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# **DIPLOMAMUNKA MA THESIS**

**Czifra Zsuzsanna**

Anglisztika MA

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# DIPLOMAMUNKA

*Etika és Narratíva Doris Lessing A fű dalol c. művében*  
*Ethics and Narrative in Doris Lessing's The Grass Is Singing*

**Témavezető:**

Dr. Timár Andrea  
egy. tanársegéd

**Készítette:**

Czifra Zsuzsanna  
Anglisztika  
(angol irodalom szakirány)

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## Abstract

In this present work entitled “Ethics and Narrative in Doris Lessing’s *Grass Is Singing*,” I investigate Doris Lessing’s first literary work departing from an underlying ethical concern for the ethical theme of the novel; and particularly, from the dilemma proposed in the narrative whether it is possible to take ethical action, if one lacks necessary knowledge of the situation, in other words, whether the ethical can come *before* knowledge or epistemology. Besides the ethical theme, I note the significance of narrative form that in turn structures the ethical content. Therefore, the present analysis follows two axes that are correlative and interactive: an ethical and a narrative. In the consideration of the ethical I relate Levinas’s philosophy of (the “saying’s”) signification in ontological language (the “said”). By analogy to the way ethical signifies in language, an articulate understanding of ethical signification in narrative situation is possible. Levinasian ethics not only provides insights for the narrative’s ethical theme on the content level but provides it with an analytic framework on the structural level. The core concept that follows from the Levinasian understanding of narrative communication is the *reader /critic* distinction that, representing cognitive practices of reading, serve as central analytic tools to decipher ethical meaning implicated in and by the text. In the last major section, building on the theoretical framework and thus exploiting the analytic apparatus of the previous sections, I revisit the original problem of the ethical theme. The insights of Levinasian philosophy and meticulous narrative analysis allow me to propose a complex understanding of Lessing’s ethics in *The Grass Is Singing*.

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## **Ethics and Narrative in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing***

### **1 Introduction: *The Grass Is Singing's* Relevance to the Contemporary Reader**

British author, Doris Lessing holds a relatively well-defined place in Anglo-American literary criticism. Her early works have mostly been praised for their insightful and authentic presentation of South-African colonial society and its problems, chiefly concerning the black and white relationship. Lessing, who spent her childhood and young adulthood (including her second marriage and divorce) in Southern Rhodesia, indeed has first-hand experience; a “first-hand” experience; she also believes that “because she was brought up in it, she has a responsibility” (qtd. in Schlueter 9). Another aspect in criticism that is usually mentioned alongside Lessing's name is an apparently strong feminist agenda in her writings. However, as also added in these cases, it is far from evident that Lessing should be called a feminist writer. She has indeed explored issues of then contemporary life (1940's –) from an essentially female perspective, but her works reflect on matters that go beyond the concerns of feminism and address problems that clearly defy the limits of a single category. The author herself denies having such an exclusive agenda. Harold Bloom, in his introduction to an essay collection on Doris Lessing, labels her a “post-Marxist materialist”, which again elucidates an important side of Lessing's writings that shows a strong political and social concern, as well as a demand for taking responsibility. Also, on a biographical note: Lessing for long sympathized with ideas of Communism (which ideas and commitment she later abandoned) and had also for a while joined the Communist party in England in the 1950's. The last, but

not least, important aspect of her writings on which she is often quoted is the experimental and subtle narrative techniques she exploits; for example, the use of various reflectors (also known as “focalizers”, “filters”<sup>1</sup>) in the narrative to manipulate perspective and foreground certain themes.

*The Grass Is Singing* is the first novel in the massive corpus of Lessing’s works and was written in the period when the author lived in Southern Rhodesia. She brought the manuscript with her when she moved to England in 1949 and had it successfully published in the following year. Although *The Grass Is Singing* might not be the author’s most polished work, nor is it the most prominent and discussed one (this latter is, undoubtedly, *The Golden Notebook*, 1962), the novel is still distinguished in her writings. Its particularity is especially in its overwhelming concern with black-white tensions in colonial Africa and also in its narrative form that is an underlying contributor of the novel’s ethical theme. Paul Schlueter, one of the first among Lessing-critics, observes: “the book certainly contains examples of thinking and technique that a more experienced writer, such as Mrs. Lessing herself in more recent years, would prefer to alter” (22). However, it is precisely because of these techniques, later abandoned, that the novel is of special interest, and merits the critical examination of narrative form and its relationship with the widely discussed ethical content.

Dominant readings of *The Grass Is Singing* have identified important themes in the novel such as racism, sexual abjection, incapability of intimacy, the representation of the female psyche etc. and illuminated the importance of these factors in Mary’s character and their relevance to human ethical life. These are important but to the ‘psychologically enlightened’ and ‘theoretically trained’ contemporary reader, they do not present that novelty and sense of shocking revelation that they might have done to the novel’s contemporaries. Its

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Keen uses the term “reflector” for perspective-bearing characters, whereas Gerard Genette uses the term “focalizer” and Seymour Chatman the term “filter” for effectively the same narrative phenomenon each term indicating a slight difference in approach. Narrative perspective is one of the components of narrative situation; it is the viewpoint of a reflector or narrator from which narrative events are related (Keen, 31).

severe political actuality has also long passed by, and although these problems (such as inequity, racism, representation of female psyche etc.) are obviously still prevalent issues of contemporary society and academic discourse; their context (historically, academically, artistically, socially etc.) is so radically different than it was in the late 1930's and 1940's that it has partly lost the shocking effect it had on its contemporary readers. This however endows readers of today with the advantage of being less engulfed by the enormity and novelty of content. This, in turn, allows them to pay more attention to structural and narrative techniques. In fact, I find that it is precisely these formal elements that provide the novel's actual relevance to us as well as to literary criticism. Lessing communicates her ethics in a way that could be called an interesting interplay between written content and inscribed narrative form. Noting the ethical significance of the themes the novel presents is, therefore, equally as important as investigating *the treatment* of these themes in order for the reader to articulate the meaning of the author's ethics in its complexity. Accordingly, a close attention will be devoted to form as well as to content in this analysis. In the following section I will shortly illustrate how the novel's thematic analysis results in an overarching ethical dilemma and necessitates the narrative investigation of the text in the light of that ethical question.

## 2 Discovering the Ethical Theme: Tony Marston's Responsibility

The plot of *The Grass Is Singing* is relatively simple: there is a "Murder Mystery" reported by a special correspondent writing that Mary Turner, the wife of a white farmer, has been killed by the native houseboy; the murderer has confessed to the crime and has been caught by the police. Motives of the murder are unknown but "probably" the murderer was in search of valuables. Following this newspaper clipping, the narrator of the novel painstakingly relates the exact circumstances following the murder: Dick, the husband has completely gone mad; Charlie Slatter, a neighbouring farmer tries to take care (or rather control) of events and Tony Marston, an idealistic twenty-year-old fresh-immigrant from England, tries to make sense of things around him while suffering great anguish in his mixed feelings about justice and responsibility. Things in this post-murder scene seem mostly to centre on the very problematic black-white relationship to which each of the characters' thoughts, problems or actions relate in some way. What is more, it is also probable that the fearful dynamic of such a relationship was responsible for the murder itself, not just for the peculiar reactions to it. After this first chapter, the narrator starts relating Mary's life from her childhood spent in poverty and constant distress over her parents' conflicts, through her gradual growth into a comfortable but seriously unreflecting and socially unaware solitary life as a young woman, then to the final stage of her twenties when in a desperate impulse she gets married to Dick Turner – himself no more fortunate or independent than Mary. A vast part of the novel describes the gradual mental and financial deterioration of both Mary and Dick; and Mary's extremely fear-driven and brutal treatment of natives. The last, rather small, part of the novel allows glimpses into Mary's relationship with the houseboy, Moses, when she is already in the last stages of mental breakdown. Dick is similarly consumed mentally: partly by Mary's

hatred and partly by seeing all his dreams and work going into decay. Events culminate in Dick's final acceptance that he must sell his farm to Slatter, with Dick kept as a manager and with Tony to step in as a representative of Charlie while the Turners go on a curing holiday – which however never takes place as things end with Mary's murder. The last chapter describes the murder and the events that in the story's temporal frame directly precede the predicament of the starting chapter. The plot is thus a simple chronological one, only the last part is placed first in the narrative.

