

Turning Her Life Into Fiction

**Autobiography, narrative perspectives and memory
in Doris Lessing's
*The Memoirs of a Survivor.***

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Introduction

Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (henceforth *Memoirs*) has puzzled many critics since it was first published in 1974, and I am no exception. I did not come across the novel by accident or by sheer interest of Lessing, although she was not unknown to me as an author, but it was my thesis advisor who pushed me gently in the direction of Lessing as he suggested that I read *The Fifth Child* and *Ben in the World*.¹ Her style of writing interested me, and after I continued to read some of her work, including *Memoirs*, there was something there that triggered my curiosity about the novel and its intriguing development in a collapsing world. Initially my thesis were to include the novel *The Children of Men*² by P. D. James, but as I realised how comprehensive *Memoirs* really was, I made the decision to concentrate solely on Lessing's novel in order to try and grasp its levels of ambiguity, and thus dedicate my whole thesis to *Memoirs*.

The first time I read *Memoirs* I overlooked, or rather forgot, the subtitle "An Attempt at an Autobiography," and happily read along interpreting the novel as speculative fiction, as a description of a collapsing world, a dystopia. I then found the novel rather uncomplicated in terms of how to interpret the plot; simply straightforward and without much difficulty, looking at the breakdown of society, the relationship between the characters and so on, understanding the narrators journeys through the wall of her living room as a way to mentally escape the collapse of the outside world, and also as a way to learn more about Emily. Although the ending of the novel rather puzzled me, and I was left with the question of how the narrator in fact survives the collapse of the city in order to tell the story, I did not find the novel to be problematic. Then, when I read *Memoirs* for the second time I realised some of the ambiguity of the novel, still interpreting it as speculative fiction, but at the same time as autobiographical in the sense that the "personal" scenes behind the wall in fact reflect Doris Lessing herself as a

¹ Novels published by Lessing respectively in 1988 and 2000

² Published in 1992: "P.D. James imagines a future England in which no children has been born for twenty-five years. Under the despotic rule of Xan Lyppiatt, the warden of England, the old are despairing and the young violent and cruel" (Cover of *The Children of Men*).

child, a matter that was confirmed during my reading of Lessing's *Under My Skin*. Thus I realised that the autobiographical aspect of the novel in fact is important. It also became clear to me that the novel deals with the matter of memory, and that especially the scenes behind the wall explore how memory works. However, at this point in the process I still found the form of the novel to be some sort of speculative fiction, because it takes place in the future, describing how the breakdown of society affects the different characters, the communities and their ways of living. However, after I had read more of the secondary material that deals with Lessing's novel, and also read the novel for the third time, I realised that there is a third interpretation of the world in *Memoirs*, an interpretation that is related to Lessing's beliefs and exploration of Sufism. This interpretation enhances the notions of ambiguity in the novel; now the city does not exist in reality, but functions as a symbol of the human mind; the narrator is on a spiritual journey and what goes on behind the wall also represents the collective and individual self of the narrator. Also, during this reading, the term speculative fiction is no longer accurate when labelling the form of Lessing's novel, as she throughout the novel seems to play with different genres. On top of all there I also found a psychological interpretation of *Memoir*, where all of the different characters in the novel represent different aspects of the narrator's psyche. I found the lack of unified interpretations by the different critics frustrating, as it made it so much more difficult for me to work out which direction I should move towards, before it occurred to me that altogether I believe that *Memoirs* can be interpreted more or less in all of these ways. Instead of focusing on trying to find the *one* ultimately correct interpretation of the novel for this thesis, I will include the different ways in which Lessing's novel can be interpreted; as fictional, as autobiographical, as spiritual and also as psychological. Thus I do not dismiss any interpretation of *Memoirs*, but rather include them all in the thesis in order to emphasise the ambiguity of the novel. However, I also found an interpretation of the world behind the wall of my own, and this will be the main focus in chapter 3 of my thesis.

Critics tend to focus on the elements of Sufism in *Memoirs*, and it is difficult to argue against the argument that the narrator is undergoing a spiritual journey, which is very much in line with Lessing's exploration of such themes in some of her other work. On one hand, because I cannot say that I am very familiar with the way of the Sufi, I do not consider it plausible that I could argue against these critics on their interpretation of the novel, but on the other hand, I also believe that *Memoirs* can be interpreted in different ways, which is why I want to take on the task of exploring the novel according to my own interpretation as well as the ones made by the critics. Because the focus in the novel has often and generally been on the spiritual and psychological level, critics tend to forget that the novel is also partly autobiographical according to Lessing's own words. Furthermore the critics who recognise the autobiographical aspect of the novel tend to leave out an explanation for why Lessing chose to combine autobiography with fiction in such an intricate manner, and rather focus on the different scenes that are being played out in the "personal" space behind the wall as being different stages in the narrator's spiritual journey in the novel. Because the novel is partly autobiographical there may be a connection between Lessing and the narrator which most critics appear to have left out, even though Lessing has quite clearly used incidents from her own childhood in the scenes where the narrator witnesses Emily's childhood, which Lessing could have done with more than just the intention of telling a story. Since one of my main arguments in this thesis is that Emily in fact is a younger version of the narrator, an important question then is whether the narrator in the novel *is* Lessing, or if Lessing merely is using the narrator as a tool with the intention to tell the story of her own childhood? The latter is more plausible, but either way the emphasis on the autobiographical aspect of the *Memoirs* should be made clearer, because the parallels between Lessing's own childhood and that of Emily in the "personal" scenes behind the wall are too obvious to ignore.

Some critics tend to show little awareness of the narrative perspective in *Memoirs* and also on the fact that the novel is presented as a “memoir” written by the unnamed narrator, which is why many critics tend to look at Emily and her role in the novel rather than the role of the narrator. That is not to say that Emily’s role is not important, but by leaving out the narrator’s role as the internal focalizer and also as the author of the “memoirs”, there is not enough emphasis on the fact that every event and action concerning the plot is filtered through the narrator. Lessing has created a narrative focalizer that changes and develops in *Memoirs*, not only during the actual period in which the plot develops, but also during the period of which the narrator is supposedly writing her “memoirs”, which makes the narrative intradiegetic. Thus the narrator continuously presents her perspective on certain issues in the story; on the matter of “it”, community, Emily and the other characters, space, and of course also realm behind the wall at the same time as she is a participant in the story. As the internal focalizer the narrator serves as the primary consciousness in the novel, and therefore everything that happens in the story is filtered through her. Furthermore, because the novel is presented as a “memoir” written by the narrator, Lessing is able to create suspense in the reader through the use of the narrator, especially when it comes to the matter of “it”, at the same time as the reader knows that the narrator is a “survivor” of “it”, which creates uncertainties for the reader as to the degree of the threat that the narrator and the city in *Memoirs* are facing. Also, because the narrator is writing the “memoirs” in retrospect, she reconstructs the story from memory, and as a result the narrator may be unreliable. Thus the narrator’s observations, comments on the plot and ability to remember must be taken into careful consideration when the reliability of the internal focalizer is established. Whereas some critics refer to the main character in *Memoirs* as the “protagonist” or the “survivor”, I will use the term “narrator” to refer to the main character because of the emphasis on the narrative perspective in my thesis.

Because there is not enough emphasis on the narrator's role in the novel, there is even less emphasis on why the narrator writes her "memoirs". The critics who focus on the novel as being a spiritual journey for the narrator fail to establish *why* the narrator is writing her story in a "memoir". If the story is meant to serve as a warning, then what exactly is the narrator warning us against? What is motivating the narrator to share her story? In *Memoirs* there are two issues that are present throughout the whole novel; that history has a tendency to repeat itself without human interference, or even the ability to recognise it, and that social patterns appear to be fixed and unchangeable. These are issues that both Lessing and the narrator in *Memoirs* pay attention to, and thus the narrator may be writing her "memoirs" with the intention to warn the reader against these issues. Also, because *Memoirs* is Lessing's experiment in autobiography, Lessing then uses the narrator to emphasise her own opinions on these matters. Furthermore, because we never learn when the narrator decides to write her "memoirs", this may have been her intention before she crossed the border between the "real" world and the world behind the wall. To write a "memoir" may be a way for the narrator to reconstruct her identity, and because the narrator's childhood is an important part of her identity the narrator has to reconstruct her repressed childhood memories. By moving through the wall, which then becomes a symbol of the mental blockage that prevents the narrator from remembering her traumatic childhood, the narrator is able to start the process of reconstructing her memories, and thereby also her identity. Thus I will argue that the world behind the wall in *Memoirs* represents the process of reconstructing memory.

Memoirs is a complicated novel that can be interpreted in several different ways, and its exploration of Sufism and psychological aspect does not make it any easier for the common reader to comprehend its complex nature. By focusing on the narrator as the internal focalizer and as the writer of her "memoirs" rather than the spiritual and psychological aspects of the novel, the reader may be able to grasp the narrator's intentions for writing her "memoirs",

which may be to warn against the matters of history repeating itself and fixed social patterns, and to finish the reconstruction of her identity through the reconstruction of her repressed childhood memories. The autobiographical aspect of the novel is thus very important because Lessing has used her narrator as a tool to retell Lessing's own childhood, and also to bring forth her own opinions on the matters of history and social structure. By doing so, Lessing has experimented with the combination of autobiography and fiction in a rather complicated manner; by testing of the relationship between identities and characters, by reconstructing her childhood memories as if experienced by someone else, by exploring possible consequences of authentic and invented catastrophes, and by mixing her own opinions of different matters with her narrator's opinions in *Memoirs*.

The thesis is divided into three chapters, where the first chapter is a context chapter, the second a chapter that deals with the "real" world in the novel and the third chapter deals with the world behind the wall. In the first part of chapter 1 I have included an introduction of Doris Lessing, her upbringing and life and some of her work that is relevant to the thesis. Since *Memoirs* was subtitled "An Attempt at an Autobiography" I found it important to introduce her life because it supports the idea that there is a connection between *Memoirs* and Lessing's real life, especially when it comes to her upbringing and her relationship with her mother. Furthermore I have provided a short introduction of the main critics that I have used in the thesis. I have also elaborated on the matter of how *Memoirs* is an autobiography in addition to an elaboration on the genres that *Memoirs* seems to embrace and finally, in the last part of chapter 1 I have elaborated on the matter of "it" in the novel, because "it" serves as background for the plot in *Memoirs*.

In chapter 2 of the thesis, where my emphasis is on the narrative perspective in the novel, the main focus is on the "real" world in *Memoirs*. By looking at how the narrator as the internal focalizer observes and comments on her relationship with Emily, on the rest of the

character, on the communities and on the space in the “real” world, I am trying not only to express the narrator’s opinion but also to establish the reliability of the narrator. Also, in this chapter I will include my interpretation as to *why* the narrator has written her “memoirs”, which I believe is partly to be found in the “real” world. Furthermore, because the narrator emphasises the matters of social structures and fixed social pattern, I have included Lessing’s own comments on these matters as she expresses them in *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, to try and establish the connection between the narrator and Lessing, and to show how the “real” world in *Memoirs* also add up to Lessing’s “Autobiography”.

In the final chapter in the thesis I have concentrated on the world behind the wall in *Memoirs*, on the matter of memory, and on how the different scenes that the narrator encounters may be part of the narrator’s reconstruction of her own childhood memories and therefore also her identity. Thus, part of my main argument is that Emily is a younger version of the narrator, because the narrator states that it is Emily’s childhood she witnesses behind the wall. Furthermore, I have emphasised Lessing’s own childhood memories as she has presented them in her conventional autobiography because there are obvious parallels between the memories of Lessing and that of the narrator in *Memoirs*, which also emphasises why Lessing called the novel “An Attempt at an Autobiography”. In chapter 3 I have looked at the different scenes which I believe represent the process of reconstructing memories and the actual reconstructed childhood memories of the narrator, in addition to some scenes that resembles constructed memory rather than reconstructed, and of course also the ending.

Chapter 1

In this chapter I will provide an introduction of Doris Lessing and her life, works and beliefs that I find relevant for this thesis, as well as a general elaboration on the matter of autobiography and genres in the novel. I have also provided a short introduction of the main critics that I have used in the thesis. In addition to this I will provide an explanation on the matter of “it” in the novel, because “it” serves as a background for the plot in *Memoirs*.

Doris Lessing: Life, Work and Beliefs

Doris Lessing, (b. Doris May Tayler) was born in Persia (now Iran) in 1919 of British parents. Her father, Alfred Cook Tayler was crippled during World War I, and he met her mother Emily McVeagh when she nursed him at the Royal Free Hospital in London. Emily and Alfred married in 1919 and had Doris the same year after they emigrated to Persia, where Alfred remained “not the only soldier never, ever, to forgive his country for what he saw as promises made but betrayed: for these soldiers were many, in Britain, in France and in Germany, Old Soldiers who kept that bitterness till they died” (*Under My Skin* 7). Alfred thus was to work for the Imperial bank of Persia, to get away the country which he now felt bitterness against. They stayed in Persia till 1925, when Alfred, Emily, Doris and her younger brother Harry moved to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where Alfred wanted to try his luck at maize farming. His attempts failed, as he knew very little about farming, and the family lived in poverty in a mud and thatch hut. Emily in a way managed to adapt to life on the farm, trying to reproduce the lifestyle which she was used to from her own upbringing, but she was often depressed, feeling deprived of the social middle-class she was accustomed to from England. Although happy living close to nature, Lessing was a lonely child, as the neighbours were miles away, and Lessing spent most of her free time reading and exploring the surroundings. Lessing’s relationship with her mother was complicated, as Emily wanted and expected a boy rather than a girl, and Lessing was left feeling unloved: “What I remember is hard bundling hands, impatient arms and her voice telling me over and over again that she had not wanted a girl, she

wanted a boy. I knew from the beginning she loved my little brother unconditionally, and she did not love me” (*Under My Skin* 25). Furthermore, her mother leaned on the controversial methods of Dr. Truby King³, and according to Lessing “Truby King was the continuation of the cold and harsh discipline of my mother’s childhood and my father’s childhood. [...] The baby must learn what’s what and who is the boss right from the start, and this essential instruction must be imparted while the infant is lying alone in a cot, in its own room, never in the parents’ bedroom. He, she, must learn its place, understand its position in the universe – alone” (*Under My Skin* 23). Her relationship with her mother colours Lessing’s work as an adult, as we will see when we study *Memoirs*, where the matter of mother and daughter relationship is one of the central issues.

In 1926 Lessing was sent to a convent school in Salisbury (now Harare), where she experienced extreme homesickness; “I was at the Convent for four years. Or for eternity. I used to wake up in the morning with the clang of the bell and not believe that I would live through that interminable day until the night. And, after this endless day would be another. Then another. I was in the grip of homesickness like an illness” (*Under My Skin* 96). At the school, the Roman Catholic teachers perpetually tried to convert the girls of the Protestant faith. Lessing went through rapid changes concerning her own faith:

I had a sudden conversion to Roman Catholicism. This was regarded by all the Protestant girls as bound to happen at some point [...] My submission was sudden and total. [...] my mother saw the holy water and the rosary under my pillow and exploded into reproaches. This marked the beginning of a rejection of my mother [...] [she] began on a history of the crimes of Roman Catholicism. The inquisition figured as the chief wrong, but others were cited, for instance the way Catholic missionaries converted the Africans they thought to their religion. [...] listening, full of cold loathing for what I saw as illogic masquerading as virtue. I lost religion in a breath; [...] I had become an atheist; (*Under My Skin* 123-125)

³A Doctor from New Zealand who emphasised the regularity when it came to the routines of a child’s feeding, sleeping and bowel movements, and where the method’s aim was to build the child’s character by avoiding cuddling and other forms of attention. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truby_King. 2008-11-17)

Due to the convent school and her mother, Lessing removed herself from religious beliefs, but in the 1960's Lessing is yet again drawn to another religion, and she becomes a Sufi.⁴

Doris Lessing dropped out of an all-girls high school in Salisbury when she was fourteen; “My fourteenth year was a make or break year, a sink or swim year, a do or die year, for I was fighting for my life against my mother. That was how I saw it. That was how it was” (*Under My Skin* 155), and she moved away from home at the age of fifteen to get away from her mother, to work as a nursemaid, a telephone operator and clerk. She continued to read and write, and at the age of seventeen she tried to write a novel: “my first novel, on the mountain of a typewriter sent all the way from Johannesburg. It was a short satirical novel, mannered, stilted, making fun of gilded youth, the young whites whose ways I had after all only glimpsed. I would become one of them within a year. Their pretensions, their privileges were contrasted with the lives of the blacks. I did not know enough to write it. This production too was later torn up in transports of embarrassment” (*Under My Skin* 191). Although Lessing's first published novel did not appear until 1949, she made numerous attempts beforehand to become a published author: “I was also writing short stories, and sold two to smart magazines in South Africa. Coming on these in some drawer years later I so burned with shame that I had to tear them up on the spot. I had written to suit a market. I had succeeded. But later I could not do it, even when I badly needed money” (*Under My Skin* 181).

At nineteen Lessing married Frank Wisdom and had two children, John and Jean, but they divorced in 1943, and the children stayed with their father. Lessing became increasingly involved with the formally banned Communist Party in Sothern Rhodesia, and in an interview made by Lesley Hazelton for The New York Times in 1982, “Doris Lessing on Feminism, Communism and ‘Space Fiction’”, Hazelton writes that ““When I became political and Communist,” [Lessing] later wrote, “it was because they were the only people I had ever met

⁴ “An Islamic religious group which tries to achieve unity with God by living a simple life and by praying and meditating.” (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=79658&dict=CALD> 2008-11-14)

who fought the color bar in lives”” (<http://mural.uv.es/vemivein/feminismcommunism.htm> 2008-10-13). Furthermore Hazelton writes that “The Rhodesian Communists were political innocents who would probably have been unacceptable to most Communist parties in the world. But far from the centers of Communist doctrine, they could afford to be purist” (<http://mural.uv.es/vemivein/feminismcommunism.htm> 2008-10-13), and Lessing stayed a member of the party until 1956. In 1945 she married her second husband, Gottfried Lessing, who was a German political activist and a member of the inner circle of the Rhodesian Communist Party. They had a son together, Peter, but also this marriage failed and Lessing divorced again in 1949, and Lessing never remarried. The same year after the divorce Lessing moved to London together with Peter, leaving John and Jean behind in Rhodesia, and with the manuscript of *The Grass is Singing* in her luggage.

