

## MISCELLANY



# REREADING DORIS LESSING'S SHORT STORY "WINE" THROUGH THE LENSES OF SPACE, HISTORY AND TRAUMATIC MEMORIES\*

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## ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing has been called a writer "ahead of her time" (Drabble 2008; Maslen 1994) due to the kind of issues she explored in her narrative. The topic of war and its everlasting effects stand as an invisible thread that runs through her entire *oeuvre* to present the reader with the devastation brought about by the world wars not only in the physicality of cities and towns but also in the bodies and minds of the survivors. The historical events that marked the twentieth century broke people's morale and the memories of the horrors witnessed flooded back poisoning their lives. The present article draws on the interconnection between space, history, and trauma in Doris Lessing's short story "Wine" (1957). By exploring the enduring relationship between these three variables she creates her Poetics of Space in which she not only crosses spatiotemporal boundaries but also public and private spheres.

KEYWORDS: Space, Trauma, History, Liminality, Short Story.

## RELECTURA DEL CUENTO "VINO" DE DORIS LESSING A TRAVÉS DE LA ÓPTICA DEL ESPACIO, LA HISTORIA Y LOS RECUERDOS TRAUMÁTICOS

## RESUMEN

Doris Lessing ha sido calificada como una escritora "adelantada a su tiempo" (Drabble 2008; Maslen 1994) debido al tipo de temas que explora en su narrativa. El tema de la guerra y sus efectos imperecederos es un hilo invisible que recorre toda su obra con el objetivo de presentar al lector la devastación provocada por las guerras mundiales no sólo en el aspecto físico de las ciudades y pueblos, sino también en los cuerpos y las mentes de los supervivientes. Los acontecimientos históricos que marcaron el siglo veinte quebraron la moral de las personas y los recuerdos de los horrores presenciados envenenaron sus vidas. El presente artículo se basa en la interconexión entre el espacio, la historia y el trauma en el cuento "Vino" (1957) de Doris Lessing. Al explorar la relación duradera entre estas tres variables, la autora crea su propia Poética del Espacio, en la que no sólo cruza los límites espacio-temporales, sino también las esferas pública y privada.

PALABRAS CLAVE: espacio, trauma, historia, liminalidad, cuento.

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Space considered in isolation is an empty abstraction [but] the evidence of its existence stares us in the face: our senses and thoughts apprehend nothing else.  
(H. Lefebvre 1991, *The Production of Space* 8)

See the past in relation to the future, and so prepare the way for masterpieces.  
(V. Woolf 2008, *Selected Essays* 31)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing has been called a “transgressor,” a “border crosser,” and a writer “ahead of her time” (Drabble 2008; Maslen 1994, Ridout and Watkins 2009) due to the topics she explored in her narrative. Even before Spatial Studies entered Academia as a new field of research, she already used places/spaces to support her stance regarding the issues dealt with in her writing. The different spaces chosen to set her European stories show not only the cohesion and consistency that can be observed in the societal fabric depicted in the tales, where particular codes have to be deciphered to reach the solid core of its society but also the dialogue in which she engaged between the public and private domains. Her objective, in her entire *oeuvre*, was to foreground the damage caused by the world wars either in the physicality of cities/towns and human bodies or in the spirit of the people who, even though they were lucky to survive, had to deal with conflicting emotions. I contend that Lessing aimed to show how ordinary human beings handle an immediate past, reflecting the warlike conflicts that moved the foundations of society leaving permanent and painful traces on the people who had to endure the wars. To reach her objective, she used the past in the present to show how historical trauma, insofar as the accumulative emotional and psychological pain endured by individuals during their lives which can be passed through generations (LaCapra 1999, 722-724), takes different forms in the survivors, bringing to the fore old wounds, as well as to emphasise the depiction of spaces to reinforce the plots turning them, sometimes, into characters which silently convey the message rounding up the stories. Taking into account various theoretical insights regarding Spatial Studies in Literature developed by very well-known scholars, I will summarise their findings concerning the dyad place/space to provide the background to the text. This article concentrates on Lessing’s use of space, history, and traumatic memories in the short story “Wine” (1957) to explore the long-lasting relationship between the aforementioned variables and survivors of the armed conflicts.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, theatricality will be used concerning the transformation physical spaces undergo in which dramatic performances can take place.

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\* A brief summary of this paper was read online at the VI Doctoral Seminar of the University of Malaga, on June 22, 2021.

<sup>1</sup> All the subsequent references to the story under analysis are from Doris Lessing’s book *Stories* cited in the bibliography and quoted parenthetically in the text.