The story itself is simple and the reader soon realizes that the point lies somewhere else than in the detective-like investigation of circumstances. Already in the first chapter the narrator indicates that this is not an ordinary murder: there is a peculiar feeling of taboo surrounding it, given that "people in the district" do not talk about it at all. The taboo which is the human relationship between a white woman and a black man, "whether for good or for evil" (26), introduces the single most important theme in the novel, dealt with on all levels of the narrative. As I will show later, this is the novel's basic ethical concern, dealing with the possibility of the relationship between, what Emmanuel Levinas defines as, the self and the "Other". It is in the face of this elementary theme that other themes of the novel gain significance. Characters constantly fight for, but more usually *against* acknowledging natives as human beings. Mary has no idea or contact with natives while she lives in town – "they were outside her orbit" (36); however, as soon as she is forced into daily contact with them she becomes harsh and shockingly racist towards her houseboys. She not only calls them 'swine' and 'beast' on a regular basis but grows to feel a deep hatred and repulsion for every single person of that race: "she hated them all, every one of them, from the headboy whose subservience irritated her, to the smallest child" (115). She is also particularly repulsed by their women: by "their fleshiness," their insolent faces and uncaring pose but above all she

hated “the way they suckled their babies” (95). This is obviously a sight she finds repulsive because of her deep sexual disinclination – another latent issue in the novel.

Although critics tend to note that Mary is in a way a representation of female sexuality and sexual struggles; her character is too two-dimensional to be in any way an insightful representation of that. The narrator tells us that “she would only need to get into the train and go back into town for that lovely peaceful life, the life *she was made for*” (98, emphasis added) or “she might have run away again, in another desperate impulse towards escape, and this time done it sensibly, and learned how to live again, as *she was made to live*, by nature and upbringing, alone and sufficient to herself” (102, emphasis added). These remarks indicate that Mary is not a character who would fulfil our liberal humanist ideas about a human being. She is completely void of even a minimum of self-assertiveness (that verges on the lack of a survival instinct), free-will, or a minimum capability of growth or change. She is, however, a neatly drawn prototype of a character who exhibits psychological patterns such as compulsive repetition of internalised parental roles and due to that, as suggested by the narrator: sexual repression. Mary grows up in a family of extreme poverty; her mother is a bitter and neurotic man-hater and her father is a miserable drunkard. The only feeling she learns from her mother is contempt and disgust (manifesting in her relationship with Dick); her benevolence can only show in pity and a brotherly appeal towards her husband, but then again she despises him: “The women who marry men like Dick 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. Mary, with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable” (90). This comment by the narrator again reinforces the very

limitedness of Mary's character but at the same time precisely follows that form of neurosis<sup>2</sup> the author seems to intuitively understand: as a typical trait of compulsive repetition, the figure and deteriorating example of her mother follows Mary "as a double" in her own marriage.

It has also been noted, that Mary's life is greatly shaped by the rather unfortunate turns her life takes i.e., by the fate which contemporary critics would call "social and psychological determination." She leads a single-woman life style in town and has a satisfactory job, many friends; thus a life she feels content and comfortable with. However, her relationships essentially lack any type or form of depth, because "she felt disinclined, almost repelled, by the thought of intimacies and scenes and contact" (37). As for men and marriage, "she had a profound distaste for sex" (39), she had plenty of men friends "who treated her just like a good pal, with none of this silly sex business" (40). Her profound distaste for and, I would also add, fear from sex and intimacy, are again deeply rooted in her childhood: "there had been little privacy in her home and there were things she did not care to remember; she had long taken good care to forget them years ago" (39). She doesn't "care to remember" and "takes good care to forget" thus her attitude towards her childhood memories and traumas is a deliberate forgetfulness or a voluntary ignorance which inner mechanisms she also regularly exploits in the later course of her life. After overhearing a conversation of her friends about her, she feels pressured to get married – which she finally does to Dick Turner. The narrator already anticipates in the beginning of the novel: "the Turners were bound to come to grief" (13). It is clear Mary's life as a married woman is bound to be

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<sup>2</sup> A neurosis which Kristeva explains as "a phobia of non-differentiation, of uncertain and unstable identity (Powers of Horror 58):" when Mary has a phobia of becoming the same as or double of her mother (Roberts, 133). Roberts accounts for Mary's dream about being forced to play a dirty game with her father and being forced to his lap is also a sign of this neurosis, in which case Mary experiences a moment of Oedipal trauma where Mary is plunged into incest dread (to use Freud's phrase)" (133).

miserable not only because the spouses are completely unsuitable for each other but also, as the narrator corroborates, because

there are so many people...for whom the best things have been poisoned from the start. When Mary thought of 'home' she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains; when she thought of marriage she remembered her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled; when she thought of children she saw her mother's face at her children's funeral – anguished, but as dry and hard as a rock. (39)

Mary's unfortunate upbringing, thus places serious limits on the potential of her future happiness which is, even more tragically, directly opposite to that of Dick: Dick's entire life is his farm, he lives in complete unison with nature and is so isolated that he would be unable to accustom himself to another setting and would basically wither and die anywhere other than on his farm. Mary is quite the same, only in the opposite way: she is consumed by the heat and isolation of farm life (which is, in fact, the same scenery as that of her horrific childhood); her happiness is tied to the city (and being alone). After overhearing an "apparently so unimportant" conversation at one of her friends' "which would have had no effect on a person who had the faintest idea of the kind of world she lived in," Mary feels pressured to get married even if every one of her instincts and good feeling is against it (41). Having no relation to or clue about the social relationships that tie her to the world (i.e. she totally lacks self-knowledge, and is unable to reflect upon herself or her situation), her subsequent reactions and decisions, including the marriage, are based on complete self-delusion and a sequence of desperate decisions.

It seems that Mary is a person who is pulled around in life by basically two forces: the forces of her upbringing and the people around her. The same thing is presented about Dick, although less elaborately argued by the text than in Mary's case. Beside the psychological and social factors, unexpected turns of events (i.e. *fate*) are equally determining elements in the story. The narrator writes at the very beginning: "the Turners were bound to come to

grief" (13), so readers are strongly inclined to think that the Turners are like tragic heroes heading inevitably towards their ill fate. The question however arises: how is this negotiable with personal agency? Do they have personal agency at all? Dick and Mary never seemed to possess any certain idea of themselves or of others around them. The narrator only makes this clearer by continuously contrasting Mary and Dick's ignorance and incompetence with its own insightful comments, constant analysis, and judgement of their situation. Such lack of their agency, however, is problematic, on the one hand, and very ironic, on the other. It is problematic because to state, for instance, that Mary's racism follows from her abjection of male sexuality (resulting from a childhood traumatic experience with her father), which she projects onto Moses, is one possible reading of the text, but it drags in such uneasy questions as: can something like racism be attributed to solely one factor and if it can, then does it take the "blame" away from that one person (Mary) and put it onto the other one (in this case, the father)? Where does this sequence end; who is to blame in the end? Most importantly: is this really what the text suggests?

Ironically, the person undoubtedly endowed with agency is Moses; even though, according to the rules of colonial society, he should have the least. Moses does not only show his agency at the end (with the murder) but all throughout the story. Mary and Moses first meet when Mary is in the field supervising labour at the time of Dick's illness. Even at this encounter, when Mary loses self-control due to her anger (fear, hatred, etc.) and hits Moses in the face with a whip; Moses is already the one who is able to practice self-control:

She stood quit still, trembling... she looked down at the whip she held in stupefaction, as if the whip had swung out of its own accord, without her willing it... Then she saw him make a sudden movement and recoiled, terrified...[b]ut he only wiped the blood off his face with a big hand that shook a little...For a moment the man looked at her with an expression that turned her stomach liquid with fear. (109–110)

Moses is the one capable of controlling his anger and emotions despite the fact that, as opposed to Mary who “had behind her the police, the courts, the jails,” he as a contracted native had “nothing but patience” (120). A further sign of Moses’ agency is when he turns towards the pathetic, helpless Mary begging him to stay at the house (as being incapable of bearing Dick’s anger any longer) and helps her out in her misery. Moses exhibits agency in sexuality when he stops in his movement while bathing when he recognizes Mary’s unconscious, again, involuntary stare at him and thus demonstrates a refusal to be a sexual object for Mary’s desires (this is one explanation). In their strange relationship, it is also Moses who is the sole agent; he is like a caretaker of the child-like Mary. The final act of his agency is the murder.

