

# Reading Doris Lessing's Short Story "England vs England" through the Lenses of Space, Trauma, and History

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**Abstract:**

Past armed conflicts and their aftermaths left everlasting traces hidden in the physical places as well as in the spaces generated by the survivors. The present article examines the treatment of traumatic spaces in the British author Doris Lessing's short story "England vs England" (1963) set in the years following the end of the Second World War. Even though Lessing's works have been studied from different perspectives—as the abundant scholarship shows—the poetics of space in her short stories set in European places other than London has not been widely analysed. This paper argues that the immediate past is present in Lessing's literature embedded in the spaces where the characters lead their everyday lives. The primary corpus includes the story under analysis and is supported by studies by scholars who have extensively researched the subjects of space and trauma and of literary critics who have examined the use of spatiality in Lessing's *oeuvre*. Analysing the traumatic spaces of post-war Europe in the narration, firstly, gives visibility to a narrative that seems to have been overlooked by the critics and, secondly, allows the study of its spatiality in its physical, psychological, and sociohistorical division. Scrutinising the physical places of the story and the atmosphere generated in them, I have found that they represent the trauma endured by the countless anonymous people who suffered the horrors of the wars and their devastating consequences and who have only been made visible by the author's skilled pen. In so doing my contribution adds another perspective to approaching the study of Doris Lessing.

**Keywords:** Space; trauma; literature; short story; war

*The old class struggle between bourgeoisie and aristocracy produced  
a space where the signs of that struggle are still manifest.*

Henri Lefebvre (1984, 57)

The short story “England vs England”, first published in 1963 in the collection *A Man and Two Women*, illustrates the fact that spaces acquire a traumatic charge due to historical events and political decisions whose ramifications reach younger generations. The present article focuses on the way in which Doris Lessing has depicted the spaces and explores the two-way connection between space and the individual with the objective of giving visibility to a story, mostly overlooked by critics, in a tripartite dialectic. The analysis is based on the works of, to mention just a few, Henri Lefebvre (1984), Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), Edward Soja (1996) and Soshana Felman, Dori Laub (1992), Cathy Carruth (1995) as well as Dominick LaCapra (1999), who have extensively studied space and trauma. The analysis also relies on the works of literary critics such as Christine Sizemore (1989), Arina Cirstea (2015) and Carmen García Navarro (2021) whose findings on Lessing’s use of space in her *oeuvre* also enrich this article. I explore the significant, defining, and far-reaching influence that spatiality exerts on individuals as well as the effects human subjectivity produces on space. In “England vs England,” Lessing centres the protagonist’s predicament not only on a particular spatiality which is depicted in very well-delineated physical spaces - that open a wide scope of exploration - but also on the atmosphere generated within them.

Doris Lessing’s short fiction set in European settings other than London also includes narrations such as “The Woman” (1956), the *novella* “The Eye of God in Paradise” (1957), “Wine” (1957), “Our Friend Judith” (1960) and “A Man and Two Women” (1963), to mention just a few. Even though their subject matters differ, they present a two-fold similarity: they are linked by the invisible thread of post-war Europe and have not been analysed from the spatial point of view as her African stories and novels have been. Margaret Drabble in the Introduction to *Stories* (2008) comments that “[t]he legacy of two world wars” weigh heavily on Lessing; therefore “in her stories we may find many signs of her own response to the violence of the twentieth century” (xiv). In my view, one of Lessing’s strategies has been to make that violence visible through the spaces where her characters interact.

All the fiction we read is not only a compendium of characters, situations, actions, and plots but also of the spaces where all the aforementioned develop. Barbara Piatti (2009) comments that “the topic of space and place in literature [has been] rather neglected” for years, although she also notes that in recent decades the term ‘spatial turn’, coined by Edward Soja in his book *Postmodern Geographies*

(1989) insofar as a replacement of the "paradigm of time with one of space" (Soja, 2), has been given "new academic attention" (179). Physical locations act as frames within which particular atmospheres generate giving rise to a distinct spatiality. Martin Heidegger (1951), considering the dyad place/space, concluded that they are not terms that exclude one another, on the contrary, the latter derives from the former since 'place' stands for the physical entity where human beings interact and 'space' for the atmosphere that emerges within the boundaries of a particular site (152). He contends that while 'place' is the physical setting 'space', as an abstract construct, is created and it can be assumed that this creation can take different forms: social, sociological, religious, moral, economic, and the like, according to the location and its characteristics; a definition endorsed by the aforementioned specialists on space. Furthermore, Kathleen Kirby (1996), sheds light on the topic claiming that the construction of a particular atmosphere within the limits of a physical place is a two-way process, "it is not only the space that defines the subject, but the subject that defines space. The subject is an effect of space, but the space that effects it is subjective" (quoted in Downey 2016, 11). These latter statements highlight the fact that there is a mutual dependence between place, space, and human beings since within the limits of a physical place a specific atmosphere is created which conditions its inhabitants but, at the same time, the occupants contribute to the construction of that distinct space.

