meant to remain hidden is the rotting bodies that either will not be buried or refuse to stay buried, making Magda's claim that her father

⁶⁵ (Gordimer 1982: x).

⁶⁶ Coetzee articulated a similar idea when he accepted the Jerusalem Prize in 1987. He said: "In a society of masters and slaves, no one is free. The slave is not free, because he is not his own master. The master is not free because he cannot do without the slave. [...] How do the masters of South Africa experience their unfreedom today? I will purposely not indulge in talk about uneasy sleep, about the imagination of disaster, about the return of the repressed in the shape of nightmare" (Coetzee 1992: 96).

“does not die so easily after all” (§36) an understatement. The Gothic is equally present in *The Grass is Singing*, but in a much less corporeal form. On a thematic level, the Gothic is present through Moses’ role as a ghost, representing the repressed black population come back to haunt the Turners. The sexually toned relationship he develops with Mary challenges white notions of black inferiority. The narrator says in the beginning of the novel that: “‘white civilization’ will never admit that a white person [...] can have a human relationship [...] with a black person” (21). Through his relationship to Mary, Moses’ suppressed humanity resurfaces and he lays bare the mendacity of colonial racial logic. He therefore forces Mary to face subdued elements of the society in which she lives, but also of her own psyche. Through occasional shifts into a Gothic narrative mode, the novel creates an uncanny atmosphere that resists the textual white idyll so typical of the pastoral farm novel.

As the relationship between Mary and Moses indicates, sexuality is central in *The Grass is Singing*, as it is in *In the Heart of the Country*, both as a subversive strategy and to enhance the Gothic elements. Sexuality in the two novels becomes Gothic because it plays upon associations to the deviant and the perverse, the colonial fear of miscegenation for example. In Coetzee’s novel the miscegenation is present for instance when Hendrik rapes Magda, which simultaneously invokes the image of the black man as a sexually charged rapist. Both novels subvert this image of the black man by having the white women orchestrate the sexual interactions. Mary uses her power to force Moses into intimate situations by making him change her clothes for her, while Magda admits that “Hendrik may take me, but it is I holding him holding I” (§227), suggesting that she is using her *imaginative command* to make him rape her. While this might sound quite speculative, it serves to emphasize that Magda perpetuates negative stereotypes in her narration. These sexual compulsions subject Moses and Hendrik to a female gaze, but also indicate that the dynamics between mistress and servant are changing by the contrasts these new relations form to their relationships with their fathers. The novels carry strong incestuous innuendos. For example Mary dreams that her father holds her face against his crotch, “her head held down in the thick stuff of his trousers” (186), while Magda connects male flesh to her father’s body, “when I think of male flesh [...] whose flesh can it be but his?” (§21). These feelings are juxtaposed to their growing attraction to their servants, indicating that they are rebelling against the racially incestuous ideology of colonialism. Sexuality in these texts can thus be said to be a narrative strategy that subverts established value systems.

This female gaze also complicates the question of blame, something Magda enhances when she compares herself to the witch in “Hansel and Gretel”. By invoking the European

fairytale tradition in this way, Magda makes it unclear whether she should be considered the heroine or the villain of the story. This tension between the role of perpetrator and victim is also played up in *The Grass is Singing* when Tony Marston says of Mary that “one can’t really blame her either. She can’t help being what she is” (22). Both protagonists are thus portrayed as layered and complex, and guilt is not easily placed. While they are not morally exempted from their actions, the texts question to what extent the protagonists could have been expected to think beyond their internalized notions and cultural *situatedness*.