It is arguable whether some agency is gained by Mary with her almost voluntary acceptance of the murder. Sheila Roberts, who explores the reinforcement of colonial fantasies of racial and sexual otherness in *The Grass Is Singing*, notes: “Mary foresees her killing and does not try to save herself from it: in fact, she goes walking out into the night as if to greet it” (135). Citing Eva Hunter, Roberts argues that Lessing’s punishment of Mary upholds such cultural practices when the female body is identified as the daughter of Eve, therefore “sterile, unnatural, guilty;” consequently, “is sacrificed by the author as well as by Moses – who represents the natural, the whole, the fertile, and the innocent – to a new dawn” (qtd. in Roberts 135)<sup>3</sup>. Although the symbolism of the novel could be interpreted in this way, I think textual traces point quite decisively in a different direction (which might not exclude the previous interpretation): Mary finally realizes that she has to take responsibility for herself, even if now it is only possible in the act of her death:

She sank down on the bed, feeling sick and hopeless. There was no salvation: she would have to go through with it.... She would walk out her road alone, she thought. That was the lesson she

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<sup>3</sup> The original quote is from Eva Hunter “Marriage as Death: A Reading of Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing*.” *Women and Writing in South Africa*. Ed. Cherry Clayton. Marshalltown: Heinemann Southern Africa, 1989. 139-61.

had to learn. If she had learned it, long ago, she would not be standing here now, having been betrayed for the second time by her weak reliance on a human being who should not be expected to take the responsibility for her. (201)

In her final desperate attempt to reach out for help from the Englishman, she realizes that she eventually has to do what she has tried to avoid in her whole life: take responsibility. It might seem a bit idealistic, even an illogical turn regarding Mary's character in the previous 200 pages of the novel, but it undoubtedly places the theme 'responsibility' in a central position. Responsibility is also foregrounded in other parts of the narrative.

In the first chapter it is Tony Marston who bears the task of responsibility – “it can be said that Tony was the person present who had the greatest responsibility that day” (26); however, he finds it difficult to disentangle the murder's complications and thus find an answer to his own situation in which he can take responsibility. Although he has observed Mary and Moses from a very close position, he faces difficulties in explaining that situation:

'If you must blame somebody, then blame Mrs Turner. You can't have it both ways.. 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. I've lived here, I tell you, which neither of you has done, and the whole thing is so difficult it is impossible to say who is to blame'. (27)

He formulates the same opinion of Mary, “she can't help being what she is” that the reader is able to formulate after getting to know her character. However, he also recognizes that Mary's case, besides its singularity, is representative of a more general problem of colonial society. Hence his argumentation shifts to a generalizing level saying that “either the white people are responsible for their behaviour, or they are not.” Relating these insights to his own situation he tries to find the way he can explain the causes and nature of the murder and thus protest against Charlie and the Sergeant. However, he is blocked in this thought process as well:

He clung obstinately to the belief, in spite of Slatter and the Sergeant, that the causes of the murder must be looked for a long way back, and that it was they which were important. What sort of a woman had Mary Turner been, before she came to this farm... And Dick Turner himself – what had he been? And the native – but here his thoughts were stopped by the lack of knowledge. *He could not even begin to imagine the mind of a native.*” (28, emphasis added)

These thoughts and the context of Tony’s responsibility structure the already listed themes of the novel, but at the same time take them to another level. Responsibility, it seems, does not only concern Mary and Dick, the participants of the tragedy, but also people, like Tony, who seem to be completely outside of it. But the question may rightly be asked: how is he to take responsibility if he does not know a crucial part of the story: that of Moses? Tony cannot even start to imagine the mind of a native so he cannot even create a ‘hypothesis’ for Moses’ part of the story, as he can (and does in the end) about Mary’s and Dick’s, and there he is stopped in his thought and, consequently, in his actions too. Thus the black-white relationship problem is not only relevant to Mary and Moses in the colonial situation but also to Tony and Moses, although in a different but also ethical context. In a culture (like the Englishman’s) where knowledge is in essential condition of conviction and conviction of ethical action and ethical action of responsibility, it seems to have a paralyzing affect on responsible action if in this “logical” chain the first one –knowledge, is already missing. The author seems to touch on the sensitive spot of the ethics of western cultures where an ethical problem is always already an epistemological one.

### 3 Ethics in Narrative Text: Lessing and Levinas

This dead end in western philosophical (and also practical) thinking is what Emmanuel Levinas rethinks in his philosophy and takes an essentially different approach to it. The Cartesian dictum “cogito ergo sum” which had been the paradigm for philosophical thought for many centuries presents this problem in its essentials. Firstly, if “cogito ergo sum” is the bedrock of human existence it means that it is only conceivable of as first-person modality, and is underlingly self-referential and self-enclosed because it predicates its existence over and over again: my cognition is the prerequisite of my being but even to be able to state ‘cogito’ presupposes that I exist. However, it is also exactly this “self-resounding” quality that Levinas finds to be the most problematic in logo centric language. As he says, “the ego is concerned only with itself” (*Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence* 117). The second implication that directly follows from the “cogito ergo sum” principle is that it posits thinking (“cogito”) as the prerequisite of existence (“sum”). This statement implies that thinking, and, ultimately, knowledge, precedes any other activity of the mind. For Levinas, this is deeply problematic, because for him, as I will show, ethics has to come *before* thinking or epistemology. The third essential of logo-centric thought that is presented, albeit only indirectly or performatively, in the Cartesian credo is that thinking and existence, as the statement itself shows, can only be conceived of *in* language. This confinement of philosophy in language was recognized by many thinkers of what we call the linguistic turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, it was also what Levinas, in his later philosophy, found to be the centre around which to build ethical thought.

Levinas approaches “Being” in a radically different way than thinkers of the logocentric discourse. The limitation of logocentrism outlined above constituted the founding paradigm from which Levinas wanted to depart. As summarized by Bettina Bergo in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Levinas’s departure is grounded in a primary concern for the *ethical*:

For Levinas, to escape deontology and utility, ethics must find its ground in an experience that cannot be integrated into logics of control, prediction, or manipulation. Whether it takes the form of the conscious ‘fit’ between subject and object in Husserl’s phenomenology, or whether a unity of mind and being evolves dialectically, rational activity can never become ‘angelic’. That is, it cannot step outside the totalizing logics of metaphysical systems, without supposing them or restoring them. There is no formal bridge, for Levinas, between practical and pure reason. Philosophy in the twentieth century (Heidegger, the Frankfurt School, deconstruction) has shown, at least, that the universality of concepts and the necessity carried by transcendental arguments are simply not sufficient to prevent the triumph of ends-rationality and instrumentalization. Ethics is therefore either an affair of inserting particulars into abstract scenarios, or ethics itself speaks out of particularity *about the first human particularity*: the face-to-face relationship. (sec. 4)

Bergo shows that Levinas departs not only from Kant and Husserl who proposed transcendental arguments (centred around a universal subjectivity) to save ethics from “ends rationality” and “instrumentalisation”, but also from the most important 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, who have shown that these arguments are, in fact, untenable. In the ambition of trying to avoid ethics “as ends-rationality”, Levinas redefines human existence and instead of the “I” he takes the “face-to-face relationship” as the first human particularity. He claims that the self is an entity always already in social relations, in a face-to-face relationship with a living other, which primordial relation is not conceptualizable. In this primordial relation the calling of the other is immanent, and always entails a responsibility for the other. Therefore,

for Levinas, ethics is not a branch of philosophy but is “first philosophy.” In his second major work, *Otherwise than Being; or Beyond Essence*<sup>4</sup> he develops the idea of ethics as first philosophy, relating it to representation and language. Whereas in an earlier work, *Totality and Infinity* the ethical came through a presence of the “face”, in *Otherwise than Being* the ethical appears in language. However, for Levinas as opposed to many thinkers of the linguistic turn, language is not simply a means or a medium in our hands that confines our knowledge and cognition as the only materiality of our thinking. Language, for Levinas, is the context of human existence. It reflects and grounds those qualities that we perceive of as distinctly human, for example the capability (and limitation) of perception, reflection, abstract thinking, imagination, art etc. The humanness of human existence is therefore perfectly mirrored in language.

The ethical enters (in) language through the “saying’s” signification of the “said” which is a signification to the other. The “saying” represents a place *before* ontology and thematization, it is elusive, ungraspable and undefinable with one single definition. The saying is the place where our obligation and primordial relatedness and responsibility to the other is made manifest. The saying is the quasi-transcendental place where ethics is born where the ethical moment of encountering the other signifies in language. In the logocentric thought,

one has already supposed [that] the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself. In this hypothesis, it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute outside-of-me, the other, would concern me. But in the ‘pre-history’ of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility, the self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles (*OBBE* 117).

The saying is associated with this ‘pre-history’ of the ego, it comes from the realm of language where the self is always already in relation to the other and where a responsibility to the other is spoken – always already there in the saying in language. In Robert Eaglestone’s

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<sup>4</sup> In citation, referred to as *OBBE* henceforth.

understanding: “It is what has made our world our context before we have even entered the world” (142). It is therefore ungraspable and free of principle, not fit to be put into words, into the “said”.