Regarding traumatic spaces - namely spaces where emotionally disturbing events occurred, that stay etched to the minds of the collective in a two-way process of defining and effecting human subjectivity in space, trauma scholars argue that they are represented in literature through the acting out and working through (Freud 1914) of the protagonists. Their "historical experience" (Caruth 1995) is given prominence in that they are "witnesses to the crisis within history" (Felman and Laub 1992) in which the concept of "empathic settlement" (LaCapra 1999) - understood as the receptiveness to the victims' suffering and their spatial projection - stands as a mediator. Space, as a living and active entity created by the people who inhabit a particular place, is produced within the geographical boundaries and in the atmosphere created by the participants, in the bodies of its people, and in the texts that narrate the events. In so doing, the literary text, a space in itself, becomes the memory site that bears witness to the sufferings of the community, but also prevents the events from being forgotten and thus positions the reader in time and space. Doris Lessing, as Robin Visel (2010) states, "believes in the power of literature to change the world" (63), and she, therefore, uses her narratives as weapons to open the readers' eyes to the unbearable suffering brought about by the past wars. Thus, literature assumes a crucial and two-fold role that, firstly, preserves the past trauma in individuals and communities and, secondly, addresses the failures of

the theories formulated on the issue from different fields in that, sometimes, people's reactions to traumatic events do not meet the parameters established by the experts on the field. Moreover, literature creates a fictional space for readers to discover their vulnerabilities. Antonius Robben and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (2000) argue that "[m]assive trauma inflicted deliberately on large groups of people by other human beings became a major psychiatric concern [. . .] during [the First World War]" (13) as well as in later years given the fact that World War II and the holocaust, in particular, have been explored from the traumatic point of view by many scholars such as those mentioned earlier. Turning specifically to the trauma experienced by coal miners, an issue of utmost importance for this article, Robben and Suarez-Orozco (2000) claim that "[t]raumatic neuroses, the so-called fright neuroses (*schreckneurosen*) had been studied at the beginning of the twentieth century but they concerned only small numbers of survivors of mining accidents" (13)) overtly disregarding the vast majority of accidents and their consequent trauma experienced by not only the people directly involved but also their families. All these tragedies create a distinct atmosphere, a space, charged with a gamut of overwhelming and destructive emotions which were hidden in order to survive but which fill the space's air, poisoning the area and its inhabitants. Therefore, as Laurie Vickroy (2002) states "[l]egacies of trauma can be passed on over to generations as children absorb the effects of trauma from parents" (58) a concept that E. Ann Kaplan (2005) and Roger Luckhurst (2008) define as 'vicarious traumatization', generating a vicious circle. Vickroy quotes the Israeli training analyst Ilany Kogan's study on the topic where she explains that "[t]he way in which events in the parents' lives were lived out often demonstrated that not only the content but the style of trauma was re-enacted". Moreover, Kogan states that when these children go into the outside world their "character structure, defensive and adaptive styles as well as life choices often [show] the disintegrative effect of a traumatic event that could not be adequately known, understood and remembered" (quoted in Vickroy, 2002, 58); hence the only solution for survivors, witnesses, and descendants lies in their acting out and later working through of the trauma suffered, acquired or inherited.

The story under study here is set in a small mining village in Yorkshire in the north of England. The central theme that runs through the narration is the clash of cultures: the working class, vividly represented by the Yorkshire mining community, and the upper class portrayed by the milieu of the University of Oxford. Charlie Thornton, the protagonist who is from a family of miners, is leaving home again after having spent some time with his family due to a nervous breakdown suffered when studying at Oxford University. The construction of the narration is based on a threefold spatial categorisation - physical, projected, and liminal - the first of which can be subdivided into the larger category of Yorkshire

and the smaller ones of, the village and the house where the action takes place. The second involves the locations of Doncaster as well as Oxford University while the third represents the locus by which the spaces are united, the pub. There are two places - the house and the pub - which bear considerable relevance in the story since they stand as the only spaces where the protagonist can act without pretence. The history of the physical environment and the trauma passed through generations acquire immense significance within the story since they appear as underlying layers, not overtly addressed by the author, but hidden in the palimpsestic spatiality of the narration.