Doris Lessing has received a number of prizes for her works, and in 2007 Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. After the publication of her first novel in 1949, Lessing has published more than thirty books, the latest one being *Alfred & Emily* in 2008, a retelling of her parents’ story, in addition to collections of short stories and poems. She has also published two volumes of her autobiography; *Under My Skin* in 1995 and *Walking in the Shade* in 1998. *Under My Skin – Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* deals with Lessing upbringing in Persia and Southern Rhodesia, her relationship with her parents and her own children, her failed marriages and her involvement with the Rhodesian Communist Party. In *Under My Skin* Lessing gives an account for why she wanted to write the autobiography: “One reason for writing this autobiography is that more and more I realize I was part of an extraordinary time, the end of the British Empire in Africa, and the bit I was involved with was the occupation of a country that lasted exactly ninety years. People no longer know what that time was like, even those who live in Southern Africa” (160). I have used this autobiography throughout the thesis as background for autobiographical issues in *Memoirs*, and also to

emphasise certain views that Lessing shares about communism, relationships and memory, that concern the novel. *Walking in the Shade – Volume Two of my Autobiography, 1949-1962* deals with Lessing's life after she has moved to England with Peter; "As for me, real London was still ahead, like the beginning of my real life, which would have happened years before if the war hadn't stopped me coming to London. A clean slate, a new page – everything still to come" (*Walking in the Shade* 3), her involvement with the British Communist Party and the withdrawal from it and her rising career as an author. Since I believe that *Memoirs* autobiographical traits derives from Lessing childhood and adolescent years, which I will argue below, *Walking in the Shade* may not be as valuable a source as *Under My Skin* in that sense, but it is still useful as a reference of Lessing's point of view on writing autobiographies.

In addition to the fiction and the autobiographies, Lessing has published several non-fictional books, including *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, henceforth *Prisons*, a collection of 5 essays from 1987. The essays deal with the notion that we constantly let our past dominate us in the present, as we are unable to free ourselves from history, and that these restraints resemble a prison. Lessing believes that we have been controlled by different societies and their leaders throughout the history of mankind, and in *Prisons* she dwells on how our past dominates us today, and how history has a tendency to repeat itself. In the collection of essays Lessing also focuses on social structures in our society, how we tend to behave within a social structure and on how most people seek to groups rather than being on their own. She elaborates on our ability, or inability, to look at ourselves from a detached point of view, both as individuals and as members of a society. These are all issues that continuously appear in *Memoirs*, and which I have included in the argument in chapter 1 and 2.

When *Memoirs* was published in 1974, Lessing called it "an Attempt at an Autobiography", a matter which I will elaborate on below, but also much of her other works are considered autobiographical as she has drawn upon her own experiences in Africa, her

childhood and her social and political engagement. *Memoirs* is one example, as I will argue in my thesis, and the series *Children of Violence* is another. In *Under My Skin* Lessing writes about her experience of autobiography in relation to *Martha Quest*, part one of her 5 book series *Children of Violence*, published in 1952: “Readers like to think that a story is ‘true’. ‘Is it autobiographical?’ is the demand. Partly it is and partly it is not, comes the authors reply, often enough in an irritated voice, because the question seems irrelevant: what she has tried to do is to take the story out of the personal into the general. ‘If I had wanted to write an autobiography then I would have done it, I wouldn’t have written a novel’”(160). Lessing does not dismiss the notion of autobiography in the novel, as she admits to draw upon her personal story, but she refuses to call the novel an autobiography as such. In *Walking in the Shade* Lessing continues to elaborate on the matter concerning *Martha Quest* and why she wrote it: “There was a point when it occurred to me that my early life had been extraordinary and would make a novel. I had not understood how extraordinary until I had left Southern Africa and come to England. *Martha Quest*, my third book, was more or less autobiographical, though it didn’t start until Martha was fourteen, when her childhood was over. First novels, particularly by women, are often attempts at self-definition, whatever their literary merits” (14).

During her authorship, Lessing has also explored her beliefs within Sufism, the spiritual movement which Lessing has embraced since the 1960’s, and *Memoirs* appears to be no exception. According to Nancy Shields Hardin in her article “Doris Lessing and the Sufi Way”, “For a non-Sufi to understand what it means to be a Sufi is perhaps impossible. What is possible and permissible is to endeavour to enlarge one’s understanding of the term “Sufi” (566). I shall by no means try to pass as one who understands what it means to be a Sufi, but since some critics believe that *Memoirs* is one of Lessing’s attempts to explore the way of Sufism, I find it necessary to try and grasp some of the religion’s main ideas. According to Dr. Alan Godlas at the University of Georgia “the Sufi surrenders to God, in love, over and over;

which involves embracing with love at each moment the content of one's consciousness (one's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, as well as one's sense of self) as gifts of God or, more precisely, as manifestations of God" (<http://www.uga.edu/islam/Sufism.html> 2008.10.13). Thus a person's consciousness plays an important role in Sufism, which is why Sufis such as Lessing explore the human mind. Furthermore, According to Hazelton in The New York Times "The Sufis believe Sufism to be the teaching within all religions. It is a mystic philosophy whose quest is to achieve universal harmony with the spirit of the Absolute Being; but to do this, unlike most other mystic philosophies, Sufism maintains involvement with this world" (<http://mural.uv.es/vemivein/feminismcommunism.htm> 2008-10-13). The fact that Sufis involve the "real" world into their quest for universal harmony may strengthen the notion that Lessing follows a Sufi path in *Memoirs*, as it takes place both in the "real" world and in the realm behind the wall. Also, according to Idries Shah, quoted in "Doris Lessing and the Sufi Way", "The Sufi's world has extra dimensions; to him things are meaningful in a sense which they are not to people who follow only the training which is imposed upon them by ordinary society" (qtd. in Hardin 566). Furthermore in the same article, Hardin believes that what Shah claims is that "The only way then to comprehend the Sufi mind is to shake loose from logical modes of thought." (566) and Hardin also believes that "This theme is one that resounds time and again throughout Lessing's work." (566) When studying *Memoirs* the reader certainly has to "shake loose from logical modes of thought" in order to try and comprehend its plot, characters and the realms behind the wall, whether the novel is an exploration of Sufism or not.

The Memoirs of a Survivor

Memoirs takes place in an unnamed collapsing city and at an undated time sometime in the future. An unnamed middle-aged narrator is writing her memoirs from a time of which she is a survivor of. She tells the story in retrospect, at the same time as she constantly shares her thoughts and perspectives in the present. What she has survived and how is never specified, but

right from the beginning of the novel the narrator refers what she and other survivors have been through as “it”, and that her story begins at a time where things are bad, but before “it”; “in the sense of something felt as an immediate threat which could not be averted” (9). The narrator lives in a “neat and comfortable, if shabby flat” (13), and one day she realises that there is a realm on the other side of the wall of her living-room, a space which overlaps the actual corridor which is behind the wall. She cannot cross over by force, but finds herself on the other side of the wall from time to time, and she realises that what goes on behind the wall might be as important as her life in the “real” world. The rooms behind the wall at this point in the novel are empty and in need of work, but the narrator feels a “sweetness, certainly – a welcome, a reassurance” (16), and also that there is a familiar presence in these rooms, an “*exiled inhabitant*” (16) One day twelve year old Emily Cartwright and her cat/dog Hugo are left in the narrator’s custody without any explanation, and at first the narrator sees Emily as a disturbance that keeps her from moving behind the wall. However, the narrator realises that she has certain responsibilities towards the child, and she begins to observe the polite and insightful girl as she matures rapidly in front of the narrator’s eyes. At the same time more and more people gather on the pavement outside the apartment, and more and more people leave the decaying city. One day Emily too moves out to the pavement and joins the new social units that are being formed, and she meets Gerald, a young group leader whom she falls in love in love with. Emily becomes part of Gerald’s house, a new community based on the idea that no one should tell others what to do, and she also becomes part of his “harem”, as he is incapable of staying with just one girl. Here Emily also meets June, a girl slightly younger than herself, who also is in love with Gerald, and who leaves Emily and the city in the end without saying goodbye. At the same time the narrator continues to visit the space behind the wall. She discovers the “personal” scenes, scenes which show incidents from Emily’s childhood, and the narrator realises that there is a connection between what happens behind the wall and in the “real”

world. In the community at Gerald's house and on the pavement Emily shows remarkable skills in leadership and survival, but she and Gerald are unable to keep the community from destruction when Gerald takes on the task as guardian for a savage group of children from the underground, and the community dissolves. Towards the end, the only people left in the city are the narrator, Emily, Hugo, Gerald and the children from the underground, and as Gerald is unable to free himself from his new gang, Emily has to save him as they at one point begin to stone him. They take refuge from the children in the narrator's apartment, and finally the wall dissolves and Emily, Hugo, Gerald and also the children walk through to a garden behind the wall. In the end, everyone but the narrator follows the human figure that the narrator refers to as the One and disappears.

Criticism

Although I have touched upon interpretations made by a variety of critics, there are four main critics whose main views I have included throughout the whole thesis, all of which have interpreted *Memoirs* in slightly different ways; Gayle Greene in *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change*, Jeanne Murray Walker in "Memory and Culture within the Individual: The Breakdown of Social Exchange in *Memoirs of a Survivor*", Lorelei Cederstrom in "'Inner Space' Landscape: Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*" and Phyllis Perrakis in "Navigating the Spiritual Cycle in *Memoirs of a Survivor and Shikasta*". I have chosen to include their interpretations because they have interpreted the novel as a whole instead of just focusing on specific elements. Greene is perhaps the critic who has the most conventional interpretation of *Memoirs*, as Greene is trying to suspend answer the "unanswerable" question that the novel brings forth: "Such questions [of realism] are unanswerable because what is happening is "impossible" according to Western notions of time, space and possibility. [...] but if we can suspend disbelief, they may teach us to question our perceptual equipment and the spatial-temporal mold of Western empiricism and lead us to something new." (141-142)

Walker deals with the matter of social exchange, or rather dysfunctional social exchange, meaning the different characters', and I believe also communities', unrealistic demands and expectations toward each other and the different communities which they belong to as a cause for the city to collapse, a matter which will be argued when we look at the different characters, especially Emily, the relationship between them and the different groups and communities in *Memoirs*: "Lessing's own impassioned remarks suggests an interpretation of the work as a schematic portrayal of the negotiation among individuals. Rather than showing these negotiations leading finally to a sane and productive collectivity, *Memoirs* refracts [...] the multiple kinds of exchange common in Western society in order to diagnose the breakdown of collectivity" (94). Cederstrom's interpretation of the novel focuses mainly on the psychological aspects in *Memoirs*, as she believes that all of the different characters represents different aspects of the narrator's psyche: "To see the novel as set in an imminent future is therefore to limit the immediate impact of Lessing's message and to misinterpret the symbolic landscape through which the narrator moves. [...] To interpret *Memoirs* as a futuristic novel [...] is to focus upon the surface, to ignore, as well, the general direction of Lessing's writing and her prevailing concern with the archetypal psyche" (116). Perrakis on the other hand interprets *Memoirs* as a spiritual journey as she "examine the interface between the will, the heart, and the mind [...] in the Survivor's spiritual journey. [...] the Survivor will develop her spiritual capacities through her experience on both sides of the wall – through her conscious reliving of her memories of her past behaviour in her interaction with a younger version of herself [...] and through her access to unconscious personal and impersonal conditions in the rooms behind the wall" (51).

Autobiography or fiction?

As already mentioned in the introduction, when Doris Lessing first published *Memoirs* she herself called it "An Attempt at an Autobiography," but this label was removed over the years

by the publishers without any real explanation. According to Lessing, “Foreign publishers simply left it off the title page, and soon no one remembered to put it on reprints in English. People seemed embarrassed. They did not understand it, they said” (*Under My Skin* 28). If I look at the structure in terms of time and narration in the novel, it is understandable why the novel is dismissed as “autobiographical”, since a reader has certain expectations and knowledge of certain criteria in autobiographical literature. However, when she called the novel “An Attempt at an Autobiography”, Lessing indeed labelled it correctly, which I will come back to later, although it may not be autobiographical in a conventional sense.

First of all, since *Memoirs* is set in the future, it is immediately indicated that this may not be a true autobiography, but rather fiction. Right from the beginning, when reading on the cover of the novel, we learn that the plot in novel takes place in an unknown future: “Many years into the future, city life has broken down, communications have failed and food supplies are dwindling” (Cover of *Memoirs*). If a novel is autobiographical it cannot narrate from the future, as an autobiography is meant, somewhat truthfully, to depict the already lived life of the author. Although the narrator clearly narrates the story in retrospect as a survivor, which I will elaborate more on in chapter 2, we cannot overlook the fact that a conventional autobiography tells the story about the past and not the future. Also, if we look at the title of *Memoirs*, there is a certain contradiction between the title and the subtitle, “An attempt at an Autobiography. According to *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, “Autobiographies are distinguished from **memoirs** (also produced for public consumption), whose authors render an account of the people and events they have known and experienced without providing the detailed reflection and introspection characteristic of most autobiographies” (32). For instance, we never really get to know what leads to the breakdown of society, except “it” is to blame, a matter I will explain below. Also, at first glance we do not know anything about the narrator except that she is middle aged and lives in a city. It is only when I analyse the novel and study

incidents and observations made by the narrator in the different spaces and behind the wall that we learn how to interpret the narrator, a notion I will deal with later when studying the narrator as an internal focalizer in chapter 2. Also, when reading an autobiography it is expected that it is the story about the narrator, while *Memoirs* at first glance appears to be mainly the story about Emily, as it is mostly Emily's development the narrator writes about. Furthermore, the title of the novel also raises certain expectations to the reader, as numerous books have been written using similar titles as *Memoirs*, such as *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor* by Judith Magyar Isaacson and "*Titanic*" *Survivor: The Memoirs of Violet Jessop Stewardess* by Violet Jessop, both memoirs that tell authentic stories of survival. ([http://www. play.com/HOME/HOME/6/Search.html?Searchstring=memoirs+of+a+survivor&searchtype=bookall&searchsource=0](http://www.play.com/HOME/HOME/6/Search.html?Searchstring=memoirs+of+a+survivor&searchtype=bookall&searchsource=0) 2008-11-21).

So what obvious traits make the novel autobiographical? First of all, Lessing has chosen the name of her mother as the name for the young girl in *Memoirs*. Second of all, in *Under My Skin* it becomes clear that Lessing in fact describes several incidents from her own childhood when the narrator in *Memoirs* visit the space behind the wall, and Lessing explains her intentions for the novel in part one of her conventional autobiography, published more than twenty years after the novel:

For years I had wondered if I could write a book, a personal history, but told through dreams, for I remember dreams well, and sometimes have kept notes of them. Graham Greene has tried something of the kind. This idea of a dream autobiography became the world behind the wall in *Memoirs of a Survivor*. I used the nursery in Tehran, and the characters of my parents, both exaggerated and enlarged, because this is appropriate for the world of dreams." (29)⁵

The notion of a dream world, the world behind the wall I will explain in chapter 3, but what is important at this point is the fact that it is through Emily the novel in this sense is autobiographical, not the narrator, as it is Emily's childhood the narrator claims that she

⁵ English novelist Graham Greene published in 1992 *A World of My Own: A Dream Diary*: "For 25 years novelist Greene recorded his dreams. (...) The world they represent is Greene's alone, because, as he says in the introduction, there are no witnesses." (<http://www.amazon.com/World-My-Own-Dream-Diary/dp/0670852791> 2008-11-21)

witnesses in the “personal” scenes behind the wall. However, if Emily and the narrator is one and the same person, then it is her own childhood the narrator remembers, a matter which I will come back to in chapter 3. One of the direct examples from Lessing’s childhood used in the novel is when she is handed her baby brother Harry and is told that “It is your baby, Doris, and you must love it” (*Under My Skin* 24). In *Memoirs* Emily is placed in the same situation with “Baby”, Emily’s brother: “This is not her baby, and they know it, so why...? But again and again they say: ‘This is your baby, Emily, and you must love him.’” (119) Another example is the scene when a sick Emily is begging for cuddle: “‘Drink your lemonade.’ ‘I don’t want to. Mummy, cuddle me, cuddle me...’ ‘Oh, Emily’” (80). In *Under My Skin* Lessing refers to an incident from her life that led to what she calls an embarrassing outburst from a child sick with dysentery: “I had it, and so did my mother, but she was nursing us all and kept quiet about what she suffered. As I became convalescent, and weepy and enfeebled, I begged her, ‘Come and cuddle me, come and cuddle me.’ [...] ‘Come and cuddle me’ became part of the repertory of family jokes, and saved me from the embarrassment of remembering that I had so recently begged for love.” (125-126) Both these scenes from the novel, and others, I will discuss more thoroughly in chapter 3, but we see that again Lessing uses almost the exact phrases as were used by her or to her, although in slightly different settings, which again shows the notion of an autobiographical novel. Furthermore, on a less obvious level, I believe that Lessing has incorporated an autobiographical aspect into the “real” world as well as in the world behind the wall, because she has emphasised through the narrator some of the opinions that she has included in *Prisons*.

What is quite interesting is that before Lessing’s autobiography, critics were reluctant to accept *Memoirs* as autobiographical, and maybe because the words “An attempt at an Autobiography” had been removed, it is often not even mentioned. However, after Lessing published *Under My Skin*, critics began to reflect on the matter because Lessing has now

explained her choice of subtitle and form quite clearly. According to Perrakis, “Although Lessing called *Memoirs of a Survivor* “an attempt at an autobiography”, this comment was originally ignored by critics because Lessing camouflages the story of her spiritual transformation under the guise of fiction and fantasy” (48). It is interesting to notice that Perrakis traces the lack of recognition of the novel as autobiographical back to the fact that it is ‘under the guise of fiction and fantasy’, and not to the matter that people seemed embarrassed and did not understand it, as Lessing suggests in *Under My Skin*. However, Perrakis does mention Roberta Rubenstein as an exception among the critics who had ignored Lessing’s subtitle, because Rubenstein analysed *Memoirs* in *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing* as far back as in 1979, 16 years before *Under My Skin* was published. Rubenstein recognises and elaborates on Lessing’s choice of subtitle: “Lessing has called *The Memoirs of a Survivor* “an attempt at autobiography” – a comment that should be taken more literarily than literally, it would appear. The novel is a kind of artistic history of the development of consciousness in her characters as well as in their creator” (220). Although Rubenstein does not recognise the literally aspect of the autobiography in the novel, she elaborates on the literarily aspect and how Lessing herself has developed the focus from her previous novels up to *Memoirs*, how “the author’s own focus gradually shifted from the exterior to the interior dimensions of experience, reflected in her fiction by the evolution from the realistic to the symbolic mode, from socialism to mysticism, and by the increasing presence of the Sufi view of psychic evolution” (222-223). The presence of Sufism in *Memoirs* I will include in chapter 2 and 3, but this is just one example that shows how Lessing’s “Attempt at an Autobiography” in fact can be read as autobiographical on more than one level. Also, another critic who addresses the matter of autobiography is Aaron S. Rosenfeld, who in fact does not mention *Under My Skin* in his article “Re-membling the Future: Doris Lessing’s ‘experiment in autobiography’”. Rosenfeld attends to the matter of the novel functioning as an autobiography, not only as a

novel that “Clearly rehearses aspects of Lessing’s own psychic and emotional development” (47), but also by suggesting that in *Memoirs* the narrator not only represent the individual but also the collective experience of what happens in the collapsing world, meaning that the narrator also represents the experience shared by all of the survivors, as she takes on the role as the one who shares the story through her writings. Thus we can establish that Lessing subtitled the novel correctly, and that *Memoirs* indeed is autobiographical on many levels but in the conventional form.