Even though the saying cannot be put into the said, it is the only place where the saying can be made manifest. For the said is “the only conceptual language available” in western philosophy so it is the site the saying leaves its “trace” on. The saying “also states and thematizes the said” (*OBBE* 47), by disrupting its delimiting thematizing practices. Meaning in ontological language is delimited by a double dimensionality according to Levinas: it is carved out as fixed identity (“noun”) trapped in the consecutive slots of time (“verb”). Whereas the noun and the verb confine and delimit language as predicated nominalised entities, the saying disrupts these laws. The saying signifies to the Other and thus is able to go beyond itself whereas the said “resounds” – only referring to itself, never outside of it; it cannot go beyond its own limits, the ontological predicate “to be”. Levinas writes:

saying signifies differently than an apparitor presenting essence and entities... Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbour, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said. This signification to the other occurs in proximity. Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self. (*OBBE* 47)

The saying thus signifies in a way that is prior to any meaning or ontological language; it assumes a fundamentally different position of the self in the world and as it relates to the other. Our basic form of existence is intersubjective and therefore responsible. This difference of Levinas’s thought from that of traditional western logocentric philosophy already resolves or gives an alternative answer to the problem the novel poses. If the ethical always already signifies the ontological (the “said,” in Levinasian terms) and, therefore, the epistemological, the dilemma of being responsible without the appropriate knowledge resolves into a simple tautology in terms of Levinasian philosophy. Responsibility and ethical

obligation is not a question of epistemology; it is the first modality of the self. In this respect, Tony Marston is responsible regardless of his knowledge of Moses or Mary or Dick. However, even if we accept such direct application of a conception of ethics coming from outside the text to a predicament developed *in* the text, we are not assisted more in deciding what Tony should actually have done. It only allows readers to state the Levinasian obvious: Tony is responsible regardless of his knowledge of Moses, which position the narrator already reveals and explains to the reader: “For the sake of those few lucid moments... it can be said that Tony was the person present who had the greatest responsibility that day” (26). However, it does not assist with further insights concerning the practical side of Tony’s dilemma (which is simply: what to do?). This example also illustrates that Levinas’s ethics is not moral philosophy; it does not develop a system of ethics, but rather as Levinas, himself asserts in *Ethics and Infinity*: his philosophy “does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning” (qtd. in Eaglestone 176)<sup>5</sup>.

It is however important to state that the tension the novel creates around Tony’s situation is a tension across narrative levels. For there is a tension between the views and thought processes of a character who feels his situation is irresolvable and those of the narrator who demonstrates the opposite when claiming that Marston “had the greatest responsibility that day” (26). This opposition calls attention to a separation between narrative levels, not only “spatially” but also ideologically. Such differences are implicative of the narrative situation created by the “author”, that is, they are part of the author’s communication. Therefore, it is the investigation of the narrative situation that has to form the ground of analysis.

The ideological opposition that emerges in the Tony–narrator case is a problem that resides across narrative levels, so it is an essential component of narrative situation. As

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<sup>5</sup> The original source is Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. R. A. Cohen (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1987) p.3.

Suzanne Keen writes in *Narrative Form*, narrators, “who are responsible for acts of telling,” can be characters in the story world and obtain a position as narrators at the same time, but the narrator is usually a separate entity outside the story world (30). In any case, “these insights reflect the basic conception of narrative level as comprised of (at least) a discourse level, a realm of narrated words-in-order, and the story level, a realm of imagined actions and agents” (30). The separation of narrative level always induces a spatial separation, but is mostly influential for interpretation when it comes with a dislocation of ideologies between the participants residing on the separate levels. For example, the narrator can be a member of the community presented in the story world that shares the same views, experience, tradition etc. as the characters, but can also share view with only *some* of the characters or *none* of the characters. Indeed, it is a crucial point of interpretation to detect the relationship of the narrator to the various characters and the presented communities.

In the case of *The Grass Is Singing*, the narrator leaves no doubt about its position as distinctly outside the story world spatially, and, in the case of colonial society, this means an ideological separation as well. From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator’s likeness or sympathy with South African white society is denounced and it rather assumes community with its audience, the reader (also implicated as outside the story world). This shows in how the narrator refers to its own position, the characters’, and the implied reader’s. When it refers to colonial society the narrator uses phrases like “people in ‘the district’” (9) or “white people” (9) or “people all over the country” (9), or just “people” or the general pronoun “they” (11); thus with the third-person reference, it denounces any kind of shared community with them. Whereas, when it reflects on issues in the story world, it uses phrases such as “to an outsider it would seem that...” (10), or “to the outsider it is strange” (11) and the general pronoun “one” repeatedly in phrases like: “the more one thinks about it” (11), “one could say” (11), or “one would have expected” (17) etc. These phrases, firstly, exhibit the

distinction of the reader from the people in the story world, more precisely, they point to the “outsider” position of the reader to the community the narrator refers to. Secondly, the narrator’s use of the generic, impersonal pronoun “one”<sup>6</sup> to present commonplace values or natural reactions of the discourse community (of course, they are only “natural” and “commonplace” to the class that the speaker addresses and that includes the speaker) implicates the narrator’s likeness with this “outside” community of its audience. With such referencing the narrator puts down the novel’s bipolar ideological framework that juxtaposes effectively two opposing standards: that of colonial Africa and that of the “outsider” to this ideology, very likely, the western liberal human thought. In the juxtaposition and influence of these dominant poles is where the place of the major characters: Mary, Dick, Moses, and narrative figures: the narrator, the narrate (the narrator’s audience), and implied reader has to be located in analysis.

Beside the separation of narrative levels, another important feature of narrative situation is that it is a communicative act between a sender and a receiver. Suzanne Keen defines narrative situation as that which “describes the nature of the mediation between author and reader” (30-31, emphasis added). It illustrates the form, the structuration, and the organic operation of the communication between a sending and a receiving agent. In other words, narrative situation describes the thematization of the text; which is strongly reminiscent of Levinas’s description of the saying which “states and thematizes the said” (*OBBE* 47, emphasis added). The similarity between the narratological definition and Levinas’s description is striking. The saying thematizes the said in the same way as the text is thematized by the narrative situation. The saying signifies in proximity, which is a signification to the other –corresponding to the transitory dynamic in narrative situation. The

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<sup>6</sup> In definition of the *New Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, the *one* as impersonal or generic pronoun “stands for a person, i.e., the average person, or the sort of person we happened to be concerned with, or anyone of the class that includes the speaker” (550).

saying “states and *thematizes* the said” – and similarly the narrative text is thematized by narrative structure. The juxtaposition of Keen’s and Levinas’s definition shows that narrative text and language operate by identical functions, with the only difference being that thematization for Levinas is always already ethical signification. By this analogy, a narrative analysis is made possible where narrative situation is understood in the terms of the Levinasian structuration of language.

The underlying principle that Levinas’s philosophy adds to narrative analysis is that ethics is always immanent in narrative structure as well as in content, in which narrative structure materializes. Suzanne Keen writes: “form and content, structure and theme: these are not artificially bound together”; form is never separable from content which is the very substance of its existence (32). Similarly, the saying can be conceived of as separate from the said in nature, but in existence it is never separable from the said, as the said is the only material in which it can appear. The narrator’s use of phrases and personal pronouns to separate narrative levels showcases exactly this phenomenon when a structural element becomes apparent through plain thematic elements of the story world, such as the third person reference and the use of the impersonal, generic pronoun, *one*.

In a Levinasian understanding of narrative situation, thus, the ethical appears in narrative as it appears in language. The ethical appears in language when the saying imprints its trace on the thematization of the said and thus signifies it to the other. The said is thematized by the axes of the “noun” and the “verb” that is by a predicating and a nominalising structuration. The saying “imprints its trace” on these thematizing mechanisms by “interrupting” them, in which it signifies “the said as proposition” to the other. Levinas describes this as follows:

the plot of the saying that is absorbed in the said is not exhausted in this manifestation[its signification in proximity]. It imprints its trace on the thematization itself, which hesitates

between, on the one hand, structuration, order of a configuration of entities, world and history for historiographers and, on the other hand, the order of non-nominalized apophansis of the other, in which the said remains a proposition, a proposition made to a neighbour, a “signifyingness dealt” (*significance baillee*) to the other (46-47).

Thus, the saying interrupts or mingles with exactly those thematizing processes of the said that confine it in the boundaries of ontology. The saying thematizes the said and disrupts/interrupts it at the same time. Disrupting the nominal structuration in “apophansis” (predication that states its own predicate) the said remains “a proposition, a proposition made to a neighbour.” From such argumentation of the saying’s signification, two things follow: (1) language and communication (thus all texts in language) have a primordially ethical dimension– “signifyingness dealt to the other”, and (2) that this ethical signification is a result of the “structuration” of content; thus the ethical shows both in the structure and content of a narrative. Levinas’s definition of ethical signification reinforces the established notion of narratology that content and form are inseparable. It also merits narrative analysis because it describes the specific mechanisms by which the ethical signifies in language – it describes “the nature of the mediation between author and reader” (Keen 30-31). The specific mechanism by which the ethical signifies is “interruption”; the moment and dynamic of interruption is thus the central element that defines a “Levinasian” narrative analysis.

