

GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 1 Explorations in creative reading and writing

Insert

The source that follows is:

Source A: 20th Century prose fiction

The Grass is Singing by Doris Lessing

An extract from the middle of a novel published in 1950

Please turn the page over to see the source

Source A

This extract is taken from the middle of a novel, set in Southern Africa in the 1940s. Mary has recently moved from town to a farm after marrying Dick, a poor farmer.

1 And then, suddenly, the heat became intolerable. Outside in the bush the cicadas
shrilled incessantly, and Mary's head ached; her limbs were heavy and tense. She
would get up and go into the bedroom, to examine her clothes, to see if there was
5 anything she could do: any bit of embroidery, or an alteration. With nothing to do,
she would wander on to the verandah* until at last her head began to swim, and she
6 had to go back to the house to get a glass of water.

7 As time passed, the heat became an obsession. Outside, there was a rough heap of
giant boulders, and she would watch the heat-waves beat up out of the hot stone,
where the heat lizards, vivid red and blue and emerald, darted over the rocks like
10 flames. Inside, she could not bear the sapping, undermining waves that beat down
from the iron roof. Even the usually active dogs used to lie all day on the verandah.
Mary could hear them panting softly, or whining with exasperation because of the
flies. She would lock them out of the house, and in the middle of the morning she
would tell a worker to carry a petrol tin full of lukewarm water into the bedroom, and,
15 having made sure he was out of the house, she stood in a basin on the brick floor,
pouring it over her. The scattering drops fell on the porous brick, which hissed with
17 dryness.

18 'When is it going to rain?' she asked Dick.

'Oh, not for another month yet,' he answered easily, but looking surprised at her
20 question. Surely she knew when the rains were likely to fall? She had been in the
country longer than he had. But it seemed to her that in the town there had been no
seasons, really, not as there were here. She had been out of the rhythm of cold and
heat and rain. It had been hot, it had rained, the cold weather had come – yes,
certainly; but it was something happening independently of her. Here, body and mind
25 were subservient to the slow movement of the seasons; she had never in her life
watched the implacable sky for signs of rain, as she did now, standing on the
verandah, and screwing up her eyes at the great massed white cloud, like blocks of
glittering crystal quartz sailing through the blue.

'The water is going very quickly,' said Dick, one day, frowning.

30 It was fetched twice a week from the bottom of the hill where the well was. Mary
would hear shouting and yelling, as if someone were in agonised pain, and going out
in front of the house, she watched the water-cart come through the trees, drawn by
two slow-moving beautiful oxen, straining their hindquarters up the slope.

35 'What are you using it for?' asked Dick. She told him. His face darkened, and he
looked at her in incredulous horror, as if she had committed a crime.

'What, wasting it like that?'

'I am not wasting it,' she said coldly. 'I am so hot I can't stand it. I want to cool
myself.'

40 Dick swallowed, trying to keep calm. 'Listen to me,' he said angrily, in a voice he had never before used to her. 'Listen to me! Every time I order the water-cart to fetch water for the house, it means a driver, and two workers, and two oxen off other work for a whole morning. It costs money to fetch water. And then you go and throw it away! Why don't you fill the bath with water and get into it, instead of wasting it and throwing it away each time?'

45 She was furious. This seemed the last straw. Here she was, living here uncomplainingly, suffering these hardships; and then she could not use a couple of gallons of water! She opened her mouth to shout at him, but before she could, he had become suddenly sorry because of the way he had spoken to her; and there was another of those little scenes which comforted and soothed her: he apologising,
50 blaming himself, and she forgiving him.

Glossary:

* verandah – an open, roofed area along the outside of a house.

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