## 2. DEFINITION OF SPACE

Space, as the atmosphere that emerges within the boundaries of a place (Heidegger 2001, 152), assumes different forms according to the location where the action takes place. On the one hand, summarising spatial scholars' claims, space turns into place as soon as the human being captures its true essence. It can be utopian –ideal– or heterotopian –real– covering all the stages of human practices and can be considered representational insofar as the mental and lived space of inhabitants and users (Foucault 1984). It can be represented and organised in maps and drawings or can express the daily routine of its people. It can also be read and decoded and is endowed with palimpsestic and/or panoptic characteristics according to the circumstances and, on occasion, turns the narration into a hegemonic discourse (Lefebvre 1991). On the other hand, as academics have amply demonstrated, fictional space is created by language in different modalities: mythical, pragmatic, and abstract and literature is a significant contributor to its making (Yi-Fu Tuan, Lefebvre, Sizemore). Likewise, since human beings are historical-social-spatial people, they construct their own spatialities in an attempt to manage their existence and, in so doing, leave traces for future generations (Heidegger, Foucault, Lefebvre, Tuan, Virilio, de Certeau, and Soja). Regarding literary space and after scrutinising the works of several academics who have dealt with the topic, I have devised a conceptualisation that endows it with some characteristics, apart from the ones already mentioned, that may or may not be all present in a literary text. Firstly, space can be felicitous or hostile, like the one of warfare and its aftermath in which its population goes through a state of psychological trauma (Bachelard, Virilio, LaCapra, Felman, Caruth); it can also be internal or external and there is always a 'caesura' that allows the passage from one space to the other (Bachelard, Foucault, Yi-Fu Tuan, de Certeau). By the same token, space is created by people's behaviour either from the higher levels (government, institutions) or from the lower ones (common people) to maintain their place in society, giving life to a space of competence against power and in which social practices are performed (de Certeau, Lefebvre, Soja). Secondly, it can be imagined, lived, and perceived through past experiences and teachings that connect past and present (Lefebvre, Sizemore) and involves a broader view of gender, class, and ethnic groups (i.e., the "Other") that foregrounds the diversity of everyday life (Lefebvre, Soja, Cirstea). Finally, the human body is a space in itself insofar as a "physical space of flesh and bone" that is lived and where power can be exerted (Soja 1996, 114).

Doris Lessing's stories display the aforementioned palimpsestic quality since she embeds in the layers of the texts not only the passing of time with its marks but also the pleasant or traumatic experiences her characters have gone through, hence a connection between past and present is established. This particular feature renders her narrative realistic and her stories can be placed within the frame of "Free Short Story," but with some variations due to the considerable emphasis Lessing lays in the depiction of the concrete characters and their places in the world. Nick Bentley in his essay "Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*: An Experiment in Critical Fiction" (2009) states that Realism was the style in which she wrote her entire 1950s fiction:



“Realism carries for Lessing, during this period, a political imperative as well as a preferred aesthetic preference [...] it involves a surface/depth model in terms of the expression of the subjective personal experience set against an underlying objective socio-economic framework” (46, 47). Concerning Lessing’s works of the ’50s and ’60s, Elizabeth Maslen (1994) highlights the topic of the city (13-24) as the spatial location in which she set her novels and short stories that is a recurring image in those works. All the situations she had to live during those decades provided her with a broader and truer perspective from which she could observe the world and transport her views into her writing. To achieve her goal, she takes heed of the physical places where the stories are set along with the time of the action, the characters’ traits as well as their everyday actions, and represents that crucial moment in which her protagonists undergo the epiphany that will transform their lives.

## 2.1. PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND LIMINAL SPACES

Henri Lefebvre –one of the pioneers in Spatial Studies– draws on the fact that those spaces, public or private, where social groups gather “contain messages, embody functions, forms, and structures quite unconnected with discourse” (1991, 131). He also supports the notion that the levels of discourse do not only involve verbal utterances but sounds and gestures that also carry meaning and perform different functions in the structuring of space. The public and private spaces depicted in the story under analysis possess their form of communication since “[e]very discourse says something about a space” bringing about a particular “relationship between language and space” (Lefebvre 1991, 132). The scholar makes a distinction between “dominated space,” which stands for public/outside space characterised by the technology that not only transforms but also mediates in its construction, and “appropriated space,” the one that is modified “in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group” (165). Likewise, the urban geographer Ali Madanipour (2003) contends that “[t]he way space is subdivided and the relationship between the public and private spheres [...] are a mirror of social relations” and indicates “how society organizes itself,” not only affecting the mental states of individuals but also regulating the way they behave and overlaying the spaces where human societies live with “a long-lasting structure” (1). Bearing in mind the previous attempts at defining public and private spaces, I came to the conclusion that Doris Lessing has made use of most of the distinguishing features characteristic of these realms to depict the atmosphere in the different places the protagonists of her stories find themselves in. These spaces, sometimes oppressive, hostile, or welcoming, but always highly charged with strong feelings, trigger sudden flashes of emotions that make the characters confront their inner trauma caused by the armed conflicts and that has come to the fore at the time of the narration.<sup>2</sup> As Alice Ridout and Susan

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<sup>2</sup> The First and Second World Wars.