Interruption in *The Grass Is Singing* is present in the constant fluctuation of narrative perspectives. The narrator employs reflectors (perspective-bearing characters) that result in a constant change in narrative perspective, which in turn manipulates the narrative situation to elicit sympathy or to present ideologies of characters that are disruptive of each other’s, or of the reader’s own views. However, as narrative events are presented through the perspective of the reflector, the reader is compelled, at least to a minimal extent, to identify with the reflecting character. Lessing’s technique of changing reflectors results in the continuous interruption of the reader’s standards as well as in an interruption across narrative levels, as

seen typically in the example of Tony and the narrator. The moment of interruption contained in and located around the narrative text is where the inscription of the saying interrupts the said and the ethics of the narrative should be looked for.

Robert Eaglestone, who developed a “new ethics of criticism” based on Levinas, relates the moment of interruption in literature as follows:

“[t]he ‘saying’ in literature is precisely that uncanny moment when we are made to feel not at home with the text or in ourselves. We are neither transported to a nether world of virtual life, nor do we simply mouth misinterpretation of the text. It is in these moments when our sense of our selves and our relation to the logos is interrupted and put into question that the ethics of literature are at their clearest.” (175)

Lessing’s narrative creates this moment of interruption by constantly alternating the various reflectors, slipping from one perspective to another. The use of free indirect speech allows these changes to go almost unnoticed, since it constantly keeps the disguise of the third person perspective of the narrator while, in fact, the narrative perspective changes with the reflectors. This creates a very even, smooth texture to the narrative but at the same time makes it hard for the reader to disentangle the separate components of narrative situation.

Therefore, I have found it necessary to account for the corresponding cognitive functions of the reader who is effectively the sole agent that performs all the functions implicated in the narrative situation, experiences “interruption” in the narrative at whichever level, and is therefore also the sole agent who is implicated in the ethics of the narrative text. Eaglestone also places the ethical instance i.e., the moment of interruption in the reading experience, which sheds a light on the importance of the reader-text-author relationship, on the fact that, as a “first consequence” of Levinas’s philosophy, reading and criticism are acts of communication between a self and another in language. The ethical dimension of criticism is, therefore, justified. According to the first, basic signification of the saying in the said (as signification to the other), our responsibilities are called forth by the text, which in the

humanities manifest themselves in an obligation to always respond to this calling. By way of criticism and theory the critic should respond and further interrupt (philosophical), literary etc. discourse so as to allow the saying to resurface in the ever-thematising discourses of (western) thinking. Criticism assumes an obligation that should never come to a halt.

Eaglestone's argument, thus, arrives at an ethics that mostly concerns criticism rather than reading, by which it is also apparent that he overlooks (or to his theory finds irrelevant) the difference between critical and reading practices. Ethics, for Eaglestone, emerges essentially in a post-reading moment thus between the *critic*–and–the text, rather than in a during-reading moment between the *reader*–and–the text. The separation of these different aspects (*critic* and *reader*) of reading is similar to Levinas's distinction of the "said" and "saying" aspects of language. These metaphorical terms (i.e. the "saying" and the "said") help to elucidate the complex way the ethical signifies in language; but their separation is artificial in the sense that, in practice i.e., in language at work, their operation is intertwined and is inseparable. The same applies to the *reader* and the *critic* that embody separate cognitive practices of the same rational activity: encountering a literary text. The analogy to Levinas is also appropriate because the *reader/critic* dyad helps to articulate the distinct ways the "saying" interrupts the "said", thus, the ethical emerges on separate narrative levels. In terms of the above (at least) two-fold division of ethical signification in narratives, Eaglestone only takes the first, (although most basic) aspect into consideration: the text *in* language as signification to the other.

The necessity of such distinction becomes clear when looking at narrative form as representing separate layers of the communicative act. The participants of the narrative situation are: real author – implied author – (narrator) – (narrate) – implied reader – real reader (Chatman's model). Real reader and real author are the historical personalities that write and then read a text, however they are usually not mentioned in analysis because

concerning the text and the analysis their real personality is irrelevant. People change over time thus a writer is not necessarily the same personality in terms of values, skills etc. from one of his books to another ten years later. Therefore, we usually talk about “implied author,” the concept of the author with values, views, and skills etc. that the text implicates and “implied reader,” the prevailing figure the implied author addresses. In analysis, critics usually use author in the sense of the implied author and reader in the sense of implied reader. I will also do this throughout my analysis; however, there is one crucial point to state before accepting this terminology. The text’s first ethical dimension would never exist if, in a hypothetical scenario, it was only between implied author and implied reader. These are only concepts and thematized abstractions of real people, and therefore, they are void of the saying which signifies in proximity between the self and other. Therefore, even if omitted at the time of analysis, it is the real author and the real reader that, in the first place, with their “once” real presence allow the ethical dimension to materialize as signification *to the other*. The first ethical facet is thus between the real reader and real author as historical beings.

Chatman’s diagram reflects the underlying idea that “narrative is understood as an act of communication, with a sender and a receiver” (Keen 33), thus “signifyingness dealt to the other.” In between those real individuals, who exist outside the text and between whom the first ethical dimension is evoked, “Chatman places the entities projected by or implied by the text” (Keen 33). Each of these entities (implied author, implied reader, narrator, narratee) represents respective facets or aspects of the cognitive practices that correspond to the three facets where the ethical signifies in a narrative. In order to understand their role in analysis, it is important to define their function precisely. Narrator and narratee are part of the textual world; the narrator is the creation of the author who is responsible for the telling the story, the “narrated words-in-order” in the discourse. Every narration is bound to have a narrator even if a covert, seemingly transparent one who might effectively have the same views, knowledge

etc. as the implied author. Exactly, however, in the case of the *reader/critic* the separation of narrator from implied author and of narratee from implied reader is crucial. The narrator is the agent who weaves the narrative, manipulates point of view, is responsible for style etc. The narratee who is, whether overtly or covertly, addressed by the narrator (an overt way would be ‘Dear Sir’ or ‘Dear Reader’) is in turn a listener, a perceiver. The narratee, strictly speaking, only facilitates understanding and comprehending the narrator’s words and thus makes sense of the basic thematic level of the narrative. I would call this function that of the *reader*.

On the next narrative level, the implied author is the version of the real author projected by that particular text. The implied author creates the narrator, has views, and communicates a message<sup>7</sup>. In his main difference from narratee, the implied reader not only understands what the narrator tells but also what the implied author wants to tell *with* this. Suzanne Keen explains in *Narrative Form*: “[t]he implied reader is the name we give to the profile of readerly traits that seems to be assumed by the text” (35): meaning, that the implied reader is not only supposed to understand the words in the narrative but also to make sense of certain allusions to contemporary culture, history, popular culture. Also very importantly, the implied reader is assumed to understand the implications made by narrative form through the narrator’s persona, (un)reliability, the inconsistency between story world and narrator commentary etc. I would call this reflecting and understanding aspect the *critic* in the narrative scenario. Of course, as Keen notes, “like the implied author, the implied reader is a projection of the text, and differs in every instance from actual readers, many of whom will not exactly match the profile suggested by the text” (35). This “suggested” but never fixed position is, however, what makes a literary text inviting even when books of criticism have

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<sup>7</sup> The use of pseudonyms in publishing distinguishes the actual author (Mary Ann Evans) from the implied author of her creation, projected by the text (George Eliot). Similarly, we can characterize the practices of the author of an anonymous narrative without knowing his or her historical identity. (Keen, 33-4)

been written on it and also what creates the necessary space for the ethical to signify, that is, for the saying to interrupt into the “already said”.

From this, however, necessarily follows that beside the implied reader, this suggested position is involuntarily filled by another profile, that of the real reader’s individual personality. Thus within the *critic*, beside the textually implicated reflecting agent, there is another function – that which comprises the individual practices of the real reader. An inevitable part of readerly practices are, thus, not implicated by but idiosyncratically brought to the text by the real reader. Even if a reader does not necessarily apply theories or philosophies to a text, he/she inevitably incorporates his/her own insights, life experience, inclinations, education etc. when understanding but especially when reflecting on the text. As Suzanne Keen summarizes “[r]eal readers are easy to define—the people who read narratives—and difficult to analyze. Literary theorists working in the fields of ‘reception theory’ (following Iser), reader response criticism (see Tompkins), and cognitive science (see Herman) have deepened our understanding of the practices of actual readers” (35). I do not wish to delve into any of these fields in this present text; what I only find relevant is the awareness of the idiosyncrasy in readerly practices. They are relevant because they work simultaneously with the practices *implied* by the narrative. It is exactly because of the idiosyncrasies that each individual (real reader) has the potential to interrupt “the said of a literary text”, and, in criticism, “the said of the already existing critical texts”. These “responsive”/“cognitive” practices make up the other half of the *critic*. This part of the *critic* is the single cognitive facility that, Eaglestone believes, the ethical obligation originates from. As, however, the following analysis of *The Grass is Singing* shows, the ethical not only resides in the idiosyncratic part of the *critic* but also in the *critic* and the *reader* that the text implicates.

