

# Relative Truth in Briefing for a Descent into Hell from the Perspective of Foucault's "Power-Knowledge" Theory

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**Abstract:** Briefing for a Descent into Hell is one of Doris Lessing's lesser-attended science fiction novels, depicting the experiences of the protagonist, Charles, as he suffers a breakdown and is transported to oceans, deserted islands, and space in a dream world. In the novel, Lessing uses the experiences of the Charles to create three false truth for the reader, which fit in with Foucault's "power-knowledge" theory. Analyzing the texts through Foucault's "power-knowledge" lens provides insight into the impact of Lessing's plotting in this work on the conclusion of "Truth is not absolute", and deepens our understanding of Lessing's aspirations to dismantle traditional dualistic views of truth.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing; Briefing for a Descent into Hell; Relative truth; "Power-knowledge" theory

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## Introduction

Doris Lessing is considered as one of the best and foremost satirist, imaginary and controversial English writers since the twentieth century (Khatri 8). Her work is diverse, encompassing novels, poems, biographies, and plays; its subject matter is vast, covering almost all the major issues and trends of the 20th century (Wu 71). Among Lessing's works, her science fictions are research-worthy but are often overlooked. Doris Lessing herself once noted, "They are fables, spun out of what is happening today" (Schwarzkopf 107). Briefing for a Descent into Hell is one of Doris Lessing's lesser-attended science fiction novels. It is not a work of the caliber of The Four-Gated City, but it is an important work for the reader and doubtless for Doris Lessing's evolution as a writer (Bolling 552).

Briefing for a Descent into Hell depicts the experiences of the protagonist, Charles, as he suffers a breakdown and is transported to oceans, deserted islands, and space in a dream world. Lessing uses the experiences of the Charles to create three false truth for the reader, namely that man is subjective in education, that there is an absolute line between Psychopaths and Psychiatrists, and that there is justice in war, which fit in with Foucault's theory of "power-knowledge".

Foucault criticizes human subjectivity, argues that there is no absolute line between madness and civilization, and denies the progressive nature of history. Analyzing the texts through Foucault's "power-knowledge" lens provides insight into the impact of Lessing's plotting in this work on the conclusion of "Truth is not absolute", and deepens our understanding of Lessing's aspirations to dismantle traditional dualistic views of truth.

## 1. Three False Truths in Briefing for a Descent into Hell

There are three false truth in Lessing's work Briefing for a Descent into Hell, namely the subjectivity of human beings in education, the absolute boundary between psychopath and psychiatrists and the righteousness of war, which correspond to the three critiques under Foucault's theory of "power-knowledge".

### 1.1 The Subjectivity of Human Beings in Education

In the letter one character, Rosemary sent to protagonist Charles, Lessing constructs a false truth that individuals possess subjectivity in education. Rosemary mentions that her students are envisioning "a weekend school with emphasis on unorthodox individual teaching" (Lessing 159), and her students are thrilled about this plan. They believe that they are gaining subjectivity in the process of establishing a new type of school, yet what the school aims to disseminate is still knowledge produced under social discourse. Rosemary appreciates and agrees with these parents' ideas of starting a new school, believing it can offer their children a

different kind of education than regular schools. She thus affirms the subjectivity of individuals in education, assuming that people's actions can be self-directed. Their self-awareness appears proactive.

She references Charles's speech about education and shares her views on the speeches she has heard before. She once agreed that "Out of this process come better schools, hospitals, a new society." (160) She feels that through the innovation of individual ideas and the dissemination of knowledge, people can find better ways to live and create a more beautiful society. In the letter, Rosemary also excerpts content from Charles's speech related to the education of the next generation. He states, when people talk about their children, "We speak of them as beings who could grow up into a race altogether superior to ourselves." (162) This indicates that people view schools as serving human subjectivity. Through school education, the younger generation could completely surpass their parents.

In this segment of Rosemary's letter, Lessing constructs such an illusion for us, that individuals in modern society possess subjectivity and can achieve self-subjectification through learning knowledge.