The limited perspective of this *situatedness* is juxtaposed with distance and overview in another intertextual element: the Greek tragedy. While this genre is much more pronounced in *The Grass is Singing* than it is in *In the Heart of the Country*, both texts put white colonial society on trial by *staging* it, laying bare its deeper structures, incoherency and flaws for the spectator. In this manner, the stage is given the significance of a courtroom, and the spectator that of a judge. This *situatedness* and lack of overview also reveals that the protagonists fail to understand the historical process of which they are part. The tragic plots forces Mary and Magda to act in certain ways, which suggests that in every historical situation, the subject is offered a limited number of options. Mary and Magda both sit in Plato’s cave mesmerised by the shadows from the world beyond, but are still restricted by the limitations of the cave. However, they experience glimpses of another perspective: for example the narrator says of Mary that “[t]he idea of herself, standing above the house, somewhere on an invisible mountain peak, looking down like a judge on his court, returned” (223/224). This indicates that Mary momentarily gains sufficient overview to judge herself from a perspective outside the cave. Similarly, Magda says that “[t]he medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled” (§256). Her use of subjunctive indicates that the contraries have not been reconciled, meaning that she, like Mary, remains a split and unresolved subject. They both experience moments of transcendence by turning their faces towards the light shining in from the opening of the cave, but only long enough to experience inner conflict.

Performing a Race and Gender Hierarchy

This invocation of the tragedy also draws the reader’s attention to the performative aspects of identity and hierarchy. For example, in *The Grass is Singing* the racial and gendered hierarchy is demonstrated to be a structure that is kept in place by a compulsive performance and physical violence. The narrator says that “the dictate of the first law of white South Africa [...] is ‘Thou shalt [sic] 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” (205). In other words, the performance is essential in order to suppress the simple truth that there is no *natural* hierarchy. It is real only to the extent that it manifests in society, but it is constructed and enacted. It is emphasised that the only thing that stops the Turners from being poor whites, meaning Afrikaners, is “a question of standards” (3). The narrator also says that “[c]lass’ is not a South African word; [...] its equivalent [is] ‘race’” (32). The colonial society in *The Grass is Singing* works “instinctively and without conscious planning” (2) to hide the fact that race is a societal distinction rather than naturally given. For, as the narrator says, “once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it” (21).

In addition to being a compulsive performance, this hierarchy is also exposed as being kept in place by social coercion. By employing the perspectives of female protagonists, *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country* demonstrate that this hierarchy is misogynistic, perpetuating stereotypical gender roles as well as stereotypical race roles. Mary experiences a growing amount of ridicule and contempt because “she was not playing her part, [...] she did not get married” (35). She gives in, and only after the fact realises that “looking back, it seemed to her that all the people she had met were secretly, silently but relentlessly, persuading her to marry” (52). She is persuaded to play her part as a woman, a persuasion that dooms her to an immanent life she is unsuited to lead. While she suffers from deep depressions and passivity most of the time she is assigned to the realm of her house, she is proven to be content only when living a social life in town or when running the farm. In other words, only by living a life traditionally assigned to men, as independent, solitary and active, does she transcend her given conditions and experience moments of success and contentment. This emphasises Simone de Beauvoir’s stance that “[e]very individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects” (de Beauvoir 1989: xxxv). In other words, a subject needs stimulating work or projects in order to experience a meaningful existence. In the end however, Mary remains in the little house, suffering under the tin roof that absorbs the heat of the scorching sun.

This pressure is also present in *In the Heart of the Country* and Magda repeatedly finds herself compulsively perpetuating ideas with which she does not agree: “Yet how galling, after meditations that would do credit to a thinker, to find myself worked into the trap of conceding that if only I had a good man to sleep at my side, and give me babies, all would be well” (§87). Here she indicates that she tries to think beyond the convention and the consensus that pressured Mary to get married. Magda finds herself worked into a trap because

whenever she attempts to think beyond local consensus, she finds herself falling back on habitual thought patterns. However, while Mary marries Dick, Magda proclaims that: “I do not have it in me to think that the mating of farmboy with farmgirl will save me” (§87).