Watkins (2009) explain, the moment a person crosses a spatial border, he/she “is also crossing a temporal border and seeing a glimpse of the past” (38). This fact entails “the crossing of psychological and social barriers” and, simultaneously, makes an alteration in “the construction of identity in the human subject” (41) that is revealed in the disturbing memories the protagonists of the story revive in the café.

Within the broad categorization of public/private spaces, the in-between or liminal spaces are included. Liminality, a term coined by the German-born, French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep in his book *The Rites of Passage (Les rites de passage)* (1909) but reformulated by Victor Turner in his article “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*” (1964) opened its application to other fields of study.<sup>3</sup> It has been widely used in Spatial Studies to describe places that do not conform to only one established classification but that are in between two categories as in the case of public and private spaces. Hotels, restaurants, bars, and cafés, among other transitory spaces, are examples of liminality in space. These are public because people from all walks of life visit them, but once they enter a room or sit at a table, the environment becomes private. Its limits blur as a result of the acts that guests undertake within it. Apart from eating or drinking, the most usual activities at restaurants, pubs, and cafés are private talks, business closings, book reading, and so on, but in hotels, more personal activities are engaged, such as undressing, having a bath, sleeping, and so on.

## 2.2. TRAUMATIC SPACE

Space is created by societies and according to the events that permeate it the community will be joyful or traumatised. Bearing this essential concept in mind, it is noticeable how Michel de Certeau’s theory of spatial practices developed in his seminal book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) coincides with the tenets introduced by trauma academics since the traumatic places people live in are formed by “the presences of diverse absences” and “what can be seen designates what is no longer there” (108) but is yearned for. Places are haunted by the spirits of those who have gone, they are hidden in the ominous silence the community has retreated into, but also in the material things that form the social group and in the institutions that exert power. This leads me to believe, like Soja (1996), that feelings of emotion create an active space, and because of this, it elicits “spatial responses, individual and collective reactions to the ordered workings of power in perceived, conceived and lived spaces” (87), the triad formulated by Lefebvre (1991) by which space is produced.

The community is considered the social space *par excellence* where all types of human activities are undertaken so, “when the community is profoundly affected,

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<sup>3</sup> In 2015, Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann published *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing*, bringing together essays that focus on the liminality of and within the short story.



one can speak of a damaged body, [...] trauma can work its way into the fabric of community life” (LaCapra 1994, 188). Jeffrey Alexander (2004) defines societal cultural trauma as a collective response to horrific incidents that mark participants perpetually changing their identities “in fundamental and irrevocable ways” allowing them to “identify the existence and source of human suffering” and, thereby, letting them share their trauma memories (6). Traumatic memories do not disappear completely but are integrated into the new reality that is created but maintains the traces of the past. Michel Foucault (1988) also joins in this dialogue when he speaks of “encumbered space” (3) meaning the morally burdened environment where people have to lead their lives regardless of the circumstances, which may well describe the Parisian environment in which the story under analysis takes place.

### 3. STORY

#### 3.1. BACKGROUND

This very short story –only six pages– is set in Paris in the aftermath of the Second World War. It has been mostly analysed from the point of view of the differences between men and women regarding relationships, sexuality, and their positions in the world, while the present rereading is centred on spatial, historical, and traumatic perspectives. The protagonists are a nameless couple who seem to be visiting the French capital since they are staying at a hotel. They are “representatives of their time” in such a way that “they are anonymous” and can be named like “those in the old Morality Plays,” as Doris Lessing states regarding textual “voices in general” in the “Preface” to *The Golden Notebook* (2014, 7), meaning that what is going to be disclosed in the story may well coincide with the feelings of thousands of others who may have gone through similar experiences; hence the omission of the protagonists’ names, only the generic terms “man” and “woman” which echo “Everyman.” They also embody the disillusionment of the times since it seems that they are together only to avoid loneliness; no emotional feelings appear to be present between them given the fact that “they could look at each other without illusion, steady-eyed” (Lessing, *Stories*, 90). On the part of the woman, “the sadness deepened in her till she consciously resisted it” whereas on the man’s part “a flicker of cruelty” came and he made a derogatory comment about her face to which she sharply retorted “[y]ou need a whipping boy” (Lessing, *Stories* 90). The last expression is open to interpretation being the most plausible one that he has always been accustomed to laying the blame on others instead of acknowledging his own mistakes or wrongdoings. It can also be considered a proleptic tool used by the author to anticipate what will be revealed later in the story. After being awoken by the deafening sound of demonstrators who were shouting and singing slogans on the streets, the couple leaves the hotel and enters a café where they start reminiscing about their past. It is outstanding how in such a brief narrative Doris Lessing has managed to include different spatial and temporal levels in which history and trauma intertwine with the protagonists’ present and past realities. The first one, which corresponds with the writing time, is defined by the





city of Paris with its war aftermath and the café. This liminal space is central in the story given the fact that it triggers painful memories –around which the narrative is based – and what takes the reader to the second spatiotemporal level, the French countryside, and the Caribbean in the past.