Genre is not always easy to determine when analysing literature, and in addition to being autobiographical, *Memoirs* appears to embrace a number of different genres. As already mentioned in the introduction, I first believed the novel to be speculative fiction. However, speculative fiction is a wide term, and I need to narrow it down in order to figure out how to categorise *Memoirs*. According to Wikipedia, “Speculative fiction is a term used as an inclusive descriptor covering a group of fiction genres that speculate about worlds that are unlike the real world in various important ways” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculative_fiction 2008-10-13). Rosenfeld elaborates on different genres in *Memoir*”, and according to him “Doris Lessing’s *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) straddles along various genres typically shunted off into the category ‘science fiction’ or ‘speculative fiction’. Partly a dystopia, partly an apocalyptic text, and partly, in her own words, ‘an attempt at autobiography,’ the novel is difficult to classify” (“Re-membering the Future” 40). Furthermore, Rosenfeld argues that “Speculative fictions do not address *the new*; they address the future – the ‘*proleptic*⁶ *analepse*’⁷ of future history.” (40) According to his definition, *Memoirs*, which is set in the future and whose plot and discourse are looked back on by the

⁶ Prolepsis: “The evocation in a narrative of scenes or events that take place at a later point in the story. [...] prolepsis may involve an image that suggests something to occur in the future. More commonly, it involves a figure of speech in which an event or action that is anticipated is treated as if it has already occurred or is presently occurring even though it is temporally impossible.” (*Bedford Glossary* 372)

⁷ Analepsis: “The evocation in a narrative of scenes or events that take place at an earlier point in the story. [...] may involve an image or figure of speech that harks back to something encountered earlier. [...] Occasionally, analepsis even involves a subconscious memory or vision of the past that suddenly manifests itself in the consciousness or dreams of the narrator... (*Bedford Glossary* 17)

narrator in retrospect, can then be considered future history. The ‘future history’ that Rosenfeld speaks of consists of the four main categories *utopian*, *dystopian*, *arcadian* and *post-apocalyptic* form, all of which constitute the bulk of the genre (40), and all of which *Memoirs* at some point fit in to. According to Rosenfeld, “Utopias are first and foremost cities. This is not to say that utopia does not also encompass rural space; [...] [utopias] tend to be communities that organize man’s relationship to his fellow men. [...] The utopia imposes order on the chaotic, free play of the passions” (43-44). In *Memoirs* the community of which Gerald is the leader, resembles a utopian community before its members begin to look for leadership and before it is destroyed by the children from the underground. Furthermore, according to Rosenfeld “Dystopian texts are most frequently seen as warnings against the very utopianism they both imitate and parody. [...] In dystopia, the city, with its teeming infrastructure and bureaucracy, becomes a flawed model of the social order – not man in an absolute relationship with nature, but man forced into an unnatural relationship with the oppressive artificiality of man-made structures” (44). Thus the whole structure of *Memoirs* resembles dystopia. Also, according to Rosenfeld, “The arcadia, drawing on the pastoral tradition and the Romantic worship of nature, represents man in a harmony with the elements, civilization and society to be fled from rather than toward” (44). In *Memoirs* the Dolgelly farm where the narrator dreams about going if she is ever to leave the decaying city, resembles the arcadian form, where man is in harmony with nature. Also the garden on the other side of the wall resembles arcadia, as this is the space where the characters leave for in the end of the novel. And finally, according to Rosenfeld “post-apocalypse is the reverse of the Arcadian fantasy. [...] [the] post-apocalyptic fantasy [...] shows the disappearance of the organizing principle. In its place, we get social chaos. The larger social organization is replaced by primitive tribes, reconstituted families who struggle for an edge in a hostile wasteland” (45). In *Memoirs* the post-apocalyptic form reveals itself after the children from the underground has taken over Gerald’s

house (and the city), as they replace the new societies that has emerged, and also the old communities. These are all issues that will become clearer in chapter 2.

Another aspect I believe I need to look at before I progress in the thesis is the matter of realism in the *Memoirs*. For the reader, to what extent do the novel has to be realistic in order to treat matters such characters, different space, the city? Is it real enough to treat as a novel who deals with a society under the verge of breakdown? If the city is only a symbol of the human psyche, as some critics argue, the characters only different parts of the narrator, and the space behind the wall nothing but imaginary, can we still analyse the novel using conventional methods? Greene dwells on the same matter:

To ask what is real in this novel – the realm behind the wall or what goes on in the flat – is to miss the point. To be troubled with these questions – what is the relationship of the realms, spatially, temporally, logically? whose childhood is the narrator remembering, or is she imagining what goes on behind the wall, or dreaming it, or is she mad? – is to remain stuck within a paradigm of knowledge the failure which is Lessing's subject. Yet we cannot help asking such questions: the novel makes them irresistible. (141)

Although it may be to miss the point to search for realism in *Memoir*, I find it difficult not to try and root the novel in realism, and I believe that the novel manages to obtain some degree of realism as long as we stay in the “real” world, except that the notion of time is somewhat different, speeded up, but as soon as the narrator crosses the border and enters the space behind the wall the degree of realism decreases. Furthermore, the question of degree of realism in the novel also leads to the question of whether the novel also seems to embrace the notion of the fantastic or not? Tzvetan Todorov elaborates on the matter of the fantastic in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, or a product of the imagination – [...] or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality [...] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a

neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. [...] The possibility of hesitation between the two creates the fantastic effect. (25-26)

When the narrator continuously moves behind the wall in *Memoirs*, it creates in the reader a question of whether she actually moves behind the wall or if this is a product of her imagination, as also the narrator questions the matter: “Not realising, or allowing myself to take in, the full implication of the fact that something was going on behind the wall of my living-room was because beyond it was a corridor” (11). In addition, Todorov gives an account for what he believes are the conditions for the fantastic in literature, all of which I believe can be found in *Memoirs*:

First the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader’s role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work [...] Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations. These three requirements do not have an equal value. The first and the third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled. (33)

In “Changing Frames: Doris Lessing’s *Memoirs of a Survivor*”, the fantastic element and lack of realism in *Memoirs* troubles Betsy Draine: “The debate on essentially ideological grounds both represents and provokes an automatic response: either “I believe in the rational approach to experience and therefore condemn the mystical fantasy in [*Memoirs*]” or “I agree with Lessing that the world has extra dimensions open only to intuition, dream and fantasy, and thus I hail the mind-stretching vision in [*Memoirs*].”” (52) I believe that there is possible to find a middle ground, which is why I have to chosen to include different interpretations, with the main emphasis on my own interpretation.

“It”

In *Memoirs* “it” serves as the background for the plot, as it appears to be both the cause of the breakdown of society and also the consequences of it. Before we look at the consequences of social breakdown, real or imaginary, let us look at what causes the breakdown, and what

immediate effect it has. In *Memoirs* we never learn exactly why the urban world is on the verge of collapse, except that it is “it” that causes the breakdown. The narrator tells us about “it” on several occasions, almost right from the beginning: “But I can’t set down a date or a time. Certainly this inner preoccupation (life behind the wall) predated the other, public, concern to which I’ve given, I hope it is not thought frivolously, the word ‘it’” (10). The matter of “it” then is briefly mentioned, although unexplained, and the narrator recognises “it” as a public concern. Thus the narrator creates suspense in the reader as to what “it” is. Therefore, it is not until much later in the novel that the narrator gives a much wider account for the matter of ‘it’:

I think this is the right time to say something more about ‘it’. Though of course there is no ‘right’ place or time, since there was no particular moment marking – then or now – ‘its’ beginning. And yet there did come a period when everyone was talking about ‘it’; and we knew we had not been doing this until recently: there was a different ingredient in our lives. [...] indeed, ‘it’ is the secret theme of all literature and history, [...] we see ‘it’ as the groundswell of events, experience... Very well then, but what *was* ‘it’? [...] For ‘it’ is a force, a power, taking the form of earthquake, a visiting comet whose balefulness hangs closer night by night distorting all thought but fear – ‘it’ can be, has been, pestilence, a war, the alteration of climate, a tyranny that twists men’s minds, the savagery of religion.

‘It’ in short, is the word for helpless ignorance, or of helpless awareness. It is a word for man’s inadequacy?

‘It’, perhaps – on this occasion in history – was above all a consciousness of something ending. (129-130)

The narrator still does not give a concrete explanation of what exactly “it” is, as “it” can be anything, a force taking different forms, and “it” will occur repeatedly in history as well as in literature. However, as the narrator says, “it” in *Memoirs* may be all of these things, but most of all “it” may be the beginning of the end, as “it” draws attention to something ending, and it is this ending that the narrator is the survivor of. According to Cederstrom, “The protagonist and Emily enter a time of collapse, a time which the protagonist terms “it”. This “it” is the end of old patterns, or at least the time when the protagonist has become aware of the inadequacy of ego-functions. [...] Emily experiences this collapse in terms of the uselessness of her efforts for the communal good” (126). Thus Cederstrom believes that “it” is part of the narrator’s

spiritual journey, which of course may be true, but where Cederstrom defines “it” as a time that comes after Emily’s failure within Gerald’s house, which I will return to later, the matter of “it” appears to consume the society also before Emily’s failure. However, Lessing herself provides an explanation of the use of ‘it’ in *Memoirs* in *Under My Skin*: “A general worsening of conditions goes on, as has happened in my lifetime. Waves of violence sweep past – represented by gangs of young and anarchic people – go by, and vanish. There are wars and movements like Hitler, Mussolini, Communism, white supremacy, systems of brutal ideas that seem for a time unassailable, then collapse” (29). Thus, I believe that what causes the breakdown in *Memoirs* is to be found in history, and as history has a tendency to repeat itself without humans unable to recognise the repetition, or rather acknowledge the matter, “it” in this case *is* the word for helpless ignorance. “It” then is no specific event or action in the “real” world in the novel, but a general notion of former and future actions that without our recognition and acknowledgement continue to repeat themselves in history.

In *Prisons* Lessing addresses the importance of literature and history being linked to educating people: “Writers comment on the human condition, talk about it continually. It is our subject. Literature is one of the most useful ways we have of achieving this “other eye”, this detached manner of seeing ourselves; history is another. Yet literature and history increasingly are not seen like this by the young, as indispensable tools for living” (8). Furthermore, Lessing elaborates more on the matter by using an example from our recent history:

We forget – and the young people don’t know since they don’t read history – that we are heirs of two thousand years, more or less, of a most tyrannical regime, besides which Hitler and Stalin are babes. [...] for two thousand years Europe was under a tyrant – the Christian church – which allowed no other way of thinking, cut off all influences from outside, did not hesitate to kill, extirpate, persecute, burn and torture in the name of God. To remember this history is not for the sake of keeping alive the memories of old tyrannies, but to recognize present tyranny, for these patterns are in us still. It would be strange if they were not. It is these patterns that I believe we should study, become conscious of, and recognize as they emerge in us and in the societies we live in. (25-26)

Further on in the thesis, I will argue that the narrator recognises these repeated patterns of history in the novel while the younger Emily does not.

In *Memoirs*, 'it' is more than just the cause of the collapse of society; it is also the effect of it, as told by the narrator:

Perhaps, after all, one has to end by characterising 'it' as a sort of cloud or emanation, but invisible, like the water vapour you know is present in the air of the room you sit in, makes part of the air you know is there when you look out of a window – [...]. 'It' was everywhere, in everything, moved in our blood, our minds. 'It' was nothing that could be described once and for all, or pinned down, or kept stationary; 'it' was an illness, a tiredness, boils [...] 'it' was the price or unreliability of the electric supply: the way telephones didn't work; the migrating tribes of cannibals; was 'them' and their antics; 'it' was, finally, what you experienced... (133-134)

"It" then becomes visible, and the narrator literally sums up 'it' as everything that happens in the broken down society; the conditions for the community and for the individual, sickness, the lack of stability and of functioning electrical supplies, the forming of new societies and collapse of others. Again 'it' is not one specific event or consequence, but a general notion of historical, and probably future, consequences of the events mentioned above. According to Walker, "'It', one ultimately realizes, is the exhausting demand that individuals place on the social structure, their need, and their inability to be satisfied [...] More than anything, the unsatisfied need is the need for social exchange" (97). Thus Walker believes that "it" is caused by the individuals' unrealistic demands and expectations toward each other and the different communities which they belong to.

The actual consequences of the breakdown in the "real" world, the ones I can give an account for, is the lack of functioning authorities, lack of production of food and water and other necessities needed for survival, the breakdown of public transportation, people leaving the city; "There was no single reason for people leaving. We knew that all public service had stopped to the south and to the east, and that state of affairs was spreading our way. We knew that everyone had left that part of the country, except for bands of people, mostly youngsters, who lived on what they could find" (12); creations of new gangs and tribes (new social units),

diseases; “it became clear that these were *new* diseases; mysterious deaths; exhaustions and listlessness [...] suddenly vanishing, released the poor sufferers from criticism and self-doubt. In short there had been for a long time a general increase in illness, both traditional and newly-evolved” (132), and children suddenly living on the street without parents:

There were suddenly children out [on the pavement], nine, ten, eleven years old, not attached to families, but by themselves. [...] Sometimes children attached themselves to other families, their own parents being unable to cope with the pressures, not knowing where to find food and supplies, or simply losing interest and throwing them out to fend for themselves as people had once done with dogs and cats that no longer gave pleasure. (82)

Officially everything seems in order, but underneath everything is in chaos and lack of normality characterise everyday life: “And as for the public, the outer world, it had been a long time since that offered the normal. Could one perhaps describe that period as ‘the ordinariness of the extraordinary?’ Well, the reader should have no difficulty here: these words are a description of the times we have lived through” (19). Thus lack of normality becomes the normal trend. Towards the end people who have not yet left the city need special appliances in order to breathe normally, as the air becomes more and more stale: “[Emily] said: ‘Now that the air outside has become impossible to breathe, I spend as much time as I can here. [...] There were machines in the room: one hanging from the ceiling, another on the floor, one nailed to a wall. These were for purifying the air” (161). The narrator reflects on the matter of the poisoned air, recognising it as being part of “it”: “... in this case, it was that the air we breathed had indeed become hard on our lungs, had been getting fouler and thicker for a long time. We had become used to it, were adapting: I, like everyone else, had been taking short reluctant breaths, as if rationing what we took into our lungs, our systems, could also ration the poisons – what poisons? But who could know, or say! This was ‘it’, again, in a new form – ‘it’, perhaps, in its original form?” (161). The stale air becomes a symbol of “it”, of something the humans must adapt to in order to survive, breathing consciously in short breaths to avoid being affected by “it”.

Chapter 2 - The “Real” World

In this chapter I have focused on the narrative perspective in *Memoirs* in particular, and have thus also tried to establish the reliability of the internal focalization of the narrator by looking at the different characters, their communities and space in terms of the narrator’s observations and comments. As the internal focalizer the narrator plays an important role in *Memoirs*, not only as a separate character, but also as the one who filters everything that happens in the novel, and thus it is the narrator’s opinions that is emphasised. Also, the reader must keep in mind that *Memoirs* is supposedly written by the narrator in retrospect, and thus the narrator’s memory plays an important role in her reconstruction of the plot in addition to the narrator’s degree of reliability as the internal focalizer. Because one of my main arguments in my interpretation of the novel is that Emily is the younger version of the narrator, the main focus on characters in this chapter is on the narrator and Emily, and how they relate and interact with one another as two different persons and as two versions of the narrator as observed by the narrator. I will also include Hugo, Gerald and June because they are important to the plot in the novel, and the narrator shares her insightfulness about these characters too. Furthermore, because *Memoirs* is considered an exploration of Sufism, some critics tend to focus on the spiritual and psychological aspects of the novel and as a consequence the focus is mainly on the world behind the wall and its connection to the “real” world in the novel rather than the “real” world in itself. It is not to say that the world behind the wall and the connection between the two worlds are not important, but I believe that it is just as important to explore the “real” world because here the narrator manages to establish some of her reasons for *why* she writes her “memoirs”, which is to warn the reader against the inability to recognise that history and social patterns has a tendency to repeats itself. Because there is a connection between the narrator’s opinions on the matter of history repeating itself in forms of “it”/fixed social patterns/social structures and Lessing’s own opinion, a matter which I believe will become clear due to Lessing’s *Prisons*, this connection reinforces my initial view that Lessing may use

the narrator as a tool to emphasise her own opinions disguised in fiction. Thus also the “real” world may be integrated into Lessing’s “Autobiography”.

The Focalizer

All the reader originally know about the narrator is that she is a middle-aged woman living in a collapsing city; we do not know her name, her age or her occupation, but all this is not really important in the novel although, as already mentioned, the novel is meant to be “An Attempt at an Autobiography”. In fact, what we do know about the narrator we learn through her writing, as she is “the survivor” writing her memoirs in retrospect; through her role as the focalizer; through her relationship with Emily; and through her encountering with the space behind the wall. She does not appear to be omniscient, except perhaps when speaking about Emily, and her descriptions of the other characters are rather speculative, as she only makes suggestions to why they behave in different ways. Although she tells the story in retrospect, in the past tense, she breaks through on several occasions with remarks on the progress of her story; she addresses the reader directly in the present, as she reflects on past events while writing the story as if she is writing it in this very moment. This is a matter that also lets us know that she indeed is a Survivor, a label that enhances the notion of a wish to be truthful since it resembles authentic stories told by authentic survivors.