Social Structures and Language

This indicates that the gender and race hierarchy is equally present in *In the Heart of the Country*, but the novel explores to a larger extent how this hierarchy is mirrored in language. By conducting close readings of the original Afrikaans dialogues in the Ravan edition, I demonstrated that the social structure on the farm is evident in the characters’ use of pronouns. While Magda and her father refer to the servants in the personal *jy*, or on a first name basis, the servants reply in third person, using titles such as *mies* or *baas*. This indicates that the one in a higher position in the hierarchy has the power to name. The one in a lower position must maintain the distance dictated by the use of third person, meaning that linguistic structures set the limits for interaction. Both Magda and her father try to establish a reciprocal rapport with Klein-Anna by attempting “to compel from the lips of a slave [...] words such as one free being addresses to another” (§250). However, knowing full well that the social structures on the farm remain unchanged, Klein-Anna cannot give them the reciprocity they crave.

This exposes that there is a correlation between social power structures and linguistic power structures. When Magda says that “I grew up with the servants’ children. I spoke like one of them before I learned to speak like this“ (§16) she indicates that language sets her apart from her servants and that there is a process of initiation into this linguistic structure. Magda describes this initiation in terms of rape. Julia Kristeva’s theories of symbolic and semiotic language provide valuable insights into this initiation and Magda’s subsequent revolt. Magda says that she is “exhausted by obedience to this law” (§163), which gives associations to the psychoanalytical concept of the Law of the Father inherent in symbolic language. Magda asks “without liberation what is the point of my story” (§12), which indicates that she is trying to overthrow the linguistic Law of the Father, and speak her way into a new society by engaging in the pre-symbolic discourse of her childhood; the semiotic, “the long *aaaa*” (§163). This *aaaa* symbolises *pure* language, or sound, before the Father names the sounds and turns them into symbolic significations. However, because the semiotic is also a symbolic concept, Magda can only hint at this new, democratic value system, indicating she is on the border between the two. She therefore becomes a *subject-in-process*, and her discourse becomes

incoherent and closely aligned to psychotic discourse as she is forced to embrace a more heterogenic meaning system

These linguistic indications of power structures prompt Magda to call Afrikaans “a language of nuances, of supple world-order and delicate particles, opaque to the outsider, dense to its children with moments of solidarity, moments of distance” (§58). This emphasizes that any language entails a community. While Afrikaans unites Magda and the servants, there is a hierarchy, a supple world-order *within* Afrikaans that dictates their hierarchical position in relation to one another. The title of the thesis “We! What rubbish” draws the reader’s attention to the problematic nature of communities. As a societal structure it inescapably generates exclusion *and* coercion. The conflict of both novels is related to personal relationships that transgress this system, indicating both the social violence and the psychological violence this system promotes. Mary and Magda both seek to transgress the limits of the community inherent in *we*, subconsciously in Mary’s case, more consciously in Magda’s, who repeatedly insists: “I am *!* I am I, not a people” (§228). Thus “We! What Rubbish” refers to the realization that the community white colonial identity entails, might actually be oppressive, violent and unsavory. However, Magda demonstrates that thinking in terms of these communities is an internalized compulsive impulse, when she towards the end of the novel says: “whoever *we* may be, perhaps I should speak only for myself?” (§260).

Narrative Agency

In this thesis I have argued that social structures seep into literary discourse, indicating that narration is not neutral. *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country* divulge the issue of textual agency by force of their narrative structures. The European intertexts also play a central role here. For example there are many similarities between the narrator of *The Grass is Singing* and the narrator of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. For one, the narrators seem to be a part of, yet critical to, the societies they describe and for another, they employ a strategic use of conflating narrator and character voices. This conflation, in addition to maintaining a textual dialogical structure, lets *The Grass is Singing* shift between discourses with incompatible value systems. This displays the novelistic ability to move seamlessly between contradictory ideologies, and draws the reader’s attention to the novel’s potential role in perpetuating these ideologies. By employing this narrative technique, *The Grass is Singing* exposes the inevitable issue of textual agency and points specifically to the farm novel’s dubious ideological contribution to white Southern Africa. The use of such an opinionated narrator lets the text demonstrate that the information the reader receives is not

neutral. An interpretative mechanism takes place before the information is presented, nudging the reader's interpretation in a certain direction. While the narrator in *The Grass is Singing* displays this process very obviously, he reminds us that in a more conventional narration, this interpretative mechanism is also present but remains lurking in the shadows of the text.