### 3.2. GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE: PARIS

The geographical setting of the story is Paris. The time may well be some years after the end of the Second World War since there appear markers in the narrative that correspond with the period. According to W. Scott Haine (2000), demonstrations and strikes were a constant in France after the Second World War due to the hardships people were experiencing because of the severe restrictions imposed on food, the lack of workplaces, and the political unrest that aimed to overthrow the different governments that took power after the creation of the Fourth Republic that did not satisfy citizens' needs. Furthermore, there were also demonstrations against the wars in the French colonies of Indochina and Algeria from where soldiers had been recruited to fight a war they did not acknowledge as theirs (171-191). The painful recollections brought back by the city and, particularly, the café coincide with the interwar years which not only increased dramatically the severe trauma the population was going through but also witnessed the French government's complete and feeble inaction which resulted in a critical economic situation as well as in the emergence of political groups – socialists, communists, fascists– supported by the working class and the youths. Regarding the topic, Antonius Robben and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (2000) explain that “[t]he interwar years brought about massive trauma” examples of it were the “massacre of over one million Armenians in Turkey [...] Russian and German pogroms, the Civil war in Spain, the state-organised famines in the Ukraine, or the tens of millions of political prisoners rotting in Stalin's Gulag” (16). France did not escape the mayhem brought on by the aftermath of the First World War. Haine (2000) devotes chapter nine to giving an account of the period and he also highlights the fact that, due to the political unrest, on 6 February 1934, demonstrations and riots sparked which ended with the killing of fifteen demonstrators and the *Place de la Concorde* blocked. Therefore, it can be said that politics and economy had poisoned the physical space which was already destroyed by the violence inflicted on it by the armed conflict.

Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) states that even though the organization of human space is uniquely dependent on sight, the other senses act as complements in its understanding. Sound, in particular, “enlarges one's spatial awareness to include areas behind the head that cannot be seen.” Moreover, it “dramatizes spatial experience” (16). The noises that roused the protagonists from their sleep, as well as the agitation produced by the demonstrators, trigger sad memories that lead them to utter phrases like “and it still goes on”, and “[n]othing changes, everything always the same” (Lessing, *Stories* 91) referring to past times which may correspond to the period between the First and Second World Wars in Paris where several political groups used the streets to put forward their ideas. Chris Millington (2012) asserts



that after the First World War, veterans, who not only were “perceived as the living incarnation of order, moral authority, and the nation” but also as heroes “of the working class opposed to capitalist warmongers” formed political groups, the most important of which were “the centre-left *Union fédérale* (UF) and the conservative *Union nationale des combattants* (UNC)” which used to demonstrate on the streets (3). Hence, the landscape seems to be the same for the protagonists who, apparently, have been out of the French capital for some years but, taking a closer look, they find evidence regarding the changes undergone by the city.

The city of Paris is a palimpsestic space that has been built layer after layer, keeping in it joys and sorrows, improvements and destruction, faithfulness and betrayal, life and death which can be “read and interpreted” (Sizemore 1989, 28) in the signs and symbols scattered throughout the city. Furthermore, the Parisian space can be considered a theatre stage where a performance takes place as Christine Sizemore and Rosario Arias, two of the scholars who have analysed the space of the city as a theatre, state in their book and article respectively. I agree with Rosario Arias (2005) in that the city space is “an area of experience that can be observed through the eyes” (6), in this case, of the survivors/witnesses, and that the narrator is a mere “observer” who makes use of the “theatrical metaphor of life as a stage” (7, 8) where reality is conformed by countless layers of experience. Following this train of thought, it could be said that the street demonstrators act as a Greek chorus in the protagonists’ existential tragedy, given the fact that they provide the ambience and the awareness the couple needs to face everything they have lived in the past years; a process that may also require the summoning of some ghosts from earlier times.

### 3.3. PROJECTED SPACES

Barbara Piatti (2009, 185) defines projected space in fictional narratives as the one that characters, even though they are not present, long for, or dream of, and I add feel nostalgic or melancholy. Since human beings revisit felicitous or unhappy places through memories, it can be said that Doris Lessing has made use of this mental process to take the reader to different spatiotemporal levels of understanding, interweaving historical facts with traumatic moments that have marked the characters’ lives and which have turned them into the persons they are at the time of the story.