## **1.2 The Absolute Boundary Between Psychopaths and Psychiatrists**

In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Lessing also constructs a false truth that the boundary between madness and civilization is absolute. At the beginning of the work, doctors are depicted as beings of absolute rationality, using various medications and therapies to attempt to awaken patients from a "mad" state. In conversations between doctors and patients, Lessing also portrays a sober and objective image of doctors, while patients are "distressed, fatigued, anxious, deluded, hallucinated" (10). Through extensive descriptions like these, Lessing presents us with the false truth that there is an absolute boundary between madness and civilization: those who exalt science and behave according to societal norms are "civilized," while those whose behavior deviates from these "normal" individuals are "mad."

After experiencing a mental breakdown, Charles falls into a semi-dream state, afraid to fall asleep because of the environment in his dreams. Doctor Y says, "You must rest. We want you to sleep." (7) Nurses also continually try to get Charles to sleep. Later, Charles settle down in his dreams, and his behavior in the real world is characterized by excessive sleep. This abnormal sleep condition is defined by doctors as an illness requiring medication. Immersed in his thoughts, Charles reacts differently to the external world. He fantasizes about drifting in the Atlantic, constantly muttering "around and around and around..." (23) "In and out, out and in. In and out, out and in." (23) This sharply contrasts with the clear discourse of the doctor, creating a distinct boundary between madness and civilization. Through this, Lessing presents us with the false truth that there is an absolute boundary between madness and civilization.

## **1.3 The Righteousness of War**

In the hospital, at the request of medical staff, Charles recalls his early experiences in war. Charles, however, recounts the experience of a friend. first clarifies the nature of the war: "...we would no longer support Michailovitch or any other Nazi-oriented movement. We would offer the Partisans arms, men, equipment." (224), indicating his friend Miles was on the "right" side of the war.

Also, he said joining the Partisans made his friend very proud: "For me it was a powerfully emotional moment: I was joining the famed Partisans whose exploits people were talking of everywhere." (230) He also praises the simple heroism of the Partisans: "Their heroism had the simplicity of other days, a clean straightforwardness, like heroes outside Troy." (230) His friend Miles also commends the precious camaraderie among soldiers: "Nowhere but in these mountains, among these soldiers, these comrades, could it be possible for two people to meet, take each other's hand, call each other by name...take the Red Star as their bond, and forget the rest." (230) This elevates war to a noble ideal, where people from different nations come together for a lofty goal, forgetting everything else.

In Charles's recollection of his friend's wartime experiences, many beautiful elements are filled, such as the stunning natural landscapes of the Yugoslav mountains, warm camaraderie among soldiers, heart-stirring love, and beautiful military-civilian relationships. Charles's friend believed that with the Allies' aid to the Partisans, the war situation would develop in a favorable direction, and the Allies were also achieving the pursuit of justice. This presents us with the false truth that war can have righteousness and history has absolute progressiveness.

## **2. Three Disillusionment with False Truths in Briefing for a Descent into Hell**

In her novel *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* Lessing first describes three false truth, which are then shattered by three critiques based on Foucault's theory of "power-knowledge". Lessing therefore focuses on the breakdown of human subjectivity, the blurred boundaries between madness and civilization, and the picture of brutal war to shatter the false truth mentioned above.

## 2.1 The Disillusionment of Subjectivity in Education

Lessing mainly explores the destruction of subjectivity in the letters Rosemary writes to Charles. She initially mentions that after hearing Charles's speech that night, she came back as if she had been "slapped out of a daydream." (158) This reaction is because Charles shattered her long-held beliefs about human subjectivity. She starts to believe that sitting in a hall listening to various speeches and discussing social matters with others does not seem as promising as it appears. People seem to be actively discussing educational issues, but in reality, they have not avoided limitation. She states: "But what we had dreamed of, and then discussed, and had then planned, and then tried to put into action, had not taken the shape we had originally dreamed of. Not anywhere near it..." (161) Here, Lessing uses Rosemary's reflections to debunk the false truth of human subjectivity. People believe they can resist authority through a series of new knowledge, but in reality, what they can actually realize is far from their original conception; they do not possess subjectivity. Human subjectivity, like all forms of subjectivity, is a result of the power-knowledge relationship. The failure to reform schools signifies their nature; schools are not meant to achieve human subjectification through education but are a product of power.