Right from the opening lines of *Memoirs* the narrator writes in present tense: “We all remember that time. It was no different for me than for others. Yet we do tell each other over and over again the particularities of the events we shared, and the repetition, the listening, as if we are saying: ‘It was like that for you, too’ (7)? These words, written in present tense, not only tell us that the narrator is writing the story in the present moment, but also that she wishes to tell the truth, not only as she perceived it, but as the others did too, which emphasise Rosenfeld’s suggestion that the narrator represents both the individual and the collective experience in the matter of the novel being autobiographical that I mentioned in chapter 1. By

speaking about how “we” remember the past and the events that took place, the narrator emphasise that there are other survivors, and that their story is similar to hers. Furthermore, when the narrator reflects on the relationship between Emily and Gerald, she does so in retrospect: “The next thing was that Emily fell in love... I am conscious that this seems a term inappropriate to the times I am describing” (73). Because she comments on this matter in the present of writing, the narrator realises that the matter of love appears to be obsolete in the past she is describing. Also, another remark made by the narrator in the present of writing, a remark that shows her need to tell the truth, is one made when she again comments on Emily’s love for Gerald: “This is history, after all, and I hope a truthful one”. (94) This comment brings to mind the matter of history repeating itself when it comes to love, but it also refers to the whole story being “history, after all”, as if to be read as realistic, and perhaps a warning? Also, the narrator’s comment on how she hopes this is the truth emphasises her role as the focalizer in the novel because it shows that what she writes is her own interpretation of what happens.

The narrator speeds up the notion of time in *Memoirs* as we will see on several occasions, especially when it comes to Emily, who is maturing faster than what is anticipated in the “real” world. At first, the twelve-year old girl appears to resemble a small child rather than an adolescent: “In those first days she slept and she slept. Because of this, and because of her invincible obedience, I was unconsciously thinking of her as younger than she was. I sat waiting quietly in my living-room, knowing that she was asleep, exactly as one does with a small child” (24), but during the period of the novel, Emily quickly matures from the child she first appears to be, through a period of acting like an insecure teenager, to becoming a mature woman, all over a rather short period of time. Whether or not this is actually happening with Emily is uncertain, because this is the narrator’s perception that the reader is presented with. Towards the end, the narrator “was seeing a mature woman who had had her fill of everything, but is still being asked from, demanded of, persuaded into giving [...] they were the eyes of a

mature woman of about thirty-five, or forty. [...] If she *had* spoken of it, she would have spoken of it so, as I've written" (169). It is the narrator who portrays Emily in a certain way, convinced that Emily would have said the same thing, which may emphasise the notion that Emily is a younger version of the narrator, but the last comment made by the narrator in the quote also creates questions in the reader about the focalizer's reliability because we cannot know for sure that the narrator's perception is correct. The change in Emily starts almost immediately: "even in the few days she had been there she had changed. Her breasts were shaping, pushing out the child's bodice. Her round face with its attractive dark eyes needed very little to shape it into a young girl's face" (27). Further on in her "memoirs" the narrator uses the old white dress that Emily finds and wears as a symbol of Emily's physical and mental maturation:

Her first self-portrait [...] Most often it was a bride's dress. Then it was a young girl's dress – that ambiguous declaration of naiveté more usually made by a mature vision than that of the wearer, an eye that sees the fragility of certain types of young girls' clothes as the expression of the evanescence of that flesh. It was a nightdress when she wore its transparency over her naked body. It was evening dress, and sometimes [...] took away innocence from anything she wore, so that she might have flowers in her hands and in her hair [...] yet she had about her the look of a woman who has calculated the exact amount of flesh she will show at a dinner party. (51-52)

The way Emily's play with the dress not only portrays her as a child or adolescent, but also as a mature woman in a bridal dress, transparent night dress and evening dress, all according to the narrator. However, it is not Emily's reaction to the dress that the narrator describes, but her own: "This dress was for me an emotional experience. I was frightened by it. [...] I believed her capable of going out on the pavement wearing it. *Now* I judge myself to have been stupid" (52, emphasis added). The narrator was incapable of understanding Emily's intentions for playing with the dress in the moments that it happened, and it is only when she writes the "memoirs" that she realises that she overreacted. Thus there has been a change in the narrator and her conception of Emily between the time of the incident and her writing, and the narrator needs to tell the reader so to reinforce her reliability. Another example of Emily's rapid change and thus

also the narrator's notion of time is seen towards the end after Emily's friend June has left Emily without saying goodbye: At first the violent shocked tears, the working face and blank staring eyes of a child [...] not a woman's tears... Which came next. Emily [...] was weeping as a woman weeps, which is to say as if the earth was bleeding. I nearly said *as if the earth had decided to have a good cry* – but it would be dishonest to take the edge of it. [...] I sat there, I went on sitting, watching Emily the eternal woman at her task of weeping” (144-145). The narrator witnesses the maturation in Emily and manages to capture the rapid change in her over just a few sentences. The narrator also reinforces her reliability as the focalizer and as a writer of the “memoirs” because she recognises the dishonesty in diminishing Emily's grief, at the same time as she informs the reader that she could have done so.

Mother and Daughter or Two of the Same?

One of my main arguments in my interpretation of *Memoirs* is that the Emily is the younger version of the narrator, which I believe that the narrator also recognises: “I frightened her, representing to her that unimaginable thing, old age. But for my part, she, her condition, was as close to me as my own memories” (43); “He would come and see Emily soon: he spoke to her, it was Emily's place now. My flat was Emily's, and I was her elderly attendant. Well, why not?” (168), However, it can be difficult not to separate them as individuals as well. One hand, Cederstrom argues that “Emily symbolizes the protagonist's younger personality, a repository of her youthful attitudes, an element in her development. [...] Emily is not a separate person but the archetypal *jeune fille* – a stage in life through which the protagonist has passed but which she has not assimilated.” (120-121)⁸, while on the other hand, according to Walker, both roles of the two characters, as two versions of the same person and as individuals, should be explored: “These two, Emily and the narrator, thrown into the same house without rhyme or reason [...] Although this is an allegory of psychological integration, it is also quite literally a

⁸ Jeune fille: from French, meaning “girl”.

story of two very different, separate human beings painstakingly forming a social bond. Faithfulness to Lessing's fiction requires that we take account of both the vehicle and the tenor, of both the social and psychological sides of the metaphorical equation" (95). Although I believe that Cederstrom is right about Emily not really being a separate person, I agree with Walker and that is why I will look at the narrator and Emily both as separate individuals and as Emily being a younger version of the narrator. Furthermore, Walker argues that Emily must be read as the narrator in the sense that the real narrator can retell incidents from Emily's childhood without having lived through them, since the narrator is not omniscient, while Emily at the same time is a real teenager living with the narrator. (96) I believe that Walker's argument is correct on this matter, but the fact that the narrator knows about Emily's past may also strengthen the notion that the narrator functions as a mother to Emily. However, this is a matter I will come back to in chapter 3, as the narrator's knowledge of Emily's childhood derives from her visits to the world behind the wall.

What we know about the narrator through her relationship with Emily is how their interaction changes the narrator, even enlightens her, as she takes on the role as an observer of Emily and her life when she comes into her life, not only as she watches Emily's past being played out behind the wall, but also through Emily's interaction with the narrator and the outside world. When Emily first arrives, the narrator's immediate observation of Emily is that: "She was watching me, carefully, closely: the thought came into my mind that this was the expert assessment of possibilities by a prisoner observing a new jailer. Already my heart was heavy: anxiety" (17)! I will elaborate on the notion of prisons later, but at this point it becomes obvious that the narrator is aware that the relationship between Emily and herself is rather frail from the beginning, as if a foster-mother is taking in a troubled child who has felt imprisoned by a former foster-parent. The matter of families is repeatedly an issue for Emily in *Memoirs*, as she seeks to create and belong to different families or societies which resemble families, as

the narrator points out on several occasions. The unit that is the narrator and Emily may not constitute a family from the beginning, but as the bond between them and their relationship strengthens, after Emily brings the narrator into Gerald's house, the family that consists of the mother and daughter creates itself. Emily's need to belong to a community may also come from her need for a family, and with Gerald's commune she finds what she is looking for: "There it was: warmth, caring, a family. Emily believed herself to have acquired a ready-made family" (83)" Also, her relationship with June and Gerald resembles family structure: "off they went, the three of them, Emily and Gerald first, June tagging on behind. Parents and a child was what it looked like – what it felt like, I guessed, at least to June" (94). Emily's longing for a real family, although she is unaware of it, is a result of the traumas of her childhood, a matter that will become clearer when we look at the scenes behind the wall in chapter 3.

When Emily first arrives in the apartment, the narrator sees Emily as a disturbance that will keep her from spending as much time as possible in the space behind the wall, while at the same time the narrator realises that having Emily there also triggers her into feeling, not only responsibilities towards the young girl, but also suppressed emotions:

I could not help thinking that to have a child with me, just as the wall was beginning to open itself up, would be a nuisance, and in fact she and her animal were very much in the way. This made me feel guilty. All kinds of emotions I had not felt for a long time came to life in me again, and I longed simply to walk through the wall and never come back. But this would be irresponsible; it would mean turning my back on my responsibilities. (24)

Emily's appearance thus helps to bring the narrator back to life in a time of such social instability, forcing the narrator to live through it instead of escaping by crossing over to the space on the other side of the wall permanently. However, the appearance of the young girl is also closely connected to the narrator's retreat to the world behind the wall, because the narrator needs Emily there to help the narrator remember her own childhood, which I will elaborate on in chapter 3. Also, the narrator rather quickly recognises her role as a parent figure to Emily: "I was a continuation, for her, of parents, or a parent, a guardian, foster-parents" (27).

Another example of the narrator feeling like a parent to Emily is when the girl has taken a shirt from her cupboard: “Without asking. I cannot say how delighted I was when she did this. It showed she felt she had some rights with me, at last” (53). Because of her visits to the world behind the wall, where the narrator witnesses the poor relationship between Emily and her mother, the narrator recognises Emily’s need for a better relationship with a mother, a role she now is willing to take on. Thus if Emily is a younger version of the narrator, the narrator is making up to herself for the wrongdoings of her own mother. Also, these observations by the narrator emphasises how the relationship between Emily and the narrator has evolved since they first came together.

To begin with, Emily does not leave the building, but stays inside in the apartment, watching the outside world from the window, before she moves out to the pavement. In this sense Emily also takes on the role of the observer, a part she must play in order to understand the outer world, and she does so with much greater insight than a girl her age are expected to, “dreadful in her accuracy” (29): “Of Janet White, a girl about her age: ‘She’ll spend her life looking for someone like daddy, but where will she find him. I mean *now*, he won’t exist” (28). Emily must observe the world before she can enter it, like the narrator knows she must observe Emily in order to remove herself from the apartment. According to the narrator “She depressed me – oh, for many reasons; my own past being one of them. [...] She simply could not let anyone pass without swallowing them, and regurgitating them covered in her slime, the clever child, the one who could not be deceived, who could not have anything put over on her: who had been applauded for being like this, had been taught it.” (29). The narrator feels depressed because the narrator recognises Emily’s past as being her own past, and therefore she hints to the reader that she knows that Emily’s upbringing had taught Emily to act a certain way. However, the narrator also tells the reader that Emily is unaware of this, which emphasise the notion that it is only the narrator who recognises that Emily is the younger version of

herself. Furthermore, Emily is cautious towards anyone who tries to come near her, including the narrator who she does not get to close to: “The point was that there wasn’t anybody who came near her, into her line of sight, who was not experienced by her as a threat. This *was* how her experience, whatever that had been, had ‘set’ her. I found I was trying to put myself in her place, tried to be her [...] and I found I was thinking that this was only what everyone did, what I did, but there was something in her which enlarged the tendency, had set it forth, exaggerated” (29-30). Again, this passage shows that the narrator is aware of the fact that Emily is coloured by her earlier experience with poor relationships in her childhood, and it also emphasises the connection between the narrator and Emily, because also the narrator appears to be cautious toward everyone around her.

When Emily finally leaves the apartment and crosses over to the outside world, after a period of doing nothing but eat and watch the life on the pavement, she, and therefore also the narrator, is ready to take part in the society. Emily continues to grow and mature as she positions herself within the space of the pavement and Gerald’s house, and she could have been a leader of her own, but she chooses not to be, and the narrator cannot understand why:

And now I suppose it must be asked and answered why Emily did not choose to be a chieftainess, a leader on her own account? Well, why not? Yes, I did ask myself this, of course. The attitudes of women toward themselves and to men, the standards women had set for themselves, their gallantry for their fight for equality, the decades long and very painful questioning of their roles, their functions – all this make it difficult for me to say, simply, that Emily was in love. (94)

The narrator shows the reader that she is as puzzled by Emily’s choice (and all women who had made the same choice) in the moment of writing the “memoirs” as she was when Emily made the decision, and it is “difficult for [her] to say” because the narrator disapproves. Because the narrator finds it important to clarify for the reader her opinion on this issue, this leaves the impression that the narrator wants to warn the reader to about this matter. The narrator believes that this is part of the fixed social patterns that keep repeating themselves despite the progress in women’s struggle for equality; “The trouble was, she did love Gerald;

and this longing for him, for his attention and his notice, the need to be the one who sustained and comforted him, who connected him with the earth, who held him steady in her common sense and her warmth – this need drained her of the initiative she would need to be a leader of a commune. She wanted no more than to be the leader of the commune’s women. His only woman, of course” (94). According to Debra A. Castillo in *The Translated World: A Postmodern Tour of Libraries in Literature*, “in a civilization that has been utterly destroyed, the old archetypes of female behaviour are absolute, the old responsibilities remain, the old images and old roles are passed on from one generation to the next” (306). Thus Emily’s behaviour is inevitable in the society affected by “it” in *Memoirs*. Another example of the stale social patterns that the narrator recognises is when she compares Gerald to a male going out to hunt while Emily, or any of the other females in Gerald’s “harem”, stays at home taking care of the house: “I entertained these thoughts [...] old thoughts about stale social patterns. Yet one had them, they did not die. Just as the old patterns kept repeating themselves, re-forming themselves even when events seemed to licence any experiment or deviation or mutation, so did the old thought, which matched the patterns” (115-116). Thus the narrator is able to recognise the repetition of these social patterns. This passage is also closely linked to another one later when Emily goes out to Gerald on the pavement: “Good Lord, how many centuries had we overturned, how many long steps of man’s up climbing did Emily undo when she crossed from my flat to the life on the pavement! And what promise, what possibilities, what experiment, what variations of the human theme had been cancelled out! Watching, I fell into despair at the precariousness of every human attempt and effort, and I left the window” (127). Not only does the narrator show her ability to reflect on the matter, but she also shows anger and despair because Emily is not able to see what she is doing, and because of this she temporarily leaves her role as the observer. The frustration she shows may leave the reader with the question of whether the narrator lets her feelings colour her observations and remarks

during her recollection of the story, but because she writes her “memoirs” in retrospect, the emotions she shows may also reinforce her reliability concerning these issues because the emotions might last have lasted longer than her memory of the actual incidents. Also, because the narrator on several occasions emphasises the matter of these stale social patterns, this is very much in line with the notion that part of the narrator’s intentions when writing her “memoirs” is to warn the reader against such repetitions.

The Animal, the Boyfriend and June

Hugo, Emily’s pet, is somewhat difficult to deal with, as the narrator describes him as mix of a cat and a dog: “What was it? An animal, at any rate. It was the size of a bulldog, and shaped more like a dog than a cat, but its face was that of a cat. It was yellow. Its hide was harsh and rough. It had cat’s eyes and whiskers. It had a long whip-like tail. An ugly beast” (22). According to Perrakis, Hugo’s “outer ugliness is a reflection of the physical and natural in the Survivor’s world” (54); thus Perrakis believes that the animal’s appearance is mainly a reflection of “it” in the *Memoirs*. Hugo’s appearance raises confusion for the narrator: “Seen thus from the back, Hugo aroused the emotions most dogs do: compassion, discomfort, as if for a kind of prisoner or slave. But then he would turn his head and expecting to see the warm abject lovingness of a dog’s eyes, fellow-feeling vanished away: this dog was no dog, half-humanised” (56). Whereas the narrator appears to be rather well reflected when speaking about the other characters in the “real” world of the novel, she is unable to figure out this peculiar animal, and she does not try to hide her confusion for the reader, and because of this the narrator gives the impression that she in fact does not have an answer for everything. Also, whereas on one hand the members of the new societies and the kids from the underground are given animal traits, which I will elaborate on below, Hugo on the other hand possesses human traits according to the narrator: “Now I was thankful Hugo was here. He was not a difficult animal (I nearly said person!) to share a home with” (47); “Despite himself, he licked her hand

a little, with a look on him that a *person* has when doing something he doesn't want to do, but can't stop..." (137, emphasis added); "She was silent when he had gone, and then Hugo came and sat with his face on her knee: he was saying: I can see that you have really chosen me at last, me against him, me instead of all the others" (168)! Because Hugo confuses the narrator she may be projecting human traits on to the animal to try and simplify him in order to figure him out, but this only raises confusion for the reader as well as for the narrator, or this may be the way she remember him. Either way Hugo's appearance causes a disturbance for the reader who wants to read *Memoirs* as being realism, because the narrator fails to present Hugo as realistic, which again may weaken the reliability of the narrator.

Hugo appears to be the main reason why Emily chooses not to leave the city because she knows she cannot take him with her, and he is also what keeps Emily coming back to the apartment. Thus Hugo seems to project Emily's (guilty?) conscience in the sense that she knows she cannot leave him behind if she decides to leave the city, that she cannot bring him with her out of the apartment because he will be in danger, and that she must return to the apartment. Because of this, Hugo serves as a link between Emily and the narrator, thus forcing them to continue their relationship. Hugo also serves as the narrator's companion and fellow spectator when Emily is out on the pavement or at Gerald's house. Although Emily and Hugo are very close in the beginning, they drift apart as the novel progresses, when Emily does not need him anymore. According to Perrakis "representing Emily's bond with the natural world, Hugo is threatened by the growing harshness and violation on pavement life [...] Furthermore, Hugo's suffering when Emily deserts him to spend her days on the pavement suggests he also represents a deep bond with aspects of her instinctual self that she is violating in her need for acceptance from her peer group" (54). Thus if Hugo projects Emily's conscience, then she suppresses this in order to become part of the life on the pavement. According to Cederstrom

Hugo, together with the children from the underground, represents the animal and instinctual part of the narrator's ego:

By recognizing the limitations of the ego and collective roles through Emily, the protagonist now explores the most basic elements of existence – the animal and instinctual. [...] Hugo [...] is contrasted with the cruel instinctual behaviour of the children of the Underground. Hugo has a quiet dignity, strength and loyalty which these gangs of children, the only functioning social unit lack. [...] The protagonist must now come to terms with the place of the instincts in the structure of the psyche which, of course exists within an animal body, which Lessing portrays though Hugo having an inherent dignity. (127)

I will elaborate on the children from the underground below, but Hugo's humanlike dignity may thus represent the animal part of the narrator's ego if Cederstrom is right, a matter which then would explain why the narrator projects human traits on to Hugo. However, Hugo is Emily's dog, not the narrator's although she is the one who spends most time with him, and thus I find it more likely that Hugo perhaps is part of this version of Emily, the young version of the narrator, rather than the middle-aged narrator.