The first projected space that appears in the narration is an unidentified country, the woman’s homeland, as she remembers it after fifteen years. Through several markers left purposely by the author, the reader can identify it as a Caribbean one given the fact that France had many Caribbean colonies at the time of the story such as Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint-Barthélemy, Saint Martin, and French Guiana, among others. She sees herself “in blazing *tropical* moonlight, stretching her arms to a landscape that offered her nothing but silence” in complete opposition to the noises she is hearing in the present city of Paris (Lessing, *Stories*, italics added 91). In her memory, she pictures herself “running down a path where small stones glistened sharp underfoot, till at last she fell spent in a swath of glistening grass.” The idyllic landscape makes her envy “the girl ecstatic with moonlight, who run crazily



through the trees” (Lessing, *Stories* 91), and as a wave of nostalgia comes over her, reality slaps when she understands that this person does not exist anymore; her desires and dreams are gone forever and what remains, after fifteen years of estrangement, uprooting, violence, terror, and disappointment is a “tired compassion” (Lessing, *Stories*, italics added 91-92) for the human race.

The second projected space referred to is the French countryside where the male protagonist and his friends, as young students, used to work getting in fruit on a farm to earn some money. Haine (2000) comments that given the fact that the First World War had wreaked havoc among the industries in France, unemployment had soared dramatically to levels unheard of before. This situation pushed people to resort to the produce of family farms to have food to survive. Moreover, young students, among them the ones who had arrived in the country on a programme that started around 1923 and were short of money, used to be hired to pick vegetables or help with the harvest (143-169). The man evokes distant memories of the situation stating that “[n]one of us had any money, of course, and we used to stand on the pavements and beg lifts, and meet up again in some village.” Their work consisted of “gathering apples” but he remembers how the atmosphere was charged with excitement and rejoicing on their part whereas tension heightened between them and the employer, “the farmer shouting at us and swearing at us because we were making love more than working, and singing and drinking wine” (Lessing, *Stories*, italics added 91-93). With her mastery of the language, Doris Lessing has needed only one sentence to fuse two opposite spaces; on the one hand, the adult one with all the hardships they were suffering due to the recent war as well as the heavy responsibilities they had to bear; on the other, the youngsters’ space that, even though they seem to have been committed to the political reality of their time, they could not help but behave according to their age and getting out the most of their lives in those difficult circumstances. Two opposing spaces joined together by the adversities they had been faced with in the aftermath of the First World War symbolised by the wine they were drinking. This ancient beverage has generally been “associated with blood because of its colour” and the “idea of sacrifice” due to the “shedding of blood” (Chevallier & Ghreerbrant 1996, 113-116). Therefore, by mentioning the word ‘wine’ in the Spatio-temporal space of the French countryside in the interwar years, not only does Doris Lessing take the readers back in time to the First World War but also foreshadows the blood that was going to be spilt in the second. The scene in the barn, in which the male protagonist is pretending not to watch while a Jewish girl –Marie– gets naked in front of him (94), but he does, acts as a prolepsis of what might have happened to her had she stayed in her native Vienna when the Nazis took over her homeland, Austria<sup>4</sup>. Many years later, remembering the situation considering what happened in Europe during the years of terror, the male protagonist must have felt as if he had been one of the guardians at a concentration

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to bear in mind that the narration of the event in the barn is told from the man’s perspective, so it is understandable to think that it might be biased and that there are facts he is not revealing.



camp who stared at the Jewish women while they stripped naked and entered the gas chambers. Therefore, in the present space of the café, some years after the end of the second war and filled with disillusionment, he orders wine (Lessing, *Stories* 91) to the surprise of the woman but given the memories of past times that have flooded back, he must have done it to drink to the memory of all his beloved ones who died in both armed conflicts as well as an atonement for his own guilt.

Even though most of his memories in the story are related to his unkind and unfair behaviour towards a girl, his recollections open the scope for Lessing to introduce several historical indicators that round up the depiction of the temporal space. The first one involves the “youth movement[s]” (Lessing, *Stories* 93), among which two of the most important ones that emerged in France during the interwar years were the Young Communists (*Jeneusses communistes* [JC]) and the Young Christian Workers (*Jeneusse ouvrière chrétienne* [JOC])” (Millington 2012, 140) and the attitudes these youngsters adopted in which the key phrase “bourgeois morality” (Lessing, *Stories* 93) encodes a way of thinking and living among the French youth in the interwar years. Susan Whitney (2009) delves into the movements’ ideologies, their political and religious stances, and, more importantly, how the different genres –male and female– developed and worked cooperatively in a highly politicised context which proves Lessing’s awareness of the matter at the time of writing the story. The second indicator of the space in which people are living is the hidden reference to the second world war and Hitler’s movement. When the male protagonist mentions Marie, the girl he had ill-treated and the only character who has a name in the narration – a fact that is open to further onomastic analysis beyond the scope of this article–, he comments “[s]he was a doctor afterwards in Vienna. She managed to get out when the Nazis came in” (Lessing, *Stories* 94). This particular reference unveils the type of space these people lived in which was charged not only with ideology but also with hunger, terror, riots, confrontations, and murder due to the devastation brought about by the armed conflict. France was unable to recover during the interwar period which witnessed a succession of governments but none of them achieved what they had promised. The state of political turmoil was reflected not only in the people but also in the spaces inhabited and produced by them (Haine 2000, 143-169). Moreover, in a very subtle way, Doris Lessing has approached particular traumatic events for one of the characters –Marie– like the *Anschluss* or Annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany –which took place on 12 March 1938– that brought about the exodus of many Jewish nationals due to the implementation of the Nuremberg Laws. They were passed on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1935, for the “Protection of German Blood and German Honour” and banned marriages and extramarital intercourse between Germans and Jews. Furthermore, the Reich Citizenship Law stated that only Germans or people related by blood to a German would be eligible as citizens (Evans 2005, 544). Those who were not fortunate to leave the country had to endure their expulsion from the circles they were part of and their transportation to different concentration camps like Mauthausen –the principal one– located near the city of Linz. The Austrian Jewish were also sent to Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz, among others (Berenbaum 2018, n.p.). Instantaneously, the national space had been transformed into a hostile one that