#### 4 Ethics in *The Grass Is Singing*: Revisited

The very latent level through which the ethical comes across in the novel is traditionally on its thematic level, through the content of the story world. As I showed in the introduction Lessing's novel is an openly political novel, however, its ethical theme overwrites every other of its themes. The ethical theme is first problematized in the story-world, thus on the basic thematic level of the novel: through the character of Tony Marston. Tony enters the Turners' tragedy at a very late point, when things were already irreversible concerning the tragic outcome. Tony was summoned to help out in the farm in those six months when the Turners were to take a curing holiday to recover from their mental and physical exhaustion. He arrives at the very last stages of the Turners' story (for the last four weeks of the nine years that had passed), thus he is only an observer of the already existing predicament. He is not only physically an outsider but ideologically as well: he is a newcomer to South-African colonial society. The time period he spends on the Turner's farm is only enough for him to get acquainted with the laws and habits of colonial Africa but not enough to accept them and assimilate completely into its order. Thus, he is in the ideal "in between" state of the ethical when one is shaken out of his/her own value-system but has not yet adopted another one. This is the ethical moment (metaphorically) when the "said" is interrupted by the "saying": where one is thrown into a situation when free from "abstract ideas of equality" (*TGS* 18) and free from the compulsive law of Society, one is able to face the other in its "nudity" as a human being. The narrator describes this momentary state of transition of the new-comers with sharp acuteness:

Most of these young men were brought up with vague ideas about equality. They were shocked, for the first week or so, by the way natives were treated. They were revolted a hundred times a day by the casual way they were spoken of...They had been prepared to treat them as human

beings. But they could not stand out against the society they were joining. It did not take them long to change. (18)

Tony is exactly in this in between state of mind when he has not yet adapted to Charlie's and the Sergeant's society and struggles to deal with conflicts of this situation:

Tony Marston appeared uncomfortable as if he did not know his own mind. And for that matter he did not: the weeks in the Turner's household with its atmosphere of tragedy, had not helped him to get his mind clear. The two standards – the one he had brought with him and the one he was adopting – conflicted still. (18)

This description of Tony's situation is exactly the Levinasian ethical moment encapsulated within a fictional situation; his situation is the dramatised projection of the ethical moment into a fictive scenario, the allegory of the disruptive power of the saying (the disruption of a law, order, or system) where the ethical dimension emerges. He is trapped between his own ideas and values (the standard of western societies) and that of colonial Africa to which he feels he must conform. So, as it was also previously quoted, “[f]or the sake of those few lucid moments, and his half-confused knowledge, it can be said that Tony was the person present who had the greatest responsibility that day” (26). It might seem odd why the narrator puts Tony into this responsible situation right in the beginning of the novel when among all the characters he was the one least involved in the situation. But if one follows the narrator's description of Tony's precise position in the tragedy, as being the only one coming from Western society and having western values, “vague ideas of equality,” the reader recognizes him/herself mostly in Tony's character. In this light, the centrality of Tony's responsibility is extended to that of the reader who is, by its likeness to a character, implicated in the ethical situation of the novel.

The analogy between the reader's and Tony's position in the ethical scene is also implicated by the use of general pronouns and phrases designating a subject – as I already discussed. The narrator refers to members of the colonial community in the third person

nominal position whereas it assumes a general ideological community for itself and the *reader*. Phrases he additionally uses beside the generic, impersonal *one* are: “to an outsider it would seem that...” (10), and “to the outsider it is strange” (11) etc. These phrases, similarly, exhibit the distinction between the *reader* and the people in the story world; more precisely, they point to the *reader*’s position as “outsider” to the community the narrator refers to. It indicates that the narrator assumes the *reader*’s – that is, the narratee’s and the reflecting *reader*’s – outside perspective as opposed to the ideological community of colonial society. Tony’s position as “the outsider” is also directly established by the narrator: “[h]e was feeling nothing that they were feeling: he was an outsider in this tragedy” (21). This distinction is the sharpest and most important in their ideologies, which the narrator not only indicates when commenting on Tony but when assuming the perspective of the “one”:

He [Charlie] turned and went into the bedroom. Mary Turner was a stiff shape under a soiled white sheet. At one end of the sheet protruded a mass of pale strawish hair, and at the other a crinkled yellow foot. Now a curious thing happened. The hate and contempt that *one would have expected* to show on his face when he looked at the murderer, twisted his features now, as he stared at Mary (16-7, emphasis added).

The question may rightly be asked, however: who is this “one”? Who is the “one” for whom it is so obvious that Charlie’s features should have contorted seeing the murderer and not when seeing Mary, the victim? Probably for “everyone normal”, but in the novel’s terms: for someone who knows nothing about colonial Society and knows nothing about the mechanisms that provide its survival and make it plausible for Charlie who faithfully represents Society, to condemn Mary instead of Moses. For Mary committed the biggest sin and threat against “the dictate of the first law of white South Africa, which is: ‘Thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are’” (178). Mary committed the worst: she had a human relationship

with Moses. Clearly, these value judgements are only valid in the ideological regime of white South Africa to which the *reader* of the narrative is implied to be an outsider.

The outsider western *reader* is faithfully represented in Tony Marston' character who, all of a sudden, finds himself in a situation which he is not only personally but also ideologically an outsider. Nevertheless, he is the person who is "lucky" enough to observe Mary and Moses in a very intimate environment (living on the farm with them) and it is through his perspective that the *reader* is enabled to see the intimate dressing scene between the two characters. Thus beside being ideologically an outsider, physically and empirically he is the only insider (character) who has a glimpse in the dressing scene, into what was going on between Mary and Moses in those (probably one or two) years of their "human" relationship.

Tony as a semi-insider and semi-outsider is analogous to the *reader* who is in the ethical moment of encountering a text: "when we are made to feel not at home with the text or in ourselves. We are neither transported to a nether world of virtual life, nor do we simply mouth misinterpretation of the text" (Eaglestone 175). I use *reader* in the narrow sense here: its function is to think only on the level of the narrator–narratee communication thus without reflecting on narrative form for example, and taking the words of the narrator at their face value. It is important because the ethics the *reader* understands is only part of the ethics the real reader will understand from the whole picture. For the ethical understanding of the *reader* is bound to one narrative level and is bound by a solely perceptive cognitive function, it thus essentially lacks the information that the *critic* will infer from reflecting on the multiple narrative levels and by complementing the perceptive function with the reflective understand the author's ethics. Thus, the *reader* is only part of the complex ethical frame the text proposes and Tony, as outsider, is a representative of the *reader's* ethical position as perceiving/understanding in the ethical moment of interruption between two standards.

In this frame, it is also Tony who verbalizes those arguments that the *critic* would contemplate once having read the story. Lessing seems to save this task for the *critic* because even before telling the actual story, the arguments are laid bare through Tony Marston's train of thoughts. In this in-between position – in “interruption” – he is the only person who still has the ability (or the courage) to see that something is wrong about the murder, “that a monstrous injustice was being done” (26). He is convinced, on the basis of what he has witnessed between Mary and Moses, that the fact and motives of the murder cannot be stated black and white. The blame cannot be put on Moses, and if blame can be put on anyone, then it must be Mrs. Turner and the white people – but she cannot be blamed either for “[s]he cannot help being what she is” (27). This argumentation is understandable considering Mary's “ill” state of mind to which Tony refers. Indeed, having read the narrative, one is hardly able to think differently of Mary. Mary is so hopelessly determined by her upbringing, fate etc. and most of all, lack of will and agency, that it is hard to see where she could have done things differently. In her last day, when looking back to her life and herself from a higher-outer point of view “she saw Mary Turner rocking in the corner of the sofa, moaning, her fists in her eyes, she saw, too, Mary Turner, as she had been, that foolish girl travelling unknowingly to this end” (195). Mary's guilt is undeniable but at the same time she is so much determined socially and psychologically that it seems to be impossible to blame her. This understanding of the ambivalent situation is what Tony's comment also reflects.