### Physical Space

The first spatial categorisation deals with physical settings in a work of fiction. Depending on the characteristics with which the author has endowed it, its description - whether detailed or brief - creates the mood that may influence the reader's response to the literary text. Yorkshire is the largest county in England and coal mining had been undertaken in the area since earlier times. It continued to be active until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in places such as Wakefield and Barnsley which is the most famous coal seam in the area. Coal was indispensable for the life led in Britain since "transport power and related industries were still heavily reliant on coal. Even in the mid-60s British Rail was still running on coal power (steam)" (Pettinger 2006, n.p.). The end of the First World War, however, marked the onset of its decline and the Second accelerated its demise. This led to a new way of life that left the pits and their coal miners as remnants of a vanishing world and which had "significant traumatic effects on the social organization [of communities]" due to the addition of acute economic problems posed by the situation and which damaged their social identity (Alexander 2012, 2) and the spaces where they interacted.

In addition, Yorkshire played an important role in both wars, its production of coal proving decisive during and after the armed conflicts given the fact that it was essential to power means of transport like ships and trains as well as to generate electricity. Not only was the region attacked by German Zeppelins during the First World war (2/5/1916) (Lewis 2016, n.p.) as well as experiencing Luftwaffe air raids in the course of the Second (29/4/1942) (Gordon 2017, n.p.) and becoming a bomb-ravaged post-war place, but also a great number of miners gave their lives or were badly injured either in the theatres of war or in the collieries because they were considered fit and qualified workers who were often put in charge of maintaining the trenches and building tunnels. Their traumatic experience must have been passed into the community they returned to, producing a major cultural trauma since they harbour the feeling of "[having]

been subjected to a horrendous event that [left] indelible marks [on them] marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 2012, 6). As such, the miners who returned from the war presented themselves as different people, and the sufferings they underwent on the battlefields, together with the hardships endured by the villagers who stayed at home, created a collective trauma since the basic tissues of society had been damaged rendering the space into a traumatised one.

The village in the story is nameless but, taking into consideration some markers left purposefully by the author, it might be Armthorpe<sup>1</sup> which was approximately thirty minutes bus ride from Doncaster, a city that is mentioned in the text: “Yes, off you go to Doncaster [...] [i]t was half an hour on the bus” (Lessing 2008, 297). Moreover, the protagonist’s father is presented as chair of the miners’ union: “[t]he old miner had been union secretary, was now chairman, and had spent his working life as miners’ representative in a dozen capacities” (Lessing 2008, 295), important information to deduce the setting of the narration since the National Union of Mineworkers headquarters is in Barnsley, another mining town in the region. The village is described as having been built in the thirties, presumably after the heavy bombardment by German Zeppelins in World War I, by the company that owned the collieries, but it is no longer their proprietor due to the nationalisation of the coal mining industry in 1947. Doris Lessing opens a window onto the past of coal mining towns when Charlie’s father tells his children what the village was like in his times: “[y]ou’ve never seen what a miners’ town can be like. You couldn’t even imagine the conditions. Slums, that’s what they used to be” (Lessing 2008, 297). Emphasising her faithful stance on “the historical accuracy and emotional truth of fiction” (Visel 2010, 68), in only three sentences, Lessing brings to the fore a space from the past embedded in the palimpsestic spatiality of the new town in which run-down dwellings, poverty, illness, and death were the norm. The two hundred houses that make up the village are exactly alike, built on the same blueprint design (Lessing 2008, 296). From the protagonist’s point of view, what defines the village is its ugliness and the colours grey and black: “[t]hat morning he had stood on the front step and looked out on lines of *grey* stucco houses on either side of *grey* tarmac; on *grey* ugly lamp-posts and *greyish* hedges, and beyond to the *grey* minetip and the neat *black* diagram of the minehead” (Lessing 2008, 296 italics added). Reading between the lines, there is more to this description. For Charlie, the space is grey and black; there are no colours that give life to a place, therefore the existence of its inhabitants is in a state of unchanging. It is

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1 In *Walking in the Shade* (1997), Lessing comments about her visit to Armthorpe (*sic*) (pp. 62, 63).