forcibly expelled them from their homeland. Both protagonists are traumatised due to what they have had to endure in the last fifteen years. Trauma travels through space and time and the city of Paris as well as the café –where he is convinced to have been around in his youth– resurface disturbing memories they had tried to block for many years.

### 3.4. LIMINAL PACE: THE CAFÉ

As I mentioned earlier, Ridout & Watkins (2009) argue that crossing a spatial boundary means crossing a temporal border as well as being able to see “a glimpse of the past” (38). Not only is a person crossing “social barrier[s]” but also “psychological” ones (41) that make people relive painful or sad memories. Ali Madanipour (2003) contends that the barriers or boundaries that divide two spheres, public and private are “used to shape social relations and spatial arrangements” [...] rooted in particular social and historical contexts” (53) as well as “to separate the space owned and controlled by individuals from those beyond such control and under the control of the society as a whole” (56). Moreover, the awakening of disturbing and unhappy memories is sometimes associated with the appearance of ghosts from the past. Michel de Certeau (1988) states that “[t]here is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence” and that people have the choice of ‘invoking’ them or not summoning them at all (108). Inside the walls of the café, ghosts of the man’s past start to appear, compelling him to face his former actions.

Henri Lefebvre (1991) formulates the concept of ‘spatial economy’ and defines it as an implied concurrence of “non-violence which imposes reciprocity and communality of use” that values relations among individuals in certain places like cafes, restaurants, cinemas, shops, etc; in sum, most public places where established, and sometimes not-written, conventions must be observed to turn them into “trouble-free” spaces (56). Furthermore, regarding cafés, Doris Lessing has stated that they are excellent places to “observe real-life soap operas” where the customer acts as a spectator of “events that are not unfamiliar” (Lessing 1992, 97). She has used this liminal space in some of her stories like “The New Café” (1992) where the narrator witnesses the friendly interaction between two young girls with a local boy, and “Sparrows” (1992) in which a middle-aged couple discusses their daughter and eventually they come to an agreement after watching a baby sparrow, to mention just a few. In short, life itself is displayed before the observer’s eyes as if he/she were attending a theatrical performance.

As well as in the Parisian streets where demonstrators acting as a Greek chorus provide the environment for the action to take place, within the café walls another performance is being delivered. Christine Sizemore (1989) states that in liminal places like cafés, the observer can perceive “fragmentary views into others’ lives” (58). Only three actors are spotted on the café’s ‘stage,’ the waiter who has a minimal role that includes serving the customers against his will, and the couple. As the action starts to develop, breaking the ominous and deafening silence that reigned in the place, these people show their growing disillusionment with their



present reality as well as their “separateness” (Lessing, *Stories* 92). The man is described as having “a shape of violence that struggled on in the cycle of desire and rest, creation and achievement” whereas the woman is regarded as “a soft-staring never-closing eye, observing, always observing, with a tired compassion” (Lessing, *Stories* 92). In what could be considered a soliloquy on the part of the man in the play performed at the café, the invisible public becomes acquainted with a situation in the male protagonist’s past whose reminiscence has been brought about by the physical space and all the connotations it has for him. Suddenly, the character feels the urge to speak about it while the woman listens to him in awe after having been transported to her homeland as a vital resource to overcome her unutterable sadness. Without being prompted by any particular question or conversation he pronounces the phrase “I remember” (91) and the recollection starts to flow.<sup>5</sup> The situation is like a one-act play in which the plot is constructed around the man’s memory which unfolds their own drama. The space on the premises has turned traumatic since the couple’s innermost and distressing feelings have captured its ambience. The pain and suffering of the past decade, along with the trauma inherited from his familial circle, may have caused his inner compulsion to speak and, in so doing, release the pain he had been concealing for years.