Nevertheless, Tony has a certain idea of the state of affairs but it seems to be very difficult for him to put it into words, his argument cannot find its right outlet:

The fact he knew, or guessed, about Mary, the fact these two men were conspiring to ignore, could be stated easily enough. But the important thing, the thing that really mattered, so it seemed to him, was to understand the background, the circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary, the pattern of their lives. And it was not so easy to do. He had arrived at the truth circuitously: circuitously it would have to be explained. (22)

Tony suggests that Mary and Dick's background is important to the explanation of the story, however, this statement is controversial for two reasons: first, Tony does not know Mary and Dick's background, still he "arrived at the truth" and second, one of the main participant's story is unavailable: that of Moses, the murderer. As Tony himself claims (via the narrator) at this dead end of his thought process: "he could not even begin to imagine the mind of a native" (28). At this point the *reader's* and Tony's knowledge parts, because the *reader* does get to know Mary and Dick's background story and does also get an indirect answer to the dilemma whether the mind of a native is imaginable: "what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his [Moses's] completed revenge, it is impossible to say" (206). The narrator thus openly admits that the complete range of emotions and motives of Moses's mind will, indeed, never be available. For Tony and the *reader* this seems a dead end of ethics, an irresolvable ethical dilemma.

In spite of this epistemological gap in the "outsider's" knowledge, the narrator – who is also an outsider – still states that Tony had "the greatest responsibility that day". Tony's arguments are laid out for (and instead) of the *reader* in this respect, as well. He repeatedly tries to speak up and express his thoughts on the murder but is shut up by Charlie and The Sergeant each time. He does not understand their vindictive attitude and from a confusion and underlying urge to conform to the new society he only plays out his arguments in his mind. He could argue with the Sergeant about blaming Mary and the whites instead of Moses because "it takes two to make a murder – a murder of this kind", but then the Sergeant might say: "it is not a question of blame...Has anyone said anything about blame? But you can't get away from the fact that this nigger has murdered her, can you?" (27). Thus Tony is forced to ask himself the rightful question: "what difference would it make [if he took action] to the only participant in the tragedy who was neither dead nor mad? For Moses would be hanged in

any case; he had committed a murder, that fact remained” (26). This line of argument, just as the one about the importance of the knowledge of the participants’ background, leads to a dead end, a moral numbness in the face of responsibility.

He finally shakes off himself this responsibility, which seems a natural human reaction. He is desperately trying to get to the end of it but in the heat, with the whisky and the cicadas shrilling, it starts getting on his nerves: it seems unfair to “get... involved with a damned twisted affair like this, when I have only just come; and I really can’t be expected to act as a judge and jury and compassionate God into the bargain!” (28) The recognition and admission of his involvement shows that even Tony himself recognizes his responsibility but is literally paralyzed in his action by his dilemmas. Eventually he succumbs to the situation: “I’m getting out of this place... I wash my hand off the thing. Let the Slatters and the Denhams do as they like. What has it got to do with me?” (29). So Tony does not act on his responsibility and ironically anticipates the reaction the *reader* might have after having read the narrative: “I wash my hand off the thing”. Indeed, before the *reader* would even recognize the similarity in his and Tony’s situation, and would start asking himself the same questions, he may wonder what Tony was expected to do. If the reader stays inside Tony’s character, then it is indeed not possible to find out. In his train of thoughts, there is really no end. The reader, however, being more informed than Tony is (thanks to the knowledgeable comments of the narrator), gains an insight not so much into the solution of the problem, but into the very reasons why it seems so irresolvable to Tony, the outsider. This, in turn, allows for the reader to understand the underlying momentum of ethics the narrator represents:

Most of these young men were brought up with vague ideas about equality. They were shocked, for the first week or so, by the way natives were treated...But ththey could not stand out against the society they were joining. It did not take them long to change. It was hard, of course, becoming as bad oneself. But it was not very long that they thought of it as ‘bad’. And anyway, what had one’s ideas amounted to? Abstract ideas about decency and goodwill, that was all:

merely abstract ideas. When it came to the point, one never had contact with natives, except in the master–servant relationship. One never knew them in their own lives, as human beings. (18)

Tony and the young men lack the momentum that could make their ethical action possible or even meaningful. This core (the instance of the ethical) would emerge from a face to face, human relationship with the natives i.e., with the other. They have ideas about equality but they cannot stand out against a stronger and more oppressive ideology – because these ideas have nothing to do with the lives or the real experience of either the young men or the natives. Their ideas are abstract, void of content, void of the momentum that makes ethics meaningful: the human, and what Levinas calls the “face-to-face”, encounter. Abstract ideas are always part of an ideology, a system, a law i.e., part of a “said”. This is the reason why it is so important for colonial society to keep the natives in the frame, in the “said”, of the master–servant relationship where the individual human being cannot gain momentum. Tony does not understand this first law of white society’ yet – the narrator explains – but when he will have spent more time in the country, he will understand and “then he would do his best to forget the knowledge, for to live with the colour bar in all its nuances and implications means closing one’s mind to many things, if one intends to remain an accepted member of society” (26). However, in the moment of “interruption”, between his ignorance and his deliberate forgetfulness,

there would be a few brief moments when he [Tony] would see the thing clearly, and understand that it was ‘white civilization’ fighting to defend itself that had been implicit in the attitude of Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant, ‘white civilization’ which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a *human relationship*, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. So, above all, it cannot afford failures, such as the Turners’ failure. (26, emphasis added)

This commentary also explains the problem with Mary and Moses’s relationship in the eyes of white South Africa. At the same time, it also highlights its single most important feature:

“human”. Mary and Moses’s relationship poses a topic of endless speculations in literary criticism. The brief history that is given of their relationship allows readers to explain its dynamic and psychology in various ways (as I partly already showed in the 2. chapter) but what is undeniable and most important about it is that it is human and personal. What leads to the tragedy of this relationship also lies in its nature of being human: it supposes responsibility – responsibility Mary could not take.

In fact, it is a lack of responsibility that begins their relationship in the first place. She breaks down in front of Moses when he tells her he wants to leave by the end of the month. She thought of Dick’s anger over dismissing another one of her servants and “she could not face it”, “she simply could not go through scenes with Dick” (150). So it is again someone else that has to take the responsibility *for* her. Moses offers her help and stays but in return, he demands the human behaviour that he rightly deserves. Mary is extremely uncomfortable with this “intimacy;” she experiences it as if he “forced her now to treat him as a human being; it was impossible for her to thrust him out of her mind like something unclean, as she had done with all the others in the past” (156). She has lost the comfort of the master-slave relationship where her authority is constantly reassured – the only way she can exist in a relationship (with Dick as well) and she has been thrown into a position where she needs to face the other and take the responsibility that comes with this. Tragically, however, she cannot respond to this either, she is incapable of facing Moses, of assuming agency in this minimal sense. As a necessary consequence of her fear (which is in fact a fear of responsibility), the moment she feels she can rely on someone, (who, in this case, is the Englishman), she betrays Moses. It happens when Tony accidentally observes the scene when Moses, like a caretaker, dresses Mary and in his shocked state of mind asks Mary about the normality of such events. Taking the opportunity that Tony’s concern presents, relying on the Englishman, Mary hysterically sends Moses away. But even Tony recognizes that Mary only

uses his presence as a shield against facing Moses and, in that situation, her own responsibilities: “Tony realized that she was trying to assert herself: she was using his presence there as a shield in a fight to get back a command she had lost” (188). The command she tries to win back is her “master” authority over Moses but she does not realize that their relationship is already irrevocably human in the face of which this act is the most severe betrayal and annihilating humiliation of the other. Her fate is inevitable from there and she knows it. During the last chapter, which follows her (through her reflection) in the last day, her mind clears up and what she sees is an ironically adequate self-portrait: “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” (195). In their very last encounter, awaiting Moses on the veranda “at the sight of him, her emotions unexpectedly shifted, to create in her an extraordinary feeling of guilt; but towards him, to whom she had been disloyal, and at the bidding of the Englishman” (204). These thoughts of Mary reinforce the central point of her tragedy: she was a woman without will, which prevented her from being in a human relationship where one eventually has to take responsibility for both the other and oneself.

The ethics, in consequence, that the *reader* understands, has the human relationship as its ultimate basis, and responsibility as the single most important momentum this relationship calls forth. This is understood both in the relationship of Mary and Moses and the hypothetical relationship of Tony (the newcomer) and Moses (the native/the other). Whereas Tony has a sense of responsibility, but lacks human contact, Mary, having a human contact, avoids responsibility. Both are presented as dead ends in the novel. However, the ethics that the *reader* understands (i.e. the ethics in the story world as it applies to characters) does not account for those responsibilities of the real reader that are implicated by the analogy to

Tony's character, as outsider. The ethics that call for those responsibilities is problematized by the *critic*.