as if the colour of the coal extracted from the womb of the earth has tainted the entire village. The spatial subworld where the miners perform their duties has made one with the village above, turning it into a space of eternal night, eternal death, where the ghosts of their ancestors intermingle with the new residents constantly reminding them of their ill-fated future. Charlie's father is still "on the coal face" (Lessing 2008, 297) meaning that he works in the underworld where the coal is cut out of the rock risking his life in terms of both accident and illness. Charlie and his siblings had "heard [their] father coughing through all the nights of [their] childhood (Lessing 2008, 297) the reason why the boys have avoided working at the pit since they could not tolerate either the spatial seclusion and invisibility the miners have to endure or the risk the work entails. George Orwell, in his essay "Down the Mine" provided a detailed and vivid account of what it was like to work in the depths of a coal mine, comparing it with the inferno: "[m]ost of the things one imagines in hell are in there – heat, noise, confusion, darkness, foul air and, above all, an unbearably cramped space" (Orwell 1937, n.p.)<sup>2</sup>. Just as the air of the space where they carry out their tasks is poisoned so is the atmosphere of the village; the black shadow of death is cast over it. The ambience of the village is presented as a toxic "mixture of anger, grief, and frustration" (Arnold 2018) not only for the miners but, and most importantly, for the new generations. Furthermore, Charlie hates his town to such an extent that he would like to demolish it: "[t]here's nothing in sight, not one object or building anywhere, that is beautiful. Everything is so ugly and mean and graceless that it should be bulldozed into the earth and out of the memory of man" (Lessing 2008, 296). For him, there is nothing that deserves to be rescued since there is only a post office, a library and "two miners' clubs for drinking" (Lessing 2008, 296). Jay Winter (2008) comments that in all European towns and villages there were war memorials built in prominent places for the people to grieve their dead (6), however, this village lacks just such an important site of memory and mourning so, in Elizabeth Maslen's (1994) words, they will "have to resurrect the sense of unity if they are to survive" (52) and heal the historically traumatised space created within its boundaries, an idea she reinforces in her article "Lessing's Witness Literature" (2018).

Regarding the library, Charlie comments that the only books it has are "romances and war stories" (Lessing 2008, 296), thus conforming to gendered preferences but highlighting the interest the World Wars still arouse in the people of the town since they are a constant presence in absence of bygone years and

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2 "Down the Mine" is chapter two of Orwell's book *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) in which he writes about the workers in Lancashire and Yorkshire who, even though they wanted to work, a vast majority could not do it because of the post-war unemployment.

relatives lost. Jörg Arnold (2018) also states that coal miners “embodied everything that had been left behind [. . .] in the ‘de-industrial revolution’ that had been underway since the 1960s” and that they were “living in a world that belonged to the past” (3, 4); therefore, Charlie’s familiar environment can be regarded as a ghost town which, despite still being populated, is gradually declining due to the dying off of economic activity and is bearing witness to the exodus of the new generations. The traumatic ambience is tangible both in the older inhabitants who have to remain and face the difficulties that lie ahead and in the younger ones who have to leave to seek a better future. In light of the situation and considering the circumstances, it is my contention that Lessing’s objective is to portray a traumatised community, a space, struggling desperately to not be wiped out and erased from the face of the earth. In the *novella* “The Eye of God in Paradise” (1957) Lessing approached spatiality from another perspective but with a similar motif. At first sight, the story appears to be set in a felicitous skiing village in Germany full of happiness and beauty but as soon as the protagonists start lifting its palimpsestic layers they are confronted with the devastation brought about by the Second World War intertwined with the American occupation, the ghosts from the past and the traumatic spaces that shape the physical place.

That said, in England vs England Charlie’s home environment emerges as an island within the village given the fact that it seems to have a future in himself and his siblings since it is “the only house with real books in it” if it had not been for this, he “wouldn’t be at Oxford” and he “wouldn’t have done well at school” (Lessing 2008, 295). In addition to this, the figure of his father as the man who is “better than anyone else in the village” (Lessing 2008, 295), despite his extreme commitment to the cause of the miners which resulted in the neglect of his children, may have acted as a catalyst for his decision to apply for the scholarship and pursue university studies. Through working in the mine’s underworld, the lowest spatial and social plane, he has catapulted his son to the highest one both physically and socially. Gaston Bachelard (2014) refers to the house as the quintessential “felicitous space” (19) due to the fact that it is not only the first universe of the human being but also the reservoir of memories and the space of happiness and intimacy. Home, as an abstract construct, stands as the archetypal safe and nourishing space whose creation falls to women while its physical, concrete counterpart, the house, is related to the masculine realm (Bachelard 2014, 88), but when both are merged it originates a sanctuary. Moreover, for Bachelard, inside and outside are both spaces that can be reversed by means of the door, the caesura, which stands as “an entire cosmos” (237) that can provide images of “hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect” (239) and which invites to cross into the mysterious, to pass from the already known to the unfamiliar and vice versa; to enter the realm of revelations.