Thus, Lessing aims to show us that both the treatment in hospitals and education in schools are merely products of power operations. We seem to achieve our own subjectivity but, in reality, cannot escape the control of "power."

## 2.2 The Blurred Boundary Between Psychopaths and Psychiatrists

In the later part of this novel, Lessing blurs the boundary between madness and civilization when describing mad and normal individuals. While doctors consider Charles "distressed, fatigued, anxious, deluded, hallucinated" (10), Lessing hints to us that Charles is simply in a state of active thought. Moreover, Charles hasn't entirely forgotten the facts of the real world; for example, he still remembers using a tape-recorder for "some damned silly lecture or other" (12); he mentions "bad sin" (10), showing he is still conscious of and actively reflecting on his mistakes in the real world. Towards the end of Charles's dreams, Lessing voices the purpose of Charles's life: "When the time comes, it will be our task to wake up those of us who have forgotten what they went for..." (132) This further illustrates that Charles is engaging in deep thought about himself, thoughts that, being non-mainstream, are branded as madness. This aligns with Foucault's theory: madness is merely the other side of modern civilization, not absolute.

Charles's understanding of being awake, or the standards of a "civilized" state, does not align with the doctor's, and it is not that Charles is absolutely mad. His other behaviors are not significantly different from those of "civilized" people in society; it is just that because his quest for truth stands in opposition to "civilization," he is defined as "mad." Hence, Lessing in her book blurs the boundary between "madness" and "civilization," debunking the false illusion of an absolute boundary between the two.

## 2.3 Harrowing Vistas of War

Charles, having participated in the Second World War during his youth, unlike his friends, found this period of his life to be an unforgettable source of anguish. In the throes of the conflict, Charles was deployed in North Africa and Italy, where he endured the daily grind of arduous tasks and the looming threat of death, to the extent that his comrades remarked, "...Charles' war must have been like a long tedious nightmare." (248) On the island in his dream, Charles also becomes an observer of the war between apes and rat-dogs. Their conflict is bloody and brutal, "...the dead lay in heaps, and the whole city smelled of blood." (82) This bloody conflict transformed the originally docile animals into bloodthirsty beings: "And now these animals, whose food was fruit and water, were gathered around piles of corpses and were tearing off lumps of hairy flesh and eating it." (82) This fantastical imagery in Charles's dream is, in fact, a reflection of real-world wars—where disagreements escalate into mutual hatred, from mere struggles to brutal slaughters.

Regarding the causes of human wars, Lessing writes: "...these creatures are...capable of slaughtering each other because of a slight difference in skin color or appearance." (129-131) It is humanity's endless xenophobia and prejudice that brew countless wars and tragedies. Lessing further elaborates on human xenophobia, shifting the focus from the ethical relations among people in war to a more general level, which indicates that history is not always progressive. Through the characters in her book, Lessing critiques this fact, showcasing her opposition to the illusion of historical progressiveness.

By constructing two starkly different narratives about war, Lessing also shatters the illusion of truth that history is absolutely rational.

## Conclusion

Through the above analysis, we can get an obvious conclusion that the truth is relative. Briefing for a Descent into Hell introduces the protagonist Charles' psychological journey and his experience in a mental hospital, from being blinded by false

truths to self-reflection and then to being blinded again. Obviously, people are easily lost in the various false truths constructed by modern society. If one wishes to truly understand what happens in modern society, it is essential to clear away the fog of false truths.

Lessing constructs three false truth, including human subjectivity, the boundary between madness and civilization, and the righteousness of war. To disprove these false truths, Lessing rewrites the role of human beings in education, vividly depicts asylum psychopaths and psychiatrists, and constructs two diametrically opposed depictions of war, in keeping with Foucault's "power-knowledge" theory.

The story ends with Charles's acceptance of electrotherapy, returning to "civilization" and normalcy, with his self-reflection and contemplation coming to an abrupt end. Lessing uses this tragedy to express sorrow for modern individuals often blinded by false absolute truths. By revealing and destroying the illusions of truth presented in the book, Lessing expresses a hope to break traditional dualistic views of truth, wishing for the voices and demands of non-mainstream and marginalized groups to be heard and understood.

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