In the story, the café is described, firstly, as a “glass-walled space that was thrust forward into the street” (Lessing, *Stories* 90). Therefore, from the beginning of the narration, and considering Lefebvre’s “relationship between language and space” (1991, 132), the reader can visualise the place as if forming part of the public realm of the pavement and street. However, it is retracted, separated from it by a barrier, not a brick barrier that prevents people from seeing or hearing what is taking place on the other side but a glass one that allows customers to feel inside and outside simultaneously as members of a mass or detached from it in a role of mere observers. Secondly, even though the nearby streets had been overcrowded with demonstrators whose noises “absorbed the din of Paris traffic” (Lessing, *Stories* 90), the café was empty. This concrete situation creates a particular atmosphere in which the protagonists - disillusioned and detached from each other - have to deal with the memories rekindled by the café and its surroundings. On the one hand, the male protagonist’s phrase “I remember” opens a spatiotemporal gap in which the present reality triggers past memories. He utters those words while looking intently and steadily at the faraway protesters “with a nostalgic face” (Lessing, *Stories* 91). He is transported to another time and space where, as a member of a youth movement, he had also demonstrated on the streets with his friends. Looking at it from his adult perspective, it was to no avail given the fact that even though France was among the victorious after the Second World War, the suffering had exceeded the benefits, and what was left in the youngsters who believed in what they were doing was a bittersweet melancholy. On the other hand, the woman, inferring the happiness the

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<sup>5</sup> This phrase is repeated three times in the story, with the connotations attached, once on page 91 and twice on page 92.





upcoming spring will bring, rejects the thought and sticks to “the static sadness” that “welled up in her, catching her throat” (Lessing, *Stories* 91) preventing her from uttering any word, only visual memories of her homeland populated her head.

The café where the male character met with his friends-comrades and the streets he used to wander have changed over the years. His recollections vary completely from what he has before his eyes and he blames the places for the wave of nostalgia and melancholy that has come over him,

It must have been this street. Perhaps this café—only they change so. When I went back yesterday to see the place where I came every summer, it was a *pâtisserie*, and the woman had forgotten me. There was a whole crowd of us—we used to go around together [...] There were recognised places for contacts: people coming from Vienna or Prague, or wherever it was, knew the places—it couldn't be this café unless they've smartened it up (Lessing, *Stories*, italics in the original 92).

The previous reference to actual places merges with the troubled times he not only witnessed but was part of. Doris Lessing has included words like “contacts” and names of places such as “Vienna” and “Prague” to round up the description of a particular atmosphere where the considerable risk the Nazi ideology posed not only to the Jewish nationals of Austria and Czechoslovakia but also on the French Jews is taken into consideration. By including these words in the narration, she has expanded the scope of it opening a space for the political terror Europe started to be filled with in the interwar years and which grew exponentially during the Second World War. The memories these places have triggered on the male protagonist not only prevent him from being able to recount them fluently but also make the woman look for something beyond the boundaries of the café “[h]e paused again, and again his face was twisted with nostalgia and involuntarily *she glanced over her shoulder down the street*” (Lessing, *Stories*, italics added 92). While he attempts to put his recollections into words, the woman looks outside as if waiting for the ghosts of his past to appear.

### 3.5. TRAUMATIC MEMORIES

According to a study carried out by the French physician, philosopher, and psychotherapist Pierre Janet in 1889—who was also considered to be one of the founders of Psychology—traumatic memories consist of “images, sensations, affective and behavioural states that are invariable and do not change over time.” He adds that these memories are “highly state-dependent and cannot be evoked at will,” however, they are elicited “in special circumstances” (van der Kolk 1995, 520-521). His description of traumatic memories includes the belatedness in retelling the event as well as their inflexibility and variability which renders the act of remembering into a “solitary activity. Moreover, they are “evoked under particular conditions which are reminiscent of the original” (van der Kolk 1991, 431). These statements are in accordance with what happens with the male protagonist's memory triggered