The house is a recurring trope in Lessing's *oeuvre*. Robin Visel (2010) states that "the house/mother is Lessing's fulcrum" (59) which is corroborated in her depiction of houses in *The Four-Gated City* and *The Sweetest Dream* in which they are turned into characters in themselves. Charlie hates the village but loves his home, "as soon as he step[s] inside his kitchen he [is] received into warmth" (Lessing 2008, 296). He has been damaged by years of living within the university's alien environment which has produced his collapse due to the immense stress he has been under. He, therefore, decides to rush home in search of refuge to overcome his nervous breakdown. In the description of the village and its houses, the narrator stresses that life in miners' homes is lived in the "brightly lit" kitchens, "where great fires roared all day on the cheap coal" and whose doors "kept opening as the miners came in from the pit for their tea" (Lessing 2008, 296). Claire Langhamer (2005) states that "the one post-war trend that stands out above all the rest is the growing significance of the home" (341). The image of the house/home and, in particular, the kitchen as the site where comfort and safety are found has a direct connection with the image of the mother since this room has been traditionally regarded as the 'woman's place'. Furthermore, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) considers the house to be "at the centre of an astronomical spatial system" and as such, it becomes a "focal point of a cosmic structure" (149). It, therefore, stands as the cornerstone, the nucleus from which family members go out into the world or come back from it looking for refuge in that bubble they know will embrace them warmly. Following this line of thought, Clare Cooper (1974) states that the house not only "encloses space" but also excludes it (131). The former is represented in the interior that encompasses its dwellers and the latter by the exterior and everything that exists beyond the building itself. Moreover, she goes on to argue that the house mirrors the person's self in that the interior reflects how the occupants see themselves and the exterior what they choose to show to others (131), but its most important characteristic centres on its "symbolic maternal function" in response to the fears from the outside world (137). Carmen García Navarro (2021) asserts that homecoming means claiming one's "territoriality, both in physical terms and in terms of [the] relationship with [one's] mother" (69) which coincides with Charlie's decision. This notion, along with Bachelard's (2014) concept of the home as a special space built by women, finds justification in this story when Charlie seems to have returned to his mother's womb looking for a place of safety from which to find the love, nourishment, and protection he had been deprived of in the alien environment of the university. He feels fragile and vulnerable, therefore he has to return to his roots, and it is in the "maternal hearth" that he will be able to structure the world about him (Cooper 1974, 140-143) and find the strength and resilience he needs to deal with his final year at university.

Langhamer (2005) also claims with regard to the periods of war that at their height “women and men looked to ‘home’ as a centring value in their lives” since “the experience of war enhanced the significance of home” given that it “provided a counterpoint to and explanation of war itself” (343). It is my contention that ‘his’ home means just this for Charlie. The predicament he finds himself in has similarities to a war but albeit one between himself and the space of the university, since his desperate struggle for recognition at Oxford as a valuable human being despite the place he comes from has resulted in his nervous breakdown. He is going through an individual trauma which, as Jeffrey Alexander (2012) states, acts as “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defences so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively” (6), hence his collapse. Trauma scholars, like Robben and Suarez-Orozco (2000), highlight the “transgenerational transmission” of trauma “from parents to children to grandchildren” (4) a notion also supported by Carmen García Navarro (2021) who states that “historical violence [is] transmitted through generations” (59). So, it is possible that the yearning his miner ancestors, as non-military war workers sent overseas, expressed for their homes during the war has been transmitted to the new generations in such a way that Charlie, a child of violence himself born during the Second World War, is experiencing an identical emotion towards his home, the space where he can feel safe. But by dint of the door, the element that Bachelard considers to be the nexus between exterior and interior and, particularly, in the figure of the father, Charlie’s idyllic homely space is penetrated by what Henri Lefebvre (1984) calls “the relations of production” because the space of the mines is transported to the inner space of the house, generating an awkward synergy that annoys Charlie: “[t]he old man was not alone. Three men came into view behind him [...] they all came crowding into the little kitchen bringing with them the spirit of facetiousness that seemed to Charlie like his personal spiteful enemy, like a poltergeist always standing in wait somewhere behind his right shoulder” (Lessing 2008, 294). The ideal and peaceful space of the home is thus turned into a space of conflict, anxiety, and trauma since Charlie’s father spends his evenings “giving advice about pensions, claims, work rules, allowances, filling in forms; listening to tales of trouble” (Lessing 2008, 295). In sum, the dark and poisonous space of the mine has entered the sacred sanctuary of the home in such a way that outside and inside have been blended, subverting the private and public spheres. García Navarro (2021) stresses the fact that Lessing’s literature “evokes the sign and traces left by traumatic episodes in the lives of children and adolescents” (59), namely, what is brought into the family house, the domestic space of the home affects the behaviour of its members and shapes them into the people who will go into the world either as strong human beings or traumatised ones; hence Charlie’s reaction.