This second layer of ethics comes across mostly from a reflection on the narrator's ethics in light of narrative form, and from the understanding of the implications it has. Tony raises the question whether one can imagine the mind of a native (in Levinasian terms, the mind of "an absolute other"). When reading Tony's thoughts in the first chapter the reader has great expectations about getting to know the whole truth about Moses in the rest of the book, from the (so far seemingly) omniscient narrator. However, as it turns out, the reader will not know more in this respect than Tony does; the novel ends on the comment from the narrator:

And this was his final moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent... Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say. (206)

The narrator cannot give a final resolution or interpretation of Moses's motives or emotions. It can only state the obvious: Moses committed murder out of revenge. But about his feelings – exactly the part that would provide an interpretation of the deeper psychology of the murder – the text remains silent.

The lack of Moses's perspective is not only told but is also inscribed in the very texture of the novel, in its narrative form. The narrator presents the story world through character-reflectors ("focalizers" or "filters") in a considerable part of the narrative. That is, besides the outside perspective of the narrator, it is often characters in the story world that view events, think, make judgements and interpret feelings i.e., hold perspective. The characters that appear as reflectors are for example Mary, Dick, Charlie Slatter, Tony Marston etc., but a set of characters can also function as reflectors such as "white society" or "people in the district" or "white South Africa" etc. These reflectors are dominant in the

narrative to varying extents: for example, while Tony is the most important reflector in the first chapter, Mary is almost the sole reflector in the rest of the narrative –alternating, of course, with the very dominant outside, authoritative perspective of the narrator-commentator. The character that is very obviously missing from the list of perspective-bearers is Moses.

This simple fact in narrative form: the lack of one character as reflector that is, the essential lack of his perspective in the text, is, in itself, reflective of the ethical theme. To the *reader*, it reinforces the epistemological problem that is articulated by the Englishman and only deepens this dilemma; in fact, it gives a definitely negative answer to it. The narrator *cannot* indeed provide the *reader* with access to the mind of Moses, to the “other” of the story. To the *critic*, however, it means that the author *does not* want to give a final interpretation and explanation of the murder. The only thing the narrator tells us is the fact of Moses’s *human* affections, but as to what human affections they are, the reader is left to decide. The very fact that the text leaves the choice to the reader (s/he can decide what to believe) is itself the ethical ‘ars poetica’ of the novel. It also points to the readers’ own responsibilities, which are as much dependent on their singular encounter with the literary text, as Tony’s responsibility would have been upon his encounter with Moses. Thus, the novel creates an ethical moment: it interrupts the reader’s world but it also leaves space for him/her to give an individual response to it, and take on his/her responsibilities in its singularity.

The understanding of Lessing’s ethics is thus two-fold: it consists, first, of an understanding of the ethical theme by the *reader* and, second, of a reflection on this understanding the ethics of the author by the *critic*. Lessing’s ethics is thus only meaningful in the dynamics of the human relationship, in the light of which responsibility can be assumed. Similarly as in Levinas, responsibility is not only temporarily called for when in an

actual interaction with the other, but is always already a grounding modality of one's life. Lessing's ethics adds to Levinasian insights in that it states the importance of taking responsibility for oneself, which is a necessary precondition of taking responsibility for the other. This is also why responsibility, will, and agency are closely related in the novel's vocabulary, and why Mary's lack of will and agency in her individual life necessarily results in her failure in a human relationship. The novel's ethics as it relates to the real reader is understood and is also made manifest in the fact that it leaves interpretation open and invites or compels the reader to give his own singular answer to it.

The final participant who is implicated in the narrative situation but whose responsibility is yet unaccounted for is the narrator's and by extension of the author's. As it follows from the narrator's own self-positioning (with the general pronouns) as distinct from the ideological community of colonial society but identical with that of the outsider reader, the narrator is similarly implicated in the ethical situation it describes. Firstly, one may ask, how is the narrator exempt from the oppressive circumstances that affect Tony but leave the narrator intact and apparently so clear-sighted? How would the narrator be different from Tony in the hopeless situation which he is in, and in which he is claimed to be responsible by the narrator? The answer to the first question is simply that the author created them this way – because both Tony and the narrator are creations of the author. The second question is answered indirectly, by the very fact of the narration, which is the manifesto of the narrator's responsibility. Even if it cannot explain the enigma, the story initiates a dialogue and interrupts the discourse of colonial society. In other words, the author, who creates the narrator and the text, interrupts the ongoing discourse of western literature and thinking by way of joining this discourse and interrupting it. Lessing's very literal but also metaphorical pivot is *TGS*'s epigraph, a quotation from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

In this decayed hole among the mountains

In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing  
 Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel  
 There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.  
 It has no windows, and the door swings,  
 Dry bones can harm no one.  
 Only a cock stood on the rooftree  
 Co co rico, co co rico  
 In a flash of lightening. Then a damp gust  
 Bringing rain

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves  
 Waited for rain, while the black clouds  
 Gathered far distant, over Himavant.  
 The jungle crouched, humped in silence.  
 Then spoke the thunder

The landscape this excerpt from *The Waste Land* describes is similar to the climatic vision of the novel's closing chapter. Mary, in a sinister anticipation of the landscape after her death, already sees the decayed vision of the farm, "nothing left, the bush grown over" everything (196). The creak creaking, the thunder lightening, the anticipated purifying rain are moments of Mary's last day and last encounter with Moses; these are also parts of the landscape of Eliot's famous text. Reading the novel next to the epigraph is like catching a glimpse of a long-forgotten story in the flash of lighting. Fitting her vision to Eliot's, Lessing interrupts but also connects her text to the tradition, and weaves her "saying" into the "said" of western literary discourse.

## 5 Conclusion

In summary, I analysed Doris Lessing's first literary novel *The Grass Is Singing*. My initial approach was to explore the most important thematic elements of the novel, many of which have also already been discussed in criticism. However, I found that each of the themes was overshadowed by or gained significance with relevance to the novel's major ethical subject. Although the novel's central motif is the murder mystery about Mary and Moses, which is a tragedy that springs from a human relationship in the South African colonial predicament, the most problematic part of the ethical theme came across to me through the dilemma of another (less central) characters' situation. The dilemma Tony's character demonstrated was whether it was possible to take ethical action, if one lacked the necessary knowledge of the situation. In other words, how Tony could be implicated as having the greatest responsibility when his knowledgeable of the situation was essentially limited.

Besides, I also noted that the dilemma of the content level was essentially interwoven with the intricacies of the novel's narrative structure. Therefore, analysis in this present work went along two axes which were correlative and interactive: an ethical aspect and a narrative aspect. The ethical dilemma pointed to a problem that, I found, was not only specific of this novel but was also discussed in 20<sup>th</sup> century western philosophy, most importantly by Emmanuel Levinas. The question whether the ethical can come *before* knowledge or epistemology, is the central concern of Levinas's philosophy. In order to merit critical insights but also to stay relevant to my original question, I discussed only the part of Levinas's philosophy that investigated ethical signification in language in his second major work, *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence*. Relating the "saying's" interruption of the "said" to the structuration of narrative content (thus, correlating the ethical and narrative aspect), I concluded a narrative method that was understood in the framework of Levinasian

ethics. In this framework I analysed the narrative situation (narrative levels, narrative perspective) from which it followed that I separate the two cognitive functions that were implied by the narrative and ethical framework and which also assisted in understanding the ethics of the novel in its complexity. The *critic* and the *reader* were used as core analytic tools in the subsequent analysis.

In the last chapter I revisited Tony's situation that initiated my original questions, and in the light of light of Levinas's ethics I rather focused on the narrator's role and ethical views that *put* Tony in the position of responsibility, in the first place. A close-reading of the narrator's commentary elucidated the central element of the author's first ethics which claimed that the only and ultimate ground of ethics was the human relationship (which Tony lacked with the natives and therefore was unable to answer his responsibility) – a very similar idea to the face-to-face encounter in Levinas. From these insights, the relationship of Mary and Moses as well as the causes of their tragedy became more plausible. Although it was not possible to tell the exact nature of their feelings, thoughts, etc. it was enough to state that they were "human." The text's ethics also necessarily implicated the responsibility of the reader and the author as the real-life participants of the narrative transaction. Lessing leaves the interpretation of Mary and Moses's relationship to the reader, as she finally does not give an explanation of the murder, in which another layer of her ethics becomes apparent, that is: ethical action is always singular and ethics, as such, only exist in the singular modality. The author's act of responsibility is manifest in the written text as an act of communication/ act of interruption which the reader is called for to answer in his/her own singular responsibility.

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