Emily's love for Gerald is what enables her to extend her social exchange, as she follows him when he forms a new society on his own, a branch of the other new social units. According to the narrator Gerald is one of the natural leaders, "a young man who seemed likely to lead the next contingent out and away from the city. He was, despite his swash-buckling clothes, a thoughtful young man, or at least one slow to judgement; an observer by temperament, perhaps, but pushed into action by the time? He was, at any rate, the natural guardian of the younger ones, the distressed, the forlorn" (73). Because of the narrator's initial description of him, Gerald seems at first to be a strong male character, but these traits are exactly what weaken him towards the end, as he is unable to release himself from the gang of kids from the underground that he is determined "to save". Towards the end "they were his, his creatures; he had made himself theirs; he had his gang, his tribe... but at the cost of doing what they wanted, serving them" (168). In *Prisons*, Lessing establishes a connection between Gerald and his need for a group to belong to:

The fact is that we all live our lives in groups – the family, work groups, social, religious and political groups. Very few people indeed are happy as solitaries, and they tend to be seen by their neighbours as peculiar or selfish or worse. Most people cannot stand being alone for long. They are always seeking groups to belong to, and if one group dissolves, they look for another. We are group animals still, and there is nothing wrong with that. But what is dangerous is not the belonging to a group, or groups, but not understanding the social laws that govern groups and govern us. (47-48)

In *Memoirs* Lessing is exploring the connection between the individual and its need to belong to a community through Gerald, but what the narrator fails to recognise is why Gerald cannot stand alone. It is not Gerald's need of belonging to a group that necessarily weakens him, but the fact that he is unable to understand the social laws that govern the group of children from the underground, which I will look at below.

It is not until the end of the novel that Gerald is able to remove himself from the group after the group has turned against him and Emily: "Blood appeared on Gerald's temple, and a stone, landing on Emily's middle, caused her to stagger back. Gerald, brought to life by the danger to her, now sheltering her with his arm, and he was bringing her in to the building" (179). By rescuing Emily and joining her, the narrator and Hugo, Gerald is still not standing alone outside of a group, as he only moves from the group of children from the underground to join the group of people inside the narrator's apartment. Despite the fact that the children from the underground turned against him, he is unable to free himself from what he sees as his responsibility toward them, a fact that is incomprehensible to the narrator: "He was very low, depressed. [...] His face was all incredulity and pain: I don't know what it was in Gerald that could not – could not even now – bear what those children had become. I do know that it was deep in him, fundamental; and to give them up was to abandon – *so he felt* – the best part of himself" (179, emphasis added). The narrator emphasises that it is Gerald's opinion and not her own that she expresses, and that she cannot comprehend why he feels the way he does. According to Cederstrom "Gerald earns his way into the group of survivors by his continual concern for the children. He is the aspect of the psyche able to establish new forms in the

future. His tenacity and ability to deal with the elemental levels of existence qualify him for survival beyond the collapse of the old order. Gerald is unable to make any changes so long as he remains with the children on their level, and he is forced to acquiesce to Emily's demands that he leave them" (129-139). If Cederstrom is right, Gerald's concern for the children and his ability to establish new social units represent an important aspect of the narrator's ego, because this is the aspect that enables existence after the survival, and this is in line with Cederstrom's psychological interpretations of the novel. However, I will argue that because the narrator is unable to comprehend Gerald's sense of commitment towards the children from the underground, it is not because of his care for the children that he "earns his way into the group of survivors" but rather despite it.

June Ryan, the first to cross the border between the pavement and the apartment (from the outside and in) is part of Gerald's commune, and her lack of proper language and self worth troubles the narrator. Unlike the Authority, who does nothing but talk, June's lack of skills in speaking are an example of how the use of language has changed for the members of the new societies as "it was at the extreme away from 'good English', the norm once used for announcements, news or by officialdom" (88). The narrator "could hardly understand her, her accent was so degraded. I am not talking about the words she used, which were always sharp enough when one had uncoded them, were stubborn and strong attempts to lay hold of meanings and ideas every bit as clear and good as those expressed in tutored speech" (88). The narrator continues to elaborate on the matter, as the reduced speech is another example of failed social exchange: "this child, formed by our old time which above all had been verbal, to do with words, the exchange of them, the use of them, had been excluded from all that richness. We (meaning the educated) had never found a way of sharing that plenty with the lower reaches of our society" (96). The narrator puts herself among the educated members of the society, and June among the uneducated. The fact that she belongs to this lower class is

probably also why she does not say goodbye when June suddenly leaves with a group of women towards the end of the novel according to the narrator:

The shocking truth was that June did not feel *she* was worth the effort: her leaving us, she must have felt, was of no importance. In spite of the fact that Emily was so devoted, and anxious and loving? Yes, in spite of that. June did not value herself. [...] She deserved nothing, was owed nothing, could not really be loved and therefore could not be missed. [...] She had gone because she could leave one day as well as another. It did not matter, she did not matter. (143-144)

Again it is important to remember that it is the narrator as the internal focalizer who shares her opinion on June's sudden disappearance, which means that the reader cannot know for sure that this is the truth, but because the narrator appears to hold a quite strong opinion on this matter, the readers are likely to trust her. According to Cederstrom's psychological interpretation of *Memoirs* "The absence of personal property indicates a lack of self esteem in the Ryans, a significant collapse of the ego. Selflessness carried to its logical conclusion results in the Ryans, who are survivors but who exist without any sense of their own worth. June has inherited this quality from her family" (125). If Cederstrom is right then June, as a member of the Ryans, represents the part of the narrator's ego that deals with self worth. However, I believe that this is another example of repeated social pattern that the narrator emphasises throughout the novel.

June's family, the Ryans also serves as an example of one particular type of family with loose social structures that occur more and more frequently in the aftermath of social collapse; "The Ryans, no longer an extreme [...] The Ryans had turned out to be nothing special" (107). It is a family of many children, living on welfare and from hand to mouth, the lowest class of society. However, rather than experience decay when the "bad time started, or rather *seen* to be starting, a very different thing" (106), the narrator believes that the Ryans thrive on it, unlike the rest of the old community: "eating better and more healthily now than when civilisation had fed them. [...] surviving capably and with enjoyment, which was more than could be said of so many of the middle-class people, who either lived on pretending nothing was *really* happening,

only a recognition of society; or who had faded away in a variety of ways, not able to bear an existence where respectability and gain could no longer measure the worth of a person” (106-107). According to Greene, the social unit that is the Ryans can be positioned between the society based on family structure as the one above, and that of the children from the underground below, as a compromise of the two different societies since “their loose family structure provides some support for its members while also allowing more flexibility than allowed by the nuclear family” (150). On the other end of the scale, members of the Ryan family can act inconsistently, not following a set social pattern, as June does when she suddenly leaves. The narrator recognises the Ryans as a representation of similar parts of the community: “I use the phrase *Gerald’s house* as people had once said *the Ryans*, meaning a way of life. Temporary ways of life, both: all of our ways of living, our compromises, our little adaptations – transitory, all of them, none could last” (107). Thus the narrator’s focus on the Ryans may mainly be a way of emphasising the different types of groups within the community.

Failing Communities

In *Memoirs* the narrator has rather strong opinions about the breaking up and forming of new communities and groups that happens throughout the whole of *Memoirs*; the original community which the narrator belongs to, the Authority (which is part of the old society, but quite different from the group which the narrator belongs to), the travellers, Gerald’s household and the gang of kids from the underground. These are part of the social exchange that Walker finds important for the interpretation of *Memoirs*, and because the narrator devotes a lot of her “memoirs” to these issues, she must do so with an intention. In the novel old communities must change or break down in order to create new ones, or find a way to exist coherently. According to the narrator the community that she belongs to, the old community, at first appears to be a

community that tries not to be affected by the breakdown of society, as they continue to live their lives as normal and unaffected as possible:

While everything, all forms of social organisation, broke up, we lived on, adjusting our lives, as if nothing fundamental was happening. It was amazing how determined, how stubborn, how self-renewing were the attempts to lead an ordinary life. [...] Order could also exist in pockets, of space, of time – through periods of weeks and months or in a particular district. Inside them, people would live and talk and even think as if nothing had changed [...] We can get used to anything at all; this is a commonplace, of course, but perhaps you have to live through such a time to see how horribly true it is. There is nothing that people won't try to accommodate into 'ordinary life.'" (19)

Even at the end, when the city is doomed and many people have left, the old community tries to live as if unaffected: "And yet in a way everybody played a part in this conspiracy that nothing much was happening – or that it was happening, but one day things would go into reverse and hey presto! Back we would be in the good old days. [...] I played the part of complicity like everybody else. I renewed my lease during these periods and it was for seven years: of course I knew that we didn't have anything like that time left" (92). What the narrator does when she writes her "memoirs" is to comment on humans' ability and need to adjust to their surroundings using the old community in *Memoirs* as an example, and this reinforces the narrator's ability to reflect upon such serious matters. However, on one hand, because the narrator still feels the need to play along despite the fact that she is aware that the community's attempt to lead "ordinary lives" is all a charade, this may cause a concern for the reader because the narrator may lose some of her reliability, but on the other hand this reinforces the narrator's ability to adjust her life.

This narrator's community consists mostly of elderly people; the middle class who has not yet chosen to leave the city, or joined the Authority. It is also the collective of which the narrator speaks for when she talks about "we" and "us" in the novel, and of which she tries to explain the reaction to the changes that take place in the city:

Even when parts of our town took anarchy for granted, we in the north talked and thought of ourselves as immune. The trouble would vanish, dissolve, take itself

off... Such is the strength of what we are used to, the first two or three appearances of gangs in our northern suburbs seemed to us isolated incidents, not likely to be repeated. Slowly, we came to understand that it was our period of peace, of normality, and not the days of looting and fighting, which were going to be unusual now. (13)

Again the narrator speaks about repetition; although here it appears that the community understands that history will repeat itself. Thus it is not the lack of ability for the old community to recognise the repetition, but rather the lack of will to do something about it. The old community tries to grasp the events that take place in the collapsing world, as the members of this community are the ones who have witnessed the breakdown. The narrator recognises that one way to keep the society at some level of normality is by exchanging news in order to know what is happening in the city, news collected by different groups in the society: “These groups were like an additional organ burgeoning on the official organs of news [...] News gathered in this way was often common talk days or even weeks before it was given official life in the newscast. [...] We felt we had to have this precious residue: it was our due, our right. Having it made us feel safer and gave us identity. Not getting it, or enough of it, deprived us, made us anxious” (45). The narrator realises that news becomes a commodity when everything else has broken down, as it is news rather than food and other necessities that is produced for people to consume. According to the narrator the old community is also the community which is most afraid of change, as they are the ones who witness the forming of new communities when the gangs are created out on the pavement. “We knew that soon our young people would leave; we made the ritual noises of wonder and alarm; but now it was happening everyone knew it had been bound to happen, and we marvelled at our lack of foresight... and the shortsightedness of others, whose neighbourhoods were still without this phenomenon and who believed they were immune” (54-55). Thus the narrator recognises that the community is in fact able to understand that there is a repeating pattern, but that they are incapable of doing something to prevent it. However, although suspicious to these new social units, members of

the old community, including the narrator, move out to the pavements, which is another example of humans' ability to adjust to the situation.

The Authority, or "the Talkers", is a branch of the old community whose presence is only felt in *Memoirs*, and almost never seen. The members of the Authority are the ones meant to be in charge as the society breaks down, while in fact they are not only incapable of preventing the collapse, but also to take charge when the crisis has struck and according to the narrator they appear unaffected by the matter, and all they do is talk:

Yet even at that late stage, there was a level of our society which managed to live as if nothing much was happening – nothing irreparable. The ruling class – but that was a dead phrase, so they said; very well then, the kind of person who ran things, administrated, sat on councils and committees, made decisions. *Talked*. The bureaucracy. An international bureaucracy. But when has it not been true? – that the section of a society which gets the most out of it maintains in itself, and for as long as it can in others, an illusion of security, permanence, order. (91)

The Authority is unable to act as they cannot recognise the need for action, and at the same time they continue to consume what the society produces, and thus they speed up the breakdown. Walker elaborates on this: "Not only is the most important commodity in the society unsatisfying; the Authority, which produces [news], demands much of the society's real, nourishing products in return for news. Thus the Authority, which consumes without producing anything real themselves, is unable to contribute to social exchange. Furthermore, the community, or rather the narrator, also recognises the need to blame the upper class and/or the Authority for social decay:

It seems to me that this has something to do, at bottom, with conscience, a vestigial organ in humanity which still demands that there should be some sort of justice or equity, feels that it is intolerable [...] that some people do well while others starve and fail. This is the most powerful of mechanisms for, to begin with, the maintain of a society, and then its undermining, its rotting, its collapse... yes of course this is not new, has been going on throughout history, very likely and as far as we know. (91-92)

Here the narrator again creates an important connection to history, and the process of blaming Authority and upper class for the failure when a society collapses. However, one must keep in

mind that the narrator's feelings toward Authority colours her opinion, and thus she may have overdone her description of them.

Emily is participating in the creation of new social units, and the gangs, or "the travellers", consist mostly of young people, such as Emily, unlike the community of which the narrator belongs. According to Cederstrom, "These gangs are abstractions of all social organizations, and Emily's relationship to them is a vivid portrait of the young ego and its need for support from its peers" (122). Thus Cederstrom believes that the new social units become part of Emily's transformation. The narrator sees the travellers as a consequence of the breakdown of the city, as there now is a need in the community to create new societies to replace the failed, old ones. Also, as the name suggests, the travellers are the ones who realise the need to leave the city, as most of them does throughout the novel, instead of trying to adjust their lives to the decaying city like the old community. The travellers embrace the collective, and unlike the narrator, who spends most of her time inside the apartment, the members of the travelling gangs need to be together. According to Walker, Lessing has claimed that "There are two alternatives to [the] responsible blending of individuals into society. [...] individuals may isolate themselves from one another, sulking or dreaming their separate dreams, egocentric but essentially helpless" (93). This view in *Memoirs* is represented by the narrator, who spends her time mostly in solitude or in the company of Emily, and also by Emily before she crosses the border between the apartment and the pavement. Walker's second view is that "people may allow themselves to be swept away into larger masses applauding or censoring without private imagination or individual choice" (93), a view which the travellers, and Emily after she has left the apartment, represent. The narrator portrays the group of travellers as packs, like animals who work together as a unity in order to function, "like dogs coming together in a park or a waste place. [...] off they go, a pack, a unit... this description is true of course of any group of people [...] The gang of 'kids' were only showing the way to their elders, who soon copied

them; a ‘pack of youngsters’ nearly always, and increasingly, included older people, even families, but the label remained” (33). According to Lessing “growing up is difficult and painful; and what we are talking about is the growing up of ourselves as social animals. Adults who hold on to all kinds of cosy illusions and comforting notions remain immature. The same holds good of us as groups or as members of groups – group animals” (*Prisons* 19). Furthermore, Lessing also believes that

Very few people indeed are happy as solitaries, and they tend to be seen by their neighbours as peculiar or selfish or worse. Most people cannot stand being alone for long. They are always seeking groups to belong to, and if one group dissolves, they look for another. We are group animals still, and there is nothing wrong with that. But what is dangerous is not the belonging to a group, or groups, but not understanding the social laws that govern groups and govern us. (*Prisons* 47-48)

However, although the travellers have traits of animals, this kind of society, unlike the gang of children from the underground, still remain human in the sense that they show social skills in the matter of consideration for their fellow members of the group, in their way of feeling responsibilities towards each other.

Gerald’s house works as an example of one of the new societies that emerge from the changes, as there are now children without parents in need of someone to look after them. As the “natural leader” Gerald wants to look after these kids in “an organised way” (83), he becomes “a father or elder brother to the children” (83) in the community which resembles a Utopia. According to the narrator’s descriptions, this new social unit, resembles a community older than the community which the narrator belongs to, as they cultivates the garden at the back of the house in order to produce food, and live without equipment which the narrator’s community sees as necessities: “how very odd it was that all over our cities, side by side with citizens who still used electric light, drew water for which they had paid from taps, expected their rubbish to be collected, were these houses which were as if the technological revolution had never occurred at all” (90). Furthermore, this community also brings back old trade skills as “The place was a conglomeration of little workshops: they made soap and candles and wove

materials and dyed them; they cured leather; they dried and preserved food; they reconstructed and made furniture” (90). The narrator is awed by the development because the appearance of these communities appears to be something that she did not foresee. However, she was able to foresee that these new societies could not last.

Gerald’s household is a society based on the (communist?) idea that no one should be in charge, a matter which Gerald and Emily was very clear on from the beginning: “Gerald and I talked it over, right at the start, it was all discussed, there wasn’t going to be any of that old nonsense, people in charge telling people what to do, all that *horrible* stuff” (112). Lessing has elaborated on the matter of creating such a utopian vision:

I think writers are by nature more easily able to achieve this detachment from mass emotions and social conditions. People who are continually examining and observing become critics of what they examine and observe. Look at all those utopias written through the centuries. [...] all the many blueprints for possible futures produced by science and space fiction writers who, I think, are in the same tradition. These of course are all criticisms of current societies, for you can’t write a utopia in a vacuum. (*Prisons* 7)

Lessing believes that the process of creating the utopian community as a counterpart to the current community is a result of the need to criticise, like the Gerald’s household is created as a utopian counterpart to the old community, and Lessing’s idea may certainly also apply to the narrator as a writer, because she is one who is “continually examining and observing”. Thus the narrator may have deliberately emphasised the utopian vision of Gerald’s household to underline everything that is wrong with the old community and especially the Authority that supposedly runs it. However, the narrator knows that the new society is doomed to fail, since most people need someone to take charge, a matter that Emily cannot comprehend because she is unable to recognise the repetition of history. In fact, Emily becomes the Authority in the new society, the one the others has to follow: “the way the children reacted when they saw Emily: this was how people respond to Authority. [...] he had been given an order, or so he felt, and was obeying her” (112). The narrator on the other hand, who is part of the old community, can recognise it because of her ability to see how history repeats itself: “you don’t get a

democracy by passing resolution or thinking democracy is an attractive idea. And that's what we have always done. On the one hand 'you're a good little girl, bad little girl', and institutions and hierarchies and a place in the pecking order, and on the other passing resolution about democracy, or saying how democratic we are. [...] All that has happened is what always happens" (113). The innate social patterns that the narrator speaks about, "you're a good little girl, bad little girl", is a matter that takes part within the structure of a family, which the reader also can recognise in the "personal" scenes behind the wall, and as the society within Gerald's house resembles a family as a social structure, Emily being the mother and Gerald the father, the same applies for them. Walker argues that as it is these repeating patterns that lead to the breakdown of the old community, it is inevitable that the same thing will happen with new communities: "If it is true that social pattern are fixed and inevitable, then progressive societies always mutate back to the same old form." (98-99) I agree, and it is therefore impossible for Emily and Gerald to maintain the utopian vision of their new society, as it is bound to change. Also, according to Greene, the family structure of Gerald's household makes it incapable of being liberated from the social patterns: "Human beings produced by the prison of the family are incapable of making a free society, and the ruined garden of Gerald's commune represent the impossibility of making anything new from existing social conditions: you can't get there from here" (150). Thus the new society fails in the end, after the intrusion of the children from the underground, and is impossible to restore: "There was nothing to prevent a new community being made there. The old one might be restored? No, of course it could not: something organic, which had grown naturally, had been destroyed" (157). According to the narrator, Gerald's household had emerged naturally, thus it cannot be restored again in the same matter.