In contrast to the covert, but opinionated narrator of *The Grass is Singing*, the protagonist Magda narrates *In the Heart of the Country*. By analysing the narrative techniques of this novel in light of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*, we see that she is a highly unreliable narrator. Due to the *nouveau roman*'s cinematic heritage, the narrative is structured like a discontinuous montage. The repetition of several events, told differently each time, mystifies the reader in terms of what happens when, and even if it happens at all. This mystification subverts Magda's narrative authority because she herself seems unsure of what exactly happened. The narrative style in *La Jalousie* is hyper-realistic, with an extreme focus on the physical location and the focal point of the narrator. Correspondingly, when Magda admits that "[m]ore detail I cannot give unless I begin to embroider, for I was not watching" (§1), she exposes that a coherent narration usually demands that the narrator 'fill in the blanks'. The numbered vignettes point to the components of a story being a collection of fictional 'facts'. Thus Magda's monologue exposes that any narration entails a *selection* of facts, which again highlights the impossibility of ever telling 'the whole truth'. Ironically, Magda claims authorial power and demands "to be the author of her own life" (§122). Yet because she struggles to liberate herself from her social and linguistic constraint, she ironises the role of the writing subject. She exposes that contemporary social structures will inevitably seep into a text by way of language and narration, meaning that in the case of the anti-pastoral farm novel, the writing subject will perpetuate the very structures it seeks to reject.

In the introduction I argued that writing is a powered act, reflecting the power structures of society. However, through narrative convention this power usually remains hidden, and the narrator comes across as embodying a certain universalism. *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country* on the other hand, expose that narration is never neutral. They lay bare the intricate relationship between literature, ideology and the unavoidable interpretative slant to literary texts. These novels call into question the cultural situation and ideology of the writing subject, dissecting his *imaginative command*. The narrator in *The Grass is Singing* educates and almost forces the reader to subscribe to his ideology, while Magda displays that while she has full narrative power over the farm and the people living there, she has limited overview due to her cultural *situatedness*. Yet she claims that "[i]t has always been that the word has come down to me and I have passed it on" (§203).

Here, she makes herself out to be a prophetess, passing on the neutral and objectively true word of God. This refers to the immense authority that the written word carries in western culture, and the power of the writing subject. Her connotations to *The Bible* remind us that even though this is perhaps the most central founding text of western culture, one can still trace its transformation through different cultural and historical positions via its long translation history. This exposes that even the most authoritative text is not exempted from cultural and historical *situatedness*: the discursive value systems, power structures and the perspective and positioning of the writing subject.

By displaying their own faults and limitations as literary texts, *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country* analyse their own situation as imaginative acts consisting of language and ideology. They also explore their own relation to a genre that was instrumental in the construction of a white colonial identity in Southern Africa. However, while they lay bare their rejection of the dubious ideology of the pastoral farm novel, they also expose that they are caught in the identity constructs and social structures the former genre perpetuated. While their critical gaze is Janus faced, looking at both society and back towards themselves, they demonstrate that metafiction, the exploration of literature, language and narration, carries societal relevance in itself. These novels are not relevant *in spite of* their self-referentiality, but *because of* it. If language, power and identity are inseparably intertwined in a subtle but destructive relationship, metafiction is a device that gains critical potency in its contribution to the exposition of these correlations. Due to the Janus faced critical gaze of *The Grass is Singing* and *In the Heart of the Country*, this exposition destabilizes the identities of the characters while simultaneously destabilizing the identity of the one who narrates, revealing his ideological positioning and subverting his *imaginative command*. Thus the haunting and the rupture of white colonial identity becomes a multifaceted literary strategy that points to a context far beyond the texts in which it is employed.

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