## Projected Space

The second spatial categorization involves projected spaces. Barbara Piatti (2009) states that to "map a fictional space" the text "has to be read and prepared carefully by breaking down the spatial structure into single elements and their respective functions" (185). Among them, the projected space stands out as the location where the characters are not present physically, but they remember or talk about to include them in the narration (185). Its function, therefore, is to enlarge the physical space by adding other locations that will not only enrich the plot but will facilitate a fuller understanding of the sequence of events in the story. "England vs England" presents two distinctive projected spaces: the town of Doncaster and the University of Oxford.

Doncaster stands as a felicitous space that contrasts sharply with Armthorpe because, at the time of the narration – the 60s -, it has already shown its potential as a big industrial and commercial city since it "inaugurated an industrial development scheme which has attracted new industries" like confectionary (Doncaster n.p.). This commercial growth makes a big difference between the two locations given the fact that while Armthorpe relies only on its coal mines and has an oppressive, hostile, and stifling atmosphere, as Charlie's description has shown, Doncaster is thriving, convivial, and welcoming due to the improvements carried out that have provided it with schools, colleges, water, gas, and electricity, together with open spaces, recreation grounds, hospitals, health services, clinics, and cinemas among other facilities and institutions. In the story, Charlie's father comments: "Yes, off you go to Doncaster, I suppose, dancing and the pictures -that's all you can think about" (Lessing 2008, 297) making reference to the impossibility of youngsters finding any type of entertainment in Armthorpe since the only amenities the village offers are the "miners' clubs for drinking" and television (Lessing 2008, 296). To distract themselves from the tedium and daily life problems they need to leave the area and go to Doncaster where they can interact and establish relationships with other people in order to foster their physical and emotional health which is, literally, at risk in their native village. By comparing the two towns, Lessing has given prominence to what they provide their dwellers: Doncaster, life, and Armthorpe, death.

In the same way that the house/home stands as a closed space that safeguards and protects its inhabitants from the outside world there also exist closed spaces that swallow them and can provoke adverse reactions from the dwellers. The University of Oxford is a space that may strike fear into the hearts of new students given the fact that it breathes knowledge, learning, team spirit, and leadership. The 'City of the Dreaming Spires' housed, and houses, the brightest minds of the world, the reason why a student like Charlie Thornton, from a working-class background,

may find the experience unnerving, disturbing and traumatic due to the unrelenting pressure he is put under. Due to the changes brought about by the Second World War, he had the possibility of attending a grammar school in Doncaster - there were no schools in Armthorpe as stated by him in his description of the village - and continuing his studies at Oxford due to the university scholarships that were awarded based on academic merits, however, he must have felt way behind his fellow undergraduates who have attended public schools.