The new gang of children from the underground which suddenly appears, is another social unit in the aftermath of the collapse, and they resemble traits from the post-apocalyptic genre where "The larger social organization is replaced by primitive tribes, reconstituted

families who struggle for an edge in a hostile wasteland” (Rosenfeld, “Re-membering the Future 45). It is a group of very young children, who probably never even had had parents, and unlike June, who still have some language left, enough to make herself understood by the narrator, the children appears to have lost their language almost complete, and is only understood by their peers: “it was not that they did not understand speech, for they were communicating with each other in words that were recognisable, if only just – they *were* words, and not grunts and barks and screams” (148). It is a group of children that the narrator describes in terms normally used on animals, being “like moles or rats in the earth” (146) and “like monkeys.” (150). Whereas Cederstrom recognises Hugo as the animal part of the narrator’s ego, she, as mentioned before, speaks about the children from the underground in the same sentences, believing that they represent the instinctual part of the ego, since “They lack the dignity of animals and have no perverted imitations of human values. [...] The instincts, however, are conditioned by society to conform to certain pattern, and when social structures are weakened, the instincts can become perverted” (127). However, although I agree with Cederstrom that the children from the underground lack the dignity that for instance Hugo possesses, I find it somewhat far-fetched that these children can be incorporated into the narrator’s ego, because there is no proof in *Memoirs* that the narrator holds any of their traits.

The narrator wishes to refer to the behaviour of the children from the underground as if they in fact were animals, but she recognise them as something completely different; not only that they are not animals, but that they are not a social unit in the same matter as the other groups on the pavement and in Gerald’s house:

They were... no, they were *not* like animals who have been licked and purred over, and, like people, have found their way to good behaviour by watching exemplars. [...] not a pack either, but an assortment of individuals together only for the sake of the protection in numbers. [...] no loyalty to each other, or if so, a fitful and unpredictable loyalty. [...] hunting in a group one hour, and murdering one of their number the next. [...] ganged up on each other according to the impulse of the moment. [...] no friendships among them, only minute-by-minute alliances [...] no memory of what had happened even minutes before. (148)

Thus the narrator is able to make the distinction between animal behaviour and the behaviour of the children from the underground. In *Prisons* Lessing also elaborates on a somewhat similar matter with an example from present time:

For instance, when British and Italian soccer fans recently rioted in Brussels, they became, as onlookers and commentators continually reiterated, nothing but animals. The British louts, it seems, were urinating on the corpses of the people they had killed. To use the word “animal” here seems to me unhelpful. This may be animal behaviour, when humans allow themselves to revert to barbarism, and has been for thousands, probably even millions of years – depending on where one decides to put the beginning of our history as humans, not animals. (8)

Thus, the gang of kids from the underground do not mirror animal behaviour, but contains an innate barbarism because no one has thought them to behave like this. Also, the gang is another example of failed social exchange in the aftermath of collapse. However, unlike the community in Gerald’s house, the gang of kids does not dissolve towards the end, a matter which is a result of their social structure, or rather lack of it. The two critics Greene and Walker share a slightly different view on the consequence of the inconsequent behaviour of the children. The former deals with the matter of social pattern within the family, finding that children who have grown up outside of a family turn inconsistent because they do not share the consequence of “all that has happened is what always happens”, a matter which works against them: “It would seem then, that though life within the family is crippling, life outside it is worse [...] The destruction of the family brings not “freedom” but anarchy: the release from “necessity produces not liberation but “inconsequence”” (Greene 150-151). The latter, however, also recognises the anarchic behaviour, but she believes that “In this portrayal of society without structure, Lessing deals harshly with the notion that human can exist together free of social patterns” (Walker 100). As they are the social group that does not change or dissolve, Walker’s claim may very well be true.

Space

According to Greene “The structure of *Memoirs of a Survivor* involves complex and unsettling play with space and time. The novel takes place in three spaces: a “comfortable, if shabby flat” (11) where the personal lives of the characters are played out; outside, on the street, where the narrator observes “the public, outer life (18), the life of the collective; and behind the wall, which represents the inner life, an inner reality in touch with a “collective” of different sort from the social – the collective consciousness of the race, or universal oversoul” (144-145, page numbers different from my edition of *Memoirs*). I will separate the different spaces even more, into the city, the apartment, the divided apartment building, the pavement, and the farm of the Dolgellys, because these are all spaces that the narrator has incorporated into her story. Furthermore, I will elaborate on another space, or rather a notion of space that continues to present itself throughout the novel, which is the prison.

The choice of a city as setting for *Memoirs* may be a very conscious choice made by Lessing. The city can be interpreted as a real place, an actual city in decay, which enhances the notion of a dystopian novel, as dystopias normally take place in cities, but in line with Cederstrom’s psychological interpretation of the novel, it can also be interpreted as a symbol of the human psyche. Cederstrom argues that “It can be demonstrated that the disintegrating city is the surrealistic landscape of the ego when its cultural symbols, its sense of unity, with the world around it, are no longer functioning creatively” (117) Further on, as the city represents the ego, meaning the conscious aspect of an individual, Cederstrom believes that the rooms behind the wall represent the self, or the unconscious: “Together, the city and the rooms behind the walls are symbols of the psyche in its totality; the movement of the protagonist between the two dimensions is a symbolic portrait of an individual who has established creative links between conscious and unconscious, the ego and the self, and who has, thereby, discovered the means of survival.” (117) Thus Cederstrom sees the city as part of the symbolic landscape that she believes that the novel is meant to explore. Another critic who dwells on the same matter is

Rosenfeld, and in his article “She Was *Where?*: Lessing, Woolf and their Radical Epistemological of place” he argues that “The city’s architecture is in fact the psyche’s architecture and this city and its narrator belong to a singular, though fragmented, One” (11) Furthermore he writes that “Lessing’s narrator gives us a city that, like Freud’s, is an allegory for consciousness” (12). Thus Rosenfeld also believes that the city is symbolic rather than real, and that the way it is constructed symbolise how the human psyche is constructed. The matter of the “One” that Rosenfeld mentions I will return to in chapter 3, as the One is the presence of someone felt by the narrator behind the wall.

The narrator in *Memoirs* reflects on matters of the city at several occasions: “there I stood, looking down over the city which – I suppose not surprisingly – did not *look* so very different than it did in the years before the machines stopped working. I had gazed down and fancied myself back in time [...] The present was so remarkable and dreamlike that to accommodate it meant this process had to be used: *It was like that, was it? Yes, it was like that, but now...*” (109); “I went to Gerald’s house through streets which were disordered, as always, but seemed much cleaner. It was as if an excess of dirtiness and mess had erupted everywhere, but then winds, or at least movements of air had taken some of it away” (160). If the city works a metaphor of the human psyche, then it will not necessarily *look* but feel different after all the changes. However, because the narrator reflects over the changes in the city, the narrator is also reminding the reader about the development, from the seemingly “normal” city in the beginning of her story to the empty streets towards the end. The darkness of the city illustrates the emptiness in the end by the narrator: “We were left in the cold dark of that interminable winter. Oh, it was so dark, it was such a low thick dark. All around us, the black tall towers stood u out of the snow that heaped around their bases, higher every day. No lights in those buildings now, nothing; and if a windowpane glinted in the long black nights, then it was from the moon, exposed momentarily between one hurrying cloud and another” (178).

The narrator's apartment serves, first of all, as the site for Emily's first transformations in the beginning of the novel, as she rapidly matures during the first weeks after her appearance. It is also where most of the interaction between the narrator and Emily takes place, as they are rarely out of the apartment together. Furthermore, the window in the apartment serves as (invisible) borders between the apartment and the pavement, as it is where the narrator (and Hugo) observes the outer world in secret, without the outer world being able to see them. Also, the front door of the apartment is the threshold of which Emily must cross over in order to start her new life on the pavement. The apartment serves as a hiding place too; for Emily when she needs rest; for Hugo who must be sheltered; for June who needs to be taken care of; for Gerald when he needs to leave the children from the underground; and for the narrator. It is the safest place to be, and towards the end, when Gerald brings with him two of the children from the underground, wanting Emily and the narrator to move to the top floor, the narrator realises the need to stay within their own space on the ground floor: "[Emily] said no, it would be better to stay down here: she did not look at me as she said this, as it slowly came into me the reason was that up at the top of the building we would be more vulnerable to attack" (167). However, the space of the apartment is violated on several occasions, e.g. when the members of Gerald's commune break in to the apartment: "[I] found my rooms had been disturbed, and in exactly the same way as the place behind the wall might be disturbed by the 'poltergeist' or anarchic principle. This was my thought as I stood there looking at a chair overturned, books spilled in the floor. There was a general disorder, an emptiness, and above all, an alien feel to the place" (95). Thus the intrusion alarms the narrator, as she can *feel* that someone has violated her space. And last but not least the apartment serves as the site for the narrator's grounding in the "real" world, as it is through the wall of her apartment she enters the space behind the wall. Thus the apartment serves as a border between the real world and the space behind the wall; a border which contains within it a threshold leading behind the wall.

The apartment building where the narrator lives is undergoing several changes throughout the novel, changes that the narrator is able to recognise, as it declines from its original form as a building for people of wealth, before “it”; “these were not the vertical streets of the poor, but were built by private money [...] The walls were thick, for families who could afford to pay for privacy. [...] These blocks were models of what such buildings should be for solidity and decency” (9), to a building for everyone:

But by that time, with so many people gone from the city, the families who lived in these block were not at all the class for whom the building had been put up. [...] in these great buildings once tenanted only by the well-to-do, by the professionals and business people, were now families or clans of poor people. What it amounted to was that a flat, a house, belonged to the people who had the enterprise to move into it. So, in the corridors and halls of the building I lived in you could meet, as in a street or a market, every sort of person. (9-10)

According to Cederstrom “The decline of this building, and of the solidity of the conventional life that surrounds it, are images of the weakening of the protagonist’s ego-relationship with the external world” (119). Thus Cederstrom believes that the decline of the narrator’s apartment building not only shows the consequences of the collapsing city, but it also represents the narrator’s weakened relationship with the outer world. However, there is a difference between the space of the downstairs of the apartment building and the upstairs; the downstairs houses the family of Professor White and “Mr. and Mrs. Jones and family, Miss Foster and Miss Baxter, Mr. And Mrs Smith and Miss Alicia Smith – little self-contained units, the old world” (98), and the upstairs becomes the space in which old skills are brought back to life and which becomes a marked place. Right from the beginning of *Memoirs* the narrator tells us that there is a difference between the higher and lower levels of the building: “I was on the ground floor, at earth-level [...] I was one of those who looked up, imagining how things might be up there in higher regions where windows admitted a finer air, and where front doors led to the public lifts and so down, down, to the sound of traffic, the smell of chemicals and of plant life... the street” (9). The life in the downstairs part of the building resembles the part of the old

community which tries to live as unaffected by the collapse of the society as possible, and towards the narrator realises how much she has changed since she became the guardian of Emily by watching the ways of the White family: “I stood silent, watching the Whites fuss and arrange, seeing my past, our pasts; it looked comic. It *was* comic. We always had been ridiculous, little, self-important animals, acting our roles, playing our parts... it was not pretty, watching the Whites, and seeing oneself. And then we all said goodbye, quite in the old style: it was nice to know you, I hope we’ll meet again, all that kind of thing, as if nothing much was happening” (164). The narrator has thus evolved, as she recognises her own maturation, while her neighbours has not changed at all, still being part of the community of the downstairs apartment building.

The lift between the different levels of the building serves as a threshold between the two different worlds, and as with social exchange between the different groups in the city, it sometimes work and sometimes fails, and by riding the lift Emily is able to make the narrator cross another border. On the top floor of the apartment building “we passed rooms where skilled people, mostly older ones, sat and mended [...] There was a woman fitting lenses to spectacle frames. [...] An occultist from the old days [...] A chair-mender, a basket mender surrounded with his twisted rushes and reeds, a knife-grinder – here they all were, the old skills” (100). Furthermore, the narrator realises, by the help of Emily, that the borders between the classes in society on the upper levels is somewhat erased in this space:

[A]mong these children, some of whose faces were familiar enough, from the pavement, were some better-dressed, cleaner, but above all with that wary self-contained I’m-only-here-on-my-own-terms-look that distinguishes the youngsters of a privileged class when engaged in work that is beneath their conception of themselves. [...] doing the equivalent of the holiday tasks of middleclass children in the old days [...] Yes I could have noticed this without Emily, in time; but her shrewd eyes were on me hastening the process; she really was finding me slow to take in, to adapt, and when I did not seem to have understood as quickly as she thought I should, set herself to explain. (99-100).

On one hand, the narrator, who is a product of the old community, is unable to process what she sees without the help of Emily. This also reinforces the notion that the narrator evolves

because of Emily. On the other hand, Emily, who is part of Gerald's commune is familiar with the situation on the top floors of the building, but because this society resembles the one within Gerald's household, also this is doomed to fail when the children from the underground moves in, and "The building, as a machine, was dead" (167). As with Gerald's commune, the intrusion by the children from the underground result in the destruction of the building, and this is another example of history repeating itself.

The pavement is an open space which allows the new tribes to form without the restrain of borders, allowing new members to approach constantly. It also serves as the platform from where everybody who leaves the city begins their journey. The pavement is the space which Emily has to encounter in order to mature and find her place in the new society (and in the world). Furthermore, according to the narrator, the pavement functions as a mediator between the old communities, the new social units such as Gerald's household, and the children from the underground: "[the children from the underground] menaced everyone in the neighbourhood, and there was to be a big meeting about it tomorrow on the pavement. People were coming from the flats and from the houses round about. I was invited. That the barriers were completely down between the citizens and the life on the pavement showed how serious a threat were these children" (152). Even the Authority encounters the pavement, first in the sense that everybody is afraid that they might show up while the mass-meeting is held; "Above all, what we feared more than anything was the attention of Authority – that 'they' should be alerted" (153), and then when they in fact show up intruding the space: "From the windows of my flat, Gerald, Emily and I and some others watched the great cars come roaring up, their lights flashing, their sirens shrieking. There was no one on the pavement. The cars drove in a pack, around a block, and then back and around again. The shrieking, whining, clanging posse of monsters drove around and about our silent streets for half an hour or so, 'showing their

teeth,' as we said, and then they went again" (156). Thus the borders of the pavement are crossed by everyone in the city.

The Dolgelly farm represents an arcadian theme in *Memoirs*, as it serves as the space where Emily and the narrator fantasise about going to if they ever are to leave the city in the future: "I had, in fact, often wondered if a certain family I had known in north Wales would shelter me. They were good farming folk – yes, that is exactly the measure of my fantasies about them. 'Good farming folk' was how safety, refuge, peace, – utopia – shaped itself in very many people's mind in those days. [...] I had once spent a week there, camping on a moor, with silvery water in little channels on a purple hillside" (31-32). When away from the decaying city, people can again restore order and build up new lives, and the Dolgelly farm thus serves as an example of such a restored future, where the travellers can, even just for some time, live their lives as before "it":

They would have to make for themselves some sort of order again, even if it was no more than that appropriate to outlaws living in and off a forest in the north. Responsibilities and duties there would have to be, and they would harden and stultify, probably very soon. But in the meantime, for weeks, months, perhaps with luck even a year or so, an earlier life of mankind would rule: disciplined, but democratic – when these people were at their best even a child's voice was listened to with respect; all property worries gone; all sexual taboos gone – except the new ones, but new ones are always more bearable than the old; all problems shared and carried in common. Free. Free, at least from what was left of 'civilisation' and its burden. (141)

Although the narrator speaks about "them", she includes herself at the same time, as she dreams about leaving with the travellers. As she writes her memoirs in retrospect, the reader may wonder if the narrator in fact is writing from such a place. If the narrator in fact has been through a spiritual journey, then she may have found a place such as the Dolgelly farm a suitable space to reflect over the matter after it is over, returning to normality. However, because the narrator never tells the reader what it really is that she is the survivor of, the reader may only speculate on where the narrator is because the narrator never reveals where she may be either.

The notion of prisons occurs several times throughout the novel; never as an actual prison, but metaphorically. I have already mentioned when Emily arrived at the apartment for the first time, assessing the narrator as a jailor, and how Hugo resembles a prisoner when the narrator sees him from behind, and also, the narrator refers to the “personal” space behind the wall as a prison, a matter which I will elaborate on in chapter 3, but there are other times in the novel, in the “real” world, where the narrator speaks about prisons: “I realised what a prison we were all in, how impossible I was for any one of us to let a man or a woman or a child come near without the defensive inspection, the rapid sharp, cold analysis, but the reaction was so fast, such a habit – probably the first ever taught us by our parents – that we did not realise how much we were in its grip” (30). Again, the narrator refers to the social structure of the family, calling it a prison. In *Prisons We*, Lessing speaks about why she wrote her collection of essays, a matter which may help us understand the narrator’s use of the prison in *Memoirs*: “This is what I want to talk about in these five essays: how often and how much we are dominated by our savage past, as individuals and as groups. And yet, while sometimes it seems as if we are helpless, we are gathering, and very rapidly – too rapidly to assimilate it – knowledge about ourselves, not only as individuals, but as groups, nations, and as members of society” (3). The notion of prisons in the “real” world, whether self-created or made by society or history, are thus possible to break free from if we continue to gather knowledge about ourselves and learn how to recognise the repeating patterns in history.