by the Parisian environment in general and the café in particular. In his case, it must have been his recollections of having spent time with his friends at that exact place that provoked the reconstruction of events regarding Marie. He retrieves a memory that he assumes had long been forgotten but it coincides with what Bessel van der Kolk (1995) categorises as traumatic amnesia in which “recall is triggered by exposure to sensory or affective stimuli that match sensory or affective elements associated with the trauma” (509) in coincidence with Janet’s postulates. Following this train of thought, Dominick LaCapra (1999) contends that to work through a “blameworthy activity” which may include “damages inflicted by victims on other victims –like the man in the story and Marie– an explicit acknowledgement of the situation is required (696, 697). In the narration, while he describes the event to the woman, he is reliving –acting out– an episode of his past, hence the necessity of distinguishing between the former experience and the current one to be able to look into the future (LaCapra 1999, 699). Even though the situation seemed not to be traumatic at the moment of occurrence, in the man’s mind it has been included with all the tragic circumstances prior to and subsequent that he went through and that shook the foundations of his position in the world. This concurs with van der Kolk’s assertion that recollections of traumatic episodes “appear to get fixed in the mind, unaltered by the passage of time” (1995, 508). The café, acting as a character in the story, caused the memories to be retrieved allowing the man to put them into words showing the powerful force exerted by the space on the protagonists. On the other hand, the woman’s memory of her homeland is prompted by the noticeable signs of the upcoming spring in which “the trees would be vivid green; the sun would pour down heat; the people would be brown, laughing, bare-limbed” (91), an image that she associates with the greenness and heat of her Caribbean environment, and differs from that of the man’s in that it is accessed spontaneously. Her trauma seems to be different from his in such a way that the recollection of her past is not a painful but a felicitous one of a bygone time in which the Caribbean space of her childhood brings images of her glowing with happiness. The subsequent, dramatic events she must have witnessed have traumatised her but her response to the stimulus produced by the Parisian atmosphere, not the café where she had never been before, is to transport herself to the place in which she was blissful. But, as they have grown so much apart, she is unable to share her memories with her partner and decides to remain silent (Lessing, *Stories* 91). She is, in LaCapra’s terms, “the secondary witness [...] who resists full identification and the dubious appropriation of the status of victim through vicarious or surrogate victimage” (1999, 717) given the fact that the man’s traumatic event took place in a time in which she was not part of his life. The scholar also speaks about “empathic unsettlement” which stands for how listeners address the victim’s problems by putting themselves in the other’s position without taking their place (1999, 723). The woman must be enduring a trauma of her own which readers can only infer from the subtle hints the author included in the narration. Moreover, it is increased by the man’s memory which exerted a profound impact on her to such an extent that “tears were pouring down her face” (95), perhaps bringing back recollections of old humiliations she was subjected to in her past. Her silence allows the man to take hold of the space of the café and start the confession of the





traumatic memory that seems to overwhelm him and which, according to Van der Kolk and Van der Hart (1991), “need[s] to be integrated with existing mental schemes” to “be transformed into narrative language” (447). To succeed he will need to join areas of experience – his past and his present– to achieve the existential unity indispensable for coming to terms with the guilt that is tormenting him since the moment he set foot in the Parisian space. Nevertheless, in the end, readers do not get a clear idea whether the man has worked through his traumatic memory since he humorously states “Darling, it’s not my fault; it just isn’t my fault” (95) or, in his recollection, he was just blaming the girl –as a “whipping boy”– for having put herself in such a position which caused his traumatic memory later on.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To conclude this rereading of Doris Lessing’s short story, it is necessary to bear in mind some important concepts regarding space, trauma, and history that form the core of almost her entire *oeuvre*. First, the dyad place/space acquires considerable significance in the light of Spatial Studies since, in her narrative, she goes beyond the physical environment where the actions take place, and having depicted it, she pays heed to the atmosphere generated by the characters insofar as historical-social-spatial people who create their spatialities. On the one hand, the differentiation between public and private spaces brings to the fore the fact that they not only concretely represent structures, functions, and forms but also convey messages and include the gestures and sounds, which also bear meaning, by which the space is structured. Moreover, within its categorization, another place stands out: the liminal space where an overlapping of functions is present because of its characteristic of an in-between place. On the other hand, the dyad place/space can be labelled as traumatic when the individuals and the communities have undergone shocking events that have moved the foundations of their society and are noticeable in the diverse social groups. What is more, their memories of the incidents are incorporated into their new reality producing a disturbance in their minds which remains unaltered throughout the years and that requires a straightforward acceptance to work it through. Furthermore, Doris Lessing has included history in the narration to devise the spatiotemporal environment in which she wants her characters to interact to show how historical events exert power in people’s lives. By leaving precise markers and mentioning facts, she has opened a historical realm before her readers to give credibility to the narration. In so doing, the space not only turns into a “stage” to demonstrate how human beings become actors in a play they have not written but in which they have to perform faultlessly in order to survive but also a character whose role provides the ambience and awareness people need to face their existential tragedy.

In the end, the roles of space, history, and trauma in the story are decisive in the construction of the narration to present the readers with different perspectives from which to approach the devastation brought about by the armed conflicts and, more importantly, to recognise their own misfortunes in the situations undergone



by the characters to discover their own relationship with the space that surrounds them. All in all, when reading Doris Lessing's narrative, the reader discovers that what appears on the surface is incomplete; there is more that can only be interpreted by lifting the hidden layers that will lead to a thorough comprehension of the message the writer wants to convey by devising a particular plot and constructing distinct characters in time and space. By crossing spatiotemporal boundaries as well as public and private spheres not only does Doris Lessing enter a new realm of exploration but she also generates her Poetics of Space.

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