Claire Sprague (1987) explains that in her depiction of some spaces Lessing uses the same claustrophobic trait found in 19<sup>th</sup>-century fiction written by women (183) which is confirmed in this story in her description of an oppressive atmosphere. The space of the university, its unique ambience, may have appeared aggressive and hostile to Charlie due to a combination of several factors: the sense of being unfit for the environment, his strong regional accent that may have sounded awkward for the upper-class students referred to as “lords and earls” who speak posh English with an “upper-class English voice” (Lessing 2008, 286, 290, 291, 295), besides his lack of knowledge regarding the bourgeoisie eating arrangements, the dressing codes - particularly the university etiquette. Finally, the obvious lack of familiar faces must have worsened his feeling of loneliness and of being out of place. As García Navarro (2021) comments, he is “unable to identify with the space” (63) therefore, the years spent there have left their marks on Charlie’s psyche due to the mental effort put into combining the power exerted on him by the university spatiality, educational levelling with his classmates and resistance to preserve his identity. Moreover, Charlie read a leaflet written by the university doctor in which he stated that students from “working-class and lower-middle-class families on scholarships are particularly vulnerable” and one of the reasons he provided for such a statement mentioned their adaptation to “middle-class mores that are foreign to them” (Lessing 2008, 303), therefore, Charlie’s apprehension is based on concrete and disturbing facts: he is trying to enter a society, a space, beyond his reach; what is more, his body as a space of flesh, bones, and mind has felt the power exercised on him by the institutional environment what, in the end, causes the nervous breakdown that takes him to his family home to recover.

### Liminal spaces

The third spatial categorization is related to the concept of liminality, a term coined by Arnold Van Gennep (1909) but reformulated by Victor Turner (1964) who opened its use to other fields of study. Dara Downey (2016) states that “[l]iminal spaces are those which are, simultaneously, place *and* space. They are familiar, yet unknown; they are secure, and yet intimidating” (3 italics in the original). Insofar as in-between spaces, liminal spaces can be defined as

transitional sites, spaces of waiting between other *loci* that act as boundaries between two places; the thresholds that involve a change in the person's position or situation and allow for a particular transformation to take place. The individual finds him/herself in the margins since he/she is neither in the location from which he/she departed nor has he/she arrived at the new one (Kertzer 2019, xiii). In the story, there appear two representative examples of these types of places, the pub and the train which coincide with Downey's (2016) assertion because one is secure and the other intimidating.

Diametrically opposite to the space created in the house and the university, the pub stands as the place that creates the transitory relaxation Michel Foucault (1984) speaks about; the space to socialise. Arina Cirstea (2015) asserts that it acts as "an emblematic space in which the collective identity of a nation or region becomes manifest in a particular set of shared ideas and socializing customs" (87) while Christine Sizemore (1989) compares it with a theatre where different performances take place showing "fragments of people's lives" (58). This is evinced in other short stories by Lessing such as "The Woman" (1956) and "Wine" (1957) in which the Swiss resort and the French café, respectively, are turned into characters that embrace the masculine space created by the characters, the former, and the revival of traumatic memories, the latter. The Irish pub, where Charlie waits for the train to London, cannot be disregarded but read and decoded due to the significance it has in the story as the transitional locus between opposite spaces: the village and Oxford as it is located near the railway station signifying, as well, a space of departure from one physical position to another. Firstly, the owner is a foreigner, but not any foreigner, but an Irish one with the connotation it has due to the ancient rivalry between the two nations promoted by the gross injustices the Irish people experienced at the hands of the English. Hence, within the liminal space there appears the Irish national space expressed by the allusions to "Cromwell [ . . . ] the Black and Tans and Casement" (Lessing 2008, 306, 307) which refer to significant historical moments in Irish history. By their mentioning, Lessing opens a window to the past and, with only a few words, not only brings to the fore the historical suffering of the Irish people but also their traumatic space. Secondly, an important characteristic of Irish pubs is that they are designed for the working class. Charlie feels at ease there, there is no need to pretend, and he shares with the owner information he has concealed from his family in order not to upset them. "You look bad", said the Irishman [...] "That's right", said Charlie. "I went to the doctor. He gave me a tonic and said I am fundamentally sound in wind and limb, he said [...] parodying an upper-class English voice for the Irishman pleasure" (Lessing 2008, 302,303). The man immediately understands what Charlie does not utter, his exhaustion due to overwork to pass the exams and not disappoint his parents who are working so hard to pay for his expenses

at Oxford, and replies: “You can’t burn the candle at both ends” (Lessing 2008, 303) and serving him a glass of whisky he tells him, “You drink that and get on the train and sleep” (Lessing 2008, 305). After that and due to the convivial atmosphere of the place, Charlie embarks on an honest confession about his feeling of not belonging in any of the environments in which he interacts, the village, his family, and Oxford University. The space created in the pub, due to its neutrality, is one of revelations, the complete disclosure of the innermost feelings. Foucault (1984) considers it within the heterotopia of temporary relaxation and along with the house/home they are the spaces where social practices are mostly produced, and where the relationships between human beings are established.