Chapter Conclusion

The narrative perspective in *Memoirs* lies solely with the narrator, because we always get her perspective on the different matters in the novel. As the internal focalizer the narrators filters everything that concern the other characters, the communities and the different spaces, and she shares her concern about the different matters when she feels that she must. Thus the reader may question whether the narrator’s observations may be coloured by her emotions when she

tells the story in retrospect in her “memoirs”, especially because the narrator seems to have very strong opinions on certain matters such as the fixed social patterns. However, because she is especially opinionated about everything that concern Emily in the “real” world, her strong emotions are entitled because the narrator recognises Emily as being a younger version of herself due to her visits behind the wall. Furthermore, I believe that the narrator’s focus on the fixed social patterns and also the matter of social structures that govern not only the characters in the novel but also the reader, is part of the reason why the narrator has chosen to write her “memoirs”. Thus the narrator’s opinions serve as a warning to the reader. Also, because these issues clearly concerns Lessing, as we see through her opinions in *Prisons*, this leaves the impression that the narrator is projecting her opinions on to the narrator, which reinforces the notion that Lessing’s uses the narrator as a tool to emphasise her own opinions on these matters. Therefore, also the “real” world is part of Lessing’s “Attempt at an Autobiography”.

Chapter 3 – Behind the Wall

As I mentioned in the introduction to the thesis I early found that *Memoirs* deals with issues of memory, especially in the world behind the wall, and I wish to emphasise my arguments by looking at the different scenes that the narrator encounters in the different realms behind the wall, both “personal” and impersonal, and also how the worlds on both sides of the wall are connected. Also, this chapter is closely linked to the matter of autobiography, and thus I will point out to what extent I find *Memoirs* to be autobiographical in connection with the world behind the wall. I believe that in *Memoirs* the matters of memory and reconstruction of the past are present on several levels: The narrator’s description of the different spaces behind the wall; the reconstruction and memory of what happened during the narrator’s visits behind the wall; the reconstruction of Emily’s, and thus also the narrator’s, past; and the function of the narrator’s own memory, both in the “real” world and behind the wall. I believe that because Emily is a younger version of the narrator, Emily appears in the “real” world when the narrator has begun the reconstruction of her own childhood memories. As I argued in chapter 2 I believe that part of the narrator’s intention when she “wrote” her memory was to warn the reader about the fact that history has a tendency to repeat itself, but I also believe that the other part of the narrator’s intention of writing down her story was to reconstruct her own identity, which is also why the narrator needs to reconstruct her repressed childhood memories. Thus by writing her “memoirs” the narrator is able to finish the process of creating her own identity. Furthermore, because Lessing has created this unnamed narrator to recreate Lessing’s own childhood memories in this “Attempt at an Autobiography”, Lessing has used the narrator as a tool to do so, which is to say that Lessing and the narrator is *not* the same person. Thus the autobiographical aspect of *Memoirs* is indeed very important, and it should not be left out of any interpretation.

As in chapter 2 I have chosen to incorporate different interpretations made by different critics in this chapter, but because few of them focus on the matter of memory, I mainly base

my conclusions on my own interpretation, and also on Lessing's *Under My Skin*. In this chapter I will look at the different kind of scenes that the narrator encounters behind the wall in order to elaborate on my interpretation: The impersonal visits behind the wall; the "personal" scenes; and the different kind of scenes which I see as a mixture of impersonal and "personal". Furthermore I will look at the connection between the world behind the wall and the "real" world, before I have devoted a section to look at the ending of the novel, perhaps the most troublesome part of the novel.

The Impersonal Visits

The narrator's first visits behind the wall are what she later calls the impersonal ones, where she is able to move around freely and participate in the action that takes place, unlike in the "personal" scenes where she is witnessing the action and cannot interfere. I believe that in *Memoirs* the different spaces in the world behind the wall may represent different memories, and the narrator's visits to this impersonal space represent the process of reconstructing her memory and thus also the reconstruction of the narrator's identity. The impersonal realm behind the wall in *Memoirs* also serves as the site for the narrator's search for the familiar presence, the "One" that reveals itself in the end, which I believe may in fact be the narrator herself, an argument which I will comment more on in the final paragraphs of this chapter. According to Nicola King in the introduction to *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, "It is commonly accepted that identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: [...] However, it is not only the *content* of memories, experiences and stories which construct a sense of identity: the concept of the self which is constructed in these narratives is also dependent upon assumptions about the function and process of memory and the kind of access it gives us to the past" (2-3). Thus the process of reconstructing her memories becomes just as important as the actual memories which she has recreated in the realm of the "personal".

From almost every visit the narrator gives a description of the space she enters: “Moving through the tall quiet white walls, as impermanent as theatre sets, [...] I came on a room, long, deep-ceilinged, once a beautiful room, which I recognised, which I knew (from where, though?)” (37). This indicates that although the narrator claims that she could not remember what had happened during her visits; “Returning from a trip into that place I could not keep a clear memory of what I had experienced, where I had been.” (159), she has finished her reconstruction when she writes her memoirs, and can thus reproduce the description. Also, toward the end of the novel, the space behind the wall becomes more and more borderless: “Staying through room after room all open to the leaves and the sky, floored with the unpoisoned grasses and flowers of the old world, I saw how extensive was this place, with no boundaries or end that I could find, much larger than I had ever understood” (87). I believe that this indicates that as the story develops the narrator realises how the extent of her memory, and that there are few boundaries between her different memories. Although there at first appears to be boundaries, this is just an illusion at one point, as the narrator is able to remove them:

I [...] found that here was a set of rooms still solid, still unthinned, with floors and ceilings intact, but as I looked I saw how the floorboards were beginning to give, had collapsed in some places; then that there were ragged holes in them, then that in fact these were not really floorboards, only a few rotting planks lying about on earth that was putting out shoots of green. I pulled the planks away, exposing clean earth and insects that were vigorously at their work of recreation. (87)

The removal of the boundaries indicates that the borders between the narrator’s different memories are fading, which also indicates that the memories become interconnected, and the “vigorously” working insects may symbolise the narrator’s vigorous work of reconstructing the childhood memories.

The first time the narrator actually sees the space behind the wall, she does not cross the threshold, “but stood there on the margin between the two worlds, my familiar flat and these rooms which had been quietly waiting there all this time” (15). Although the narrator is longing to move beyond the border she does not, and if we connect this to the matter of memory and

remembering, I believe that it by crossing the border, the narrator will begin to remember what she has repressed, which may be a reason why she does not actually move beyond the border of the wall the first time. Thus what she achieves on this first occasion is a confirmation that there indeed is something going on behind the wall, and that this is something she has been waiting to experience: “I did not at the first time achieve much more than that there were a set of rooms. The rooms were disused, had been for some time. [...] I stood and looked, feeding with my eyes. I felt the most vivid expectancy, a longing: this place held what I needed, knew was there, had been waiting for – oh yes, all my life, all my life. I knew this place, recognised it” (15). Because the narrator recognises the space, although she believes that she has never been there before, this enhances the notion that what she witnesses is imprinted in her memory, but that she has repressed it and thus does not realise this. Furthermore, because the narrator tells us that the space has not been used for a long time, this leads to the impression that what she is beginning to remember happened a long time ago and that she has not tried to remember it before. Also, the fact that she “forgot this occurrence” and “went on with the little routines of my life, conscious of the life behind the wall, but not remembering my visit there” (15), indicates that the narrator’s memory is untrained in the beginning.

None of the space that the narrator encounters in the impersonal visits behind the wall is fixed; it is in constant change. She rarely visits the same space twice, and most of the rooms she visits needs to be cleaned up and repaired, and the narrator is able to do so: “To make them habitable, what work needed to be done! Yes, I could see that it would take weeks, months... I stood there marking fallen plaster, the corner of a ceiling stained with damp, dirty or damaged walls” (16). The narrator recognises the need to repair the different spaces behind the wall, and to do so will take time, just as sorting out different memories takes time. She also finds the need to repaint the rooms: “I decided that what I had to do was to repaint the rooms... I talk as if they were a permanent, recognisable, stable set of rooms, as in a house or a flat, instead of a

place which changed each time I saw it. [...] layer after layer of white paint went on, first dull and flat, then increasingly fine, until the last one covered everything with a clear softly shining enamel, white as snow or fine china. It was like standing inside a cleaned-out eggshell” (58). I believe that by repainting the rooms, the narrator may recognise the need for a clean canvas to reconstruct her memories on. There is also constant disturbance in the space behind the wall, a matter which I also will come back to when I look at the connection between the world behind the wall and the narrator’s “real” world, which indicates that the narrator’s line of thoughts is in constant state of flux and that she is unable to organise the reconstruction of her memory:

Throughout this period, whenever I was drawn in through the flowers and leaves submerged under half-transparent white paint, I found rooms disordered or damaged. I never saw who or what did it, or even caught a glimpse of the agent. It was seeming to me more and more that in inheriting this extension of my ordinary life, I had been handed, again, a task. Which I was not able to carry through. For no matter how I swept, scrubbed floors and rubbed down walls, whenever I re-entered the rooms after a spell away in my real life all had to be done again. It was like what one reads of a poltergeist’s tricks. (57)

Every time the narrator is in her “real” world the world behind the wall is disturbed, and she has to redo her work and thus also the reconstruction. She feels that she is been given the task to clean up in the space, and that she finds it difficult because of the disturbance, which she compares to a “poltergeist’s trick”; an invisible force that enters the rooms every time she leaves the space. This is connected to the increasing chaos, created by “it”, in the “real” world, which interferes with the narrator’s ability to perform her task of remembering because the disturbance in the space behind the wall also increases: “I cannot begin to give an idea of the mess in those rooms. [...] heaped with crackling and splintering furniture. Other rooms had been used, or so they looked, as refuse dumps: stinking piles of rubbish filled them. [...] some sleeping bags left anyhow, a big pot full of cold boiled potatoes near the wall in line with a dozen pairs of boots” (134-135). According to Walker, “The metaphor of furniture in the rooms, all of it antiquated or stained or slashed, [...] present an image of the possibilities that lie in re-ordering cultural forms and traditions” (111), and Perrakis believes that “in the

impersonal rooms behind the wall the Survivor discovers various kinds of inner work that she must perform, leading to different forms of detachment. [...] Clearing out the outmoded ways of thinking and believing is the first step in purification of the Survivor's inner being" (55), but I believe that the furniture and also the other things in these impersonal spaces may also represent different parts of the narrator's different memories, all of which she must repair or rearrange in order to carry out the reconstruction of her childhood memories.

In *Memoirs* there is a particular scene which most of the critics mention, when the narrator encounters the six-sided room: "On the floor was spread a carpet, but it was a carpet without its life: it had a design, an intricate one, but the colours had an imminent existence, a potential, no more. [...] Some people were standing about the room. [...] one of them detached a piece of material from the jumble on the trestles, and bent to match it with the carpet – behold, the pattern answered that part of the carpet. This piece was laid exactly on the design, and brought it to life" (69). According to Walker, "The retreat behind the wall is not an escape from social exchange, which of course cannot be escaped; in fact Lessing demonstrates the power of the cultural realm to order social experience. [...] Such community is an ideal, of course, which does not exist in the "personal" It is a vision of community loose and devoid of social roles but united though the human need and power to order, to find pattern, a meaning which transcends time"(112). Walker believes that the ordering of different pieces into a certain pattern symbolises the ordering of social experience that can be fulfilled by cooperation, which is consistent with her interpretation of the theme of the novel being about social exchange. However, what I question about her interpretation of this particular scene, is that believe she compares this kind of community to the ones in the "personal", which I find rather strange because in the novel the "personal" refers specifically to the scenes where the narrator witnesses Emily's childhood, and thus do not deal with communities as such. What I

find she should compare the community in this scene to, if any at all, should then rather be the communities in the “real” world, which appears to be incapable of this kind of social exchange.

Greene too offers another interpretation of this scene: “This mysterious scene offers an image of loving and cooperative effort that will go on, independent of anyone’s individual will. [...] The figures, silent and concentrating, the intricately patterned carpet, the shine of the star, recall scenes associated with the magi, the revelation of divinity – and this marvelously resonant scene does offer an epiphany, though not of an individual messiah but of a communal effort that will save us all” (153). Like Walker, Greene focuses on the communal cooperation in the room, but she also connects the scene with religious aspects that we associate with Christianity, such as “the magi”⁹, divinity and the Messiah. On the one hand, I agree with Greene that the scene offers some kind of epiphany because it enlightens the narrator’s understanding of her task behind the wall, but on the other hand I do not agree with Greene on the religious connotation of the scene, because I cannot find any other literary evidence that Lessing has incorporated religious aspects from Christianity into *Memoirs*, especially since she is a Sufi. Furthermore, Cederstrom’s interpretation of this particular scene is in line with her overall psychological interpretation of *Memoirs*:

[She] sees the failure of the collective and its cultural forms; these old images can no longer vitalize her sense of self. [...] she watches Emily’s absorption in these images until she has a vision in the inner rooms which enables her to understand the difference between identification with social stereotypes and unity with archetypal pattern. She sees a room in which people are bringing to life a pattern on a carpet by matching scraps of cloth to its design. [...] The real matching work is not accessible to Emily, for she is busily attempting to vitalize herself through the old stereotyped images of the young girl. Emily’s patterns [...] are personal and limited: they focus on external [...] rather than the necessary work of relating archetypal unities to the inner being, which is the job for middle age. (122-123)

Thus Cederstrom believes that the narrator has to participate in the inner work of matching new patterns in order to be able to vitalize “sense of self” as Emily is unable to free herself from the

⁹ “In the Bible, the three men, thought to be kings or astrologers, who followed a star to visit Jesus Christ when he was a baby and give him presents. They are also called the Three Kings or the Three Wise Men.” (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=48030&dict=CALD> 2008-12-01)

archetypal patterns in the “real” world. Cederstrom also emphasise the matter that it is the narrator who has to do this now since Emily cannot do this is because she is too young, which enhances the notion that Emily is the younger self of the narrator, and that she now is able to do what she could not do as an adolescent. However, although Cederstrom may be true when it comes to her interpretation, I also find another, and I believe also much simpler interpretation which is in line with my readings of the function of the realm behind the wall.

I believe that the scene within the six-sided room may also function as a symbol of the process of reconstructing memory. The different bits and pieces represent fragments of memories, and by fitting them together, the memories become unified and the memories come to life:

I entered the room, I stood on the carpet looking down as they did at its incompleteness, pattern without colour, except where the pieces had already been laid in a match, so that parts of the carpet had a bleak gleam, like one that has been bleached, and other parts glowed up, fulfilled, perfect. I, too, sought for fragments of materials that could bring life to the carpet, and did in fact find one, and bent down to match and fit, before some pressure moved me on again. (70)

The scene describes the process of reconstruction, like the process that Nicola King refers to: “All narrative accounts of life stories, whether they be ongoing stories which we tell ourselves and each other as part of the construction of identity, or the more shaped and literary narratives of autobiography or first-person fictions, are made possible by memory; they also reconstruct memory according to certain assumptions about the way it functions and the kind of access it gives to the past” (2). Thus in *Memoirs* the narrator’s participation in what she compares to “a child’s game, giant-sized; only it was not a game, it was serious, important not only to the people actually engaged in this work, but to everyone” (70), is part of the ongoing process which the narrator has to go through in order to reconstruct her memory: “The room disappeared. I could not find it when I turned my head to see it again, so as to mark where it was. But I knew it was there waiting, I knew it had not disappeared, and the work in it continued, must continue, would go on always” (70).

The “Personal” Scenes

Whereas the impersonal space behind the wall may represent the reconstruction of memory, I believe that the “personal” scenes may represent the actual memories of the narrator, and which she has to encounter to be able to carry out the reconstruction. Because it is Emily’s childhood the narrator witnesses, this reinforces the notion that Emily and the narrator is one and the same, and that Emily is a younger version of the narrator. Thus it is her own childhood the narrator remembers in the “personal” scenes, and the narrator is able to do so because of the reconstruction she performs. However, although *Memoirs* was “An Attempt at an Autobiography”, Doris Lessing and the narrator is not the same person, but Lessing used the narrator as a tool when she wrote her “dream autobiography”. According to Jeanie Warnock in “Unlocking the Prison of the Past: Childhood Trauma and Narrative in Doris Lessing’s *The Memoirs of a Survivor*”, “[*Memoirs*] employs a nameless first person narrator who symbolically represents Lessing’s own attempts to use narrative to access and then hold together previously dissociated aspects of childhood experience: [...] In thus processing these fragmented memories, her narrator – and by extension Lessing herself – is able to re-write her current self-narrative and find inner potentialities still waiting to be realized consciously” (12). Thus by writing her “memoirs”, the narrator is able to finish her reconstruction of her identity.

As mentioned in chapter 1, many critics were reluctant to accept the novel as being autobiographical, but one critic who also sees the “personal” scenes as a way of viewing the narrator’s own childhood is Perrakis: “the Survivor must also visit the personal realm behind the wall, where again she must begin the work of cleansing her heart, in this case of the traumas of her early life” (56). Although critics such as Perrakis see the “personal” as a space where the narrator must free herself from the traumatic experiences of her childhood as part of her spiritual journey, I want to emphasise the actual memories as part of the narrator’s effort to connect the past her identity. The actual memories that the narrator has are part of the process of reconstructing her whole past, and since the narrator is writing her “memoirs” in retrospect,

she is able to do so. According to N. King, “[Greenman’s] experience is an acute example of the fact that much human experience or action takes place under the mark of ‘what wasn’t known then’: what we remember are events which took place in a kind of innocence. This paradoxical ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’ is the position of any autobiographical narrator, who, in the present moment of the narration, possesses the knowledge that she did not have ‘then’, in the moment of the experience” (1-2).¹⁰ I believe that this is the position that the narrator is in when she writes her “memoirs”, when she possesses the knowledge that she needs to finish the reconstruction of her memories.

The narrator recognises the distinction between the impersonal and “personal” space behind the wall from her first encounter with the “personal” scenes in the text, stating that she was aware of this distinction when they occurred: “What I found next was in a very different setting: above all, in a different atmosphere. It was the first of the ‘personal’ experiences. This was the word I used for them from the start. And the atmosphere was unmistakable always, as soon as I entered whatever scene it was” (38). Thus there is a completely different atmosphere, as she has shifted from the state of reconstructing her memories to actually witnessing them. These memories are fixed, as cannot interfere, unlike the impersonal scenes where she is at work reconstructing. She compares the “personal” realm to a prison, not unlike the notion of prisons in the “real” world, where there appears to be no escape:

the ‘personal’ was instantly to be recognised by the air that was its prison, by the emotions that were its creatures. The impersonal scenes might bring discouragement or problems that had to be solved, [...] – but in that realm there was a lightness, a freedom, a ledge of the possibility of alternative action. One could refuse to clean that room, clear that patch of earth; one could walk into another room altogether, choose another scene. But to enter the ‘personal’ scene was to enter a prison, where nothing could happen but what one saw happening, where the air was tight and limited, and above all where time was a strict unalterable law and long. (38-39)

¹⁰ Greenman is a British Jew who survived Auschwitz, and who King heard “give a talk at an anti-Nazi League meeting in Winchester, where he made connections between the persecution and murder of the Jews by the Nazis and the racism of the present” (1).