Finally, the train Charlie takes to return to Oxford functions as the nexus between two different physical places; in the case of the story, Doncaster, and London, but also between different worlds since people from diverse walks of life share a space. However, the ambience of the village and the coal mines Charlie wants to leave behind follows him, his background is also present in this liminal space as it is going to be revealed in the space of the train compartment. Foucault (1984) regards it as “an extraordinary bundle of relations” due to the multi-faceted quality it displays insofar as “it is something through which one goes [...] by means of which one can go from one point to another” and also as “something that goes by” (3). It has become the distinguishable characteristic of civilization since Victorian times and its importance as public service exceeds the private one showing its indisputable superiority. On the other hand, each railway car is a space within a broader space insofar as within its walls a particular spatiality is created in which time seems to have come to a halt and the dwellers of the car appear to conform, temporarily, a cohesive group in which individual privacy gives way to a moderate team spirit. Michel de Certeau (1988) concerning the space within a space, asserts that “[i]nside [the railway car], there is the immobility of an order. [...] Outside, there is another immobility, that of things” (112). Moreover, he claims that there exists a ‘caesura’ insofar as a break that connects the interior and exterior spaces represented by the “windowpane and the rail” because, due to the transparency of the pane, a distinguishable spatiality is created “between the fluctuating feelings of the observer and the moving about of an oceanic reality” (112). Charlie uses the window as a prompt to start a conversation with the upper-class girl sitting in the compartment: “[a]ctually it is rather cold, isn’t it? Wouldn’t you like to have the window up?” (Lessing 2008, 309) but it also fulfils its function of separating the cold night of the outer space from the cosy atmosphere of the railway car’s interior. Moreover, the working-class woman who arrives later also asks him to close the window to prevent the cold from entering the place; therefore, the feelings of the observers, mentioned by de Certeau, are reproduced by Lessing to separate them from the real world of the exterior and to

prepare the setting for the two social spaces in the compartment to collide. The last scene of the story lacks de Certeau's "immobility of an order" because Charlie's background follows him since within the enclosure of the train compartment the two spaces - upper-class and working-class - are confronted once more producing such an intimidating feeling in Charlie that it prompts him to misbehave mocking the old woman for her working-class way of speaking and causing the upper-class girl to embarrass him to the extent he has to leave the place. The cohesive order and team spirit in the railway car are destroyed until the moment the woman goes to the corridor where Charlie is standing in shame to ask him, motherly, to return to his seat, and, in so doing, the spatial order is restored.

## Conclusion

Doris Lessing has constructed the traumatic spatiality in the story by means of spatial antithesis, a technique also used in the *novella* "The Eye of God in Paradise", for the reader to enter an invisible warlike realm by lifting the layers of the text's palimpsest. On the one hand, there appears the dark mining village blended in with the surrounding mines and the University of Oxford with its oppressive class-ridden atmosphere. On the other, the house is a supplier of nourishment and affection, and Doncaster is the felicitous place where a promising future seems possible. Between them stand the pub and the train with their democratic characteristic. However, all these spaces are linked by the invisible thread of post-war Europe embedding the traumatic immediate past in the places where the characters lead their everyday lives and in which historical events and political decisions reach the younger generations as well. The traumatization of the space seems to be a never-ending two-way process between space and individual in which the former defines the latter and vice versa. In the story, this mutual relationship is generated by history and the trauma it creates, therefore, this reciprocity between spatiality and subjectivity, between the village and its inhabitants, between the university and Charlie, shows far-reaching effects and implications as depicted in the narration. The presence of the wars, embedded in the narrative tissue, can be discovered in the houses built after the bombardments, the educational laws that provided working-class children with better education and allowed them to dream of a promising future, the miners who returned from the trenches having to adapt to the new rules of the industry and the mentioning of Blacks and Tans in Ireland who were given the job due to the unemployment caused by the First World War. Therefore, I contend that both world wars act as a historical background that provides the text with the necessary support to allow the readers to gain a thorough comprehension of the story. By interweaving the contrasting spaces with the ones that come to the surface throughout the story, to the point

of acquiring visibility, Lessing has succeeded in creating the spatiality that shows the trauma suffered not only by the protagonist but also by the community of the mining village as a whole. In so doing, she has managed to bring to the fore her Poetics of Space which takes into consideration not only the physical places but also the atmosphere created by their dwellers as well as the trauma endured by its inhabitants in a sort of palimpsestic game.

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