The “personal” scenes are difficult for the narrator to witness, and it is also difficult for the narrator to write about in her “memoirs”; “I have been writing, with no particular reluctance, or lack of enjoyment, descriptions of the realm of anarchy, of change, of impermanence; now I must return to the ‘personal’ and it is with dismay, a not-wanting....” (59), which I believe enhances the notion that it is her own childhood she is reluctantly remembering and putting down in words in her “memoirs.” I believe that because her childhood appears to be traumatic, the narrator has repressed her memories, and is now able to remember because of Emily. The young girl appears first after the narrator’s first visits behind the wall, which indicates that because the narrator now is able to reconstruct her memories, she is also able to reproduce (and remember) the younger version of herself, Emily. Also, it may be easier for the narrator to carry out the recollection by trying to distance herself from her traumatic memories by creating another character to re-enact her childhood. Thus because of Emily the narrator is able to continue her work of creating her identity.

In the first visit to the “personal” real, the narrator sees a white nursery:

a tall room, but this time square and without grace, and there were tall but heavy windows, with dark red velvet curtains. [...] An Edwardian layette, emitting that odour which is not quite scorch, but near to it: heated airless materials. [...] A cradle with muslin flounces, minute blue and green flowers on white... I realised what a relief the colour was, for everything was white, white clothing, white cot and cradle and covers and blankets and sheets and baskets. A white-painted room. A little white clock that would have been described in a catalogue as a Nursery Clock. White. (39)

Lessing associates the red velvet curtains with fear: “when I was doing apprentice pieces in my twenties, several Poe-like stories appeared where red velvet curtains concealed threat” (*Under My Skin* 32), which enhances the notion that something traumatic has happened in this room, and this nursery resembles the one in Persia where Lessing spent her early years: “The Tehran nursery was English, Edwardian, and could have been in London. An enormous room, square, high, filled like a lumber room with heavy furniture. [...] The curtains have blue and pink Bo-peeps and lambs, but otherwise everything, but everything, is white. A suffocation of smelly

whiteness” (*Under My Skin* 27). Lessing’s use of the nursery in *Memoirs* is consistent with Lessing’s intention to write a “dream autobiography”, where she used this same setting, and the whiteness in the room is useful as it resembles a screen where the “personal” scenes can be re-enacted. Also that fact that everything is enlarged in the “personal” scenes behind the wall enhances the feeling of being in a dream; “Everything around her was enormous: the room so large, warm and high, the two women so tall and strong and disliking, the furniture daunting and difficult” (40); “this was again the child’s view that I was imprisoned in. Largeness and smallness” (75), but it also enhances the notion that it is the narrator who is reliving her childhood, when everything appeared to be enormous: “Being invited into this scene was to be absorbed into child-space; I saw it as a small child might – that is, enormous and implacable; but at the same time I kept with me my knowledge that it was tiny and implacable – because petty, unimportant” (40). While everything appears to be large when she is a child, the narrator is now an adult and her knowledge about the room has changed, which is consistent with King’s argument above; that she now possesses a knowledge that she did not have when she was a small child, and that what happened then should not be important.

The scene that is played out in the narrator’s first encounter with the “personal”, shows Emily as she watches her brother being treated differently than her: “At which the mother smiled, a smile different from the other, and not understood by the little girl, except that it led to her being pulled up roughly on the mother’s hand, and told: ‘Why aren’t you undressed? I told you to get undressed’” (40-41). This resembles Lessing’s relationship with her own mother, and as their poor relationship coloured Lessing in her upbringing, so is Emily, and therefore also the narrator, traumatised by it, which is part of why the narrator finds it difficult to encounter these memories. Also, since “This small child was of course the Emily who had been given into my care, but I did not understand for some days that I had been watching a scene from her childhood (but that was impossible, of course, since no such childhood existed

these days, it was obsolete) a scene, then from her memory, or her history, which had formed her” (42); and “[Emily’s] face was old and weary. She seemed to understand it all, to have foreseen it, to be living through it because she had to, feeling it as a thick heaviness all around her – time, through which she must push herself, till she could be free of it” (41), this again suggests that Emily and the narrator is the same person, as this is the kind of childhood which existed when the narrator was a child, and that Emily’s face seems to reflect the narrator’s “old and weary” face which has suffered this before.

Also the second “personal” scene “was a scene of clean tidiness, a room that oppressed and discouraged because of its statement that here everything had its place and its time, that nothing could change or move out of its order” (59). Like in the scene before, this shows the neglect of Emily; “The woman, the wife and mother, was talking; she talked, she talked, she went on and on as if no one but herself existed in that room or beyond it, as if she were alone and her husband and her children – the little girl particularly, who knew she was the chief culprit, the one being complained of – couldn’t hear her” (60); Nor did she see the little girl who stood a short way from her mother, watching, listening, all her senses stretched, as if every pore took in information in the form of warnings, threats, messages of dislike. From this child emanated strong waves of painful emotion” (60), but this time the scene is penetrated by the word “guilt”. The narrator may be able to recognise this because she is reliving her own childhood: “It was guilt. She was condemned. And, as I recognised this emotion and this group of people there in the heavy comfortable room, the scene formalised itself like a Victorian problem picture or a photograph from an old fashioned play. Over it was written in emphatic script: GUILT” (60). The fact that the narrator sees the scene formalise itself, enhances the notion that this is a fixed memory that the narrator has been able to reconstruct. The narrator is now able to recognise the feeling of guilt which she experienced as a child unable of understanding why she is unloved. Also, the mother, whose “eyes, unclouded by self-criticism,

like skies that have been blue for too many weeks, and will continue blue and regular for weeks yet, for it was nowhere near the time for the season to change” (60), is the one in the room not feeling guilty, as she appears to be unaware of what she is doing to her young daughter, probably because of her own upbringing; like Lessing’s own mother, who was brought up by the same strict rules as Lessing, Emily’s mother appears to be repeating the pattern of her own childhood. This becomes evident in the scene later in the novel where the narrator picks up Emily’s infant mother, which I will look at below. The “guilt” that the narrator is feeling has followed the narrator since her childhood, and is haunting her even in the “real” world, which is another reason to believe that it is the narrator’s childhood she now has begun to remember:

The hard accusing voice went on and on, would always go on, had always gone on, nothing could stop it, could stop these emotions, this pain, this guilt at ever had been born at all, born to cause such pain and annoyance and difficulty. The voice would nag on there for ever, could never be turned off, and even when the sound was turned low in memory, there must be a permanent pressure of dislike, resentment. Often in my ordinary life I would hear the sound of a voice, a bitter and low complaint just the other side of sense: there it was, on one of rooms behind the wall, still there, always there...” (62-63)

In the “tickling” scene, Lessing has used another memory from her own childhood: “He was ‘tickling’ the child. This was a ‘game’, the bedtime ‘game’, a ritual. The elder child was being played with, was being made tired, was being given her allowance of attention, before being put to bed, and it was a service by the father to the mother, who could not cope with the demands of her day, the demands of Emily” (76). In *Under My Skin* Lessing tells us about the “tickling” from her own life: “Daddy captures his little daughter and her face is forced down into his lap or crotch, into the unwashed smell [...] By now my head is aching badly, the knocking headache of over-excitement. His great hands go to work on my ribs. My screams, helpless, hysterical, desperate. [...] It does not have to be like this, for you may watch a very little child being gently chased and tickled in a real game, not an exercise in disguised bullying” (31). Furthermore, Lessing also tells us how this game used to haunt her in her

dreams when she was younger: “Very early, long before I can remember, began two themes or streams that have dominated my childhood. One was the world of dreams, where I have always been at home. Until I was ten or so, they were most often nightmares. [...] It was the ‘tickling’ of my earlier years. In these dreams great hands pressed and squeezed my ribs and I screamed and wriggled, and heartless brutal faces loomed down on me” (*Under My Skin* 119). As in Lessing’s real life, so does this “tickling” scene seem to haunt the narrator in the “dream autobiography”, as this is one of the traumatic childhood memories she appears to be reconstructing. Emily’s father, a soldier like Lessing’s own father, “went on with his task, from time to time looking at his wife with a wonderfully complex expression – guilt, but he was unaware of that; appeal, because he felt this was wrong and ought to be stopped; astonishment that it was allowable and by her, [...] and mingled with all these, a look that was never far from his face at any time, of sheer incredulity at the impossibility of everything” (77).” The narrator is now able to recognise the feelings of guilt, appeal, astonishment and incredulity in the father as she has reconstructed the memory. According to Cederstrom, this particular scene is “physical violence described as a game” (123). Furthermore, she believes that “This game sets the stage for some of the masochistic tendencies that color Emily’s love relationship in later life. In need for connection, for love, she has learned to submit to torture, any kind of contact, in order to avoid the alienation so painful to the fragile ego” (123). However, I believe that, as with any of the other scenes the narrator witnesses from a child’s perspective, everything is enlarged too, including the child’s feelings. The game of “tickling” is not an unusual one, and as the narrator reconstructs this particular memory, she also relives the emotions she felt as a child, and not necessarily what she would have felt had she been an adult subjected to such “torture”. Thus it is the child’s emotions that haunt the narrator as an adult, and which she now is able to remember.

There is an immediate change of scenery after the “tickling” game, when the father is watching Emily when she is sleeping: “ The man bent lower and gazed, and gazed... a noise from the bedroom [...] made him stand straight and look – guilty, but defiant, and above all, angry. Angry at what? At everything that is the answer. [...] The little girl tossed herself over again and lay on her back, naked, stomach thrust up, vulva prominent. The man’s face added another emotion to those already written there” (79). My immediate response to this particular scene was that it could be a description of sexual abuse, but the fact that Emily is asleep in this scene and unable to know that her father is in the room means that the scene cannot actually have happened if Emily is in fact the young version of the narrator, because then the narrator should not be able to reconstruct this as a memory. If so, then this scene can be constructed rather than reconstructed; a projection of something that could have happened, but not necessarily did. Because of the nature of the “tickling” game, where the father’s face projects feelings of guilt, appeal, astonishment and incredulity, is it easy to believe that Emily could have been sexually abused in the following scene. However, Lessing claims that *she* was not sexually abused, but that the opposite can easily be perceived: “The fact was, my early childhood made me one of the walking wounded for years. A dramatic remark, and pretty distasteful, really, but used with an exact intention although it makes me easy victim to the current obsessionalists who see evidence of ‘abuse’ everywhere. They mean, usually, sexual abuse. If you say, I wasn’t abused, they at once put on that knowing-better smile used by certain kinds of analyst” (*Under My Skin* 25). As most of the incidents in the “personal” scenes are actual incidents from Lessing childhood, and this scene appears to be no exception, but the narrator may have reconstructed a false memory, rooted in the earlier scenes. According to Warnock, “the “personal” memories of *The Memoirs* particularly reveal the way much of the narrator’s younger life (and by extension Lessing’s own) was an unconscious re-living of her traumatic childhood experience with her father” (12-13). As for this particular memory and the

one with the “tickling” game, I believe that Warnock’s statement is correct, and that the narrator has come to terms with the memories that deal with the childhood trauma connected to her father, but altogether I find that the narrator’s reconstruction of her childhood memories is just a much about coming to terms with her relationship with her mother, as it is by her mother she has felt unwanted and unloved.

I believe that the “cuddling” scene which I mentioned in chapter 1 is another example of Emily’s, and thus also the narrator’s, memory of the relationship with her mother:

‘Stay with me,’ pleaded the girl.

[...]

The woman sat on the extreme edge of the bed, looked harried, looked as she always did, burdened and irritated. But she was also pleased.

‘Drink your lemonade.’

‘I don’t want to. Mummy, cuddle me, cuddle me...’

‘Oh, Emily’

(80)

As Lessing wrote in *Under My Skin*, she was embarrassed that she had begged for love from her mother, which only enhances the notion of a poor and unloving relationship between them. According to King, “There are moments when memory seems to return us to a past unchanged by the passing of time; such memories tend to be suffused with a sense of loss, the nostalgia out of which they may be at least in part created” (2). All of the “personal” scenes in *Memoirs* appear to be unchanged by time, but in this scene there is a sense of loss which the narrator is able to feel when she is witnessing this particular scene: “Between the little girl’s hot needful yearning body, which wanted to be quieted with a caress, with warmth, wanted to lie near a large strong wall of a body, a safe body which would not tickle and torment and squeeze; wanted safely and assurance – between her and the mother’s regularly breathing, calm body, all self-sufficiency and duty, was a blankness, an unawareness; there was no contact, no mutual comfort” (80). The narrator remembers her need for comfort and love, but also that her mother was unable to provide her with what she needed, and like Emily in the “real” world after she

has been rejected on the pavement on her first visit there, the young girl “read and ate and ate and read” (81), after the rejection from her mother as a way to substitute the poor relationship.

In the “sweeping” scene where “The wall opened. Behind it was an intensely blue sky, a blue sharply clear and cold, blue that never was in nature. [...] with nowhere in it that depth which leads the eye inwards to speculation or relief, the blue that changes with the light. No, this was a sky all self-sufficiency, which could not change or reflect” (116), which resembles the eyes of Emily’s ignorant mother, the narrator witnesses Emily at the task of sweeping:

But as she swept, as she made her piles, the leaves gathered again around her feet. She swept faster, faster, her face scarlet, desperate. [...] One room was clear, then another; but outside the leaves lay as high as her knees, the whole world was thickly covered with the leaves that descended as fast as snowflakes everywhere from the horrible sky. The world was being submerged in dead leaves, smothered in them. She turned herself about in an impulsive movement of panic to see what was happening inside the rooms she had cleared: already the piles she had made were being submerged. (116-117)

It is a somewhat different scene that the narrator witnesses, but just as “personal” as the other scenes, as she can only be a witness. I believe that the sweeping represents Emily’s, and therefore also the narrator’s, attempt to rid herself of the traumatic memories of her childhood, but she is unable to carry out the task, just as the narrator is unable to free herself from her memory. According to Warnock, “Emily strives to bring a sense of meaning to her endeavours, but she is engaged in a futile task because she is unable to free herself from the inner paralysis and the disgust that are associated with the helpless vulnerability of her child self. [...] The task is impossible because Emily’s childhood experiences with her father continue to contaminate both her intrapsychic and interpersonal world” (14). I believe that during the process of reconstructing her memory, the narrator is at work cultivating her childhood memories, and like Emily, she loses herself in the process; she vanishes: “[Emily] vanished, a staring little figure, a small bright-coloured girl, like a painted china ornament for a cabinet or a shelf, a vivid clot of colour on painted whiteness, the horrible whiteness of the nursery world that opened out of the parents’ bedroom where the summer or a storm or a snow-world lay on the

other side of the curtains” (117). Thus both Emily and the narrator appear to vanish into their past.

After the sweeping scene, the narrator witnesses an infant, never named, lying in a cot, and one thing that I find interesting is the immediate shift between the “sweeping” scene and this one, because it is as if the narrator now moves from one end of the range of her memories to another, from when she is trying to rid herself of all traumatic experience from her childhood, to when she was an infant. Thus the narrator is now able to reconstruct every aspect of her childhood memories. In this particular scene, in an all white room,

The infant was not alone; something was moving about, a heavy tramping creature, each footstep making the cot shake. [...] Never, not until she would come to lie helpless on her deathbed, all strength gone from her limbs, nothing left to her but the consciousness behind her eyes, would she again be as helpless as she was now. The enormous tramping creature came thudding to the cot, whose iron bars shook and rattled, and as the great face bent over her, she was excavated from the hot white and whisked up, losing her breath, and was gripped in hands that pressed on her ribs. (117-118)

I believe that what the narrator remembers is probably a common incident from her childhood, when she is lying in her cot, and where everything again is enlarged. To an infant, helpless in any way, everything must seem exaggerated, and in *Under My Skin* Lessing tells us what she believes are the “real childhood memories”:

A tiny thing among trampling, knocking careless giants who smell, who lean down towards you with great ugly hairy faces, showing big dirty teeth. (...) The hands they use to grip you can squeeze the breath half out of you. The rooms you run about in, the furniture you move among, [...] nothing is your size, [...] These are the real childhood memories and any that have you level with grown-ups are later inventions. An intense physicality, that is the truth of childhood. (18)

Lessing’s words in her autobiography are, if not identical, then at least very similar to the scene described in *Memoirs*, and thus I believe that this too is one of the memories that the narrator now is able to remember. Also, at this point, the narrator remembers the feeling of being dirty: “She was dirty. Already. Dirty. The sound of the word was disapproval, disgust, dislike. It meant being bundled about, turned this way and that, between had knocking hands, like a piece of filleted fish on a slab, or a chicken being stuffed” (117-118). The “dirty” at this point means

of course that the child has a dirty nappy, which is why she associates it with being “bundled about”, but this feeling of being dirty has also followed the narrator from childhood to the day she reconstructs this scene behind the wall.

In the next scene, where Emily is being handed her baby brother; “This is not her baby, and they know it, so why...? But again and again they say: ‘This is your baby, Emily, and you must love him’” (119), and there is a sudden change in point of view when the narrator suddenly appears to become Emily, as she becomes able to put herself in her position: “Such a desolation and an aloneness as no one the world (except everyone in the world) has felt, she feels now and the violence of her pain is such that she can do nothing but stand there, stiff, staring first at the bundle, then at the great white-clothed nurse, then at the mother and the father smiling in their beds” (118-119). Because the narrator in this scene is becoming Emily, the notion of them being the same person is strengthened, as the narrator cannot possibly know the exact feelings that Emily experiences unless she has felt them herself. I believe that this is the only passage in *Memoirs* where there is such a shift in the point of view, which also reinforces my argument that the narrator is remembering her own childhood in the “personal” scenes behind the wall. The narrator experienced this scene as another form of deceit from her parents, because she was unable to understand why they acted like they did: “The lie confuses her. It is a game, a joke, at which she must laugh and protest, as when her father ‘tickles’ her, a torture which will recur in nightmares for years afterwards? [...] And so it was all too much, the lies were too much, the love was too much. They were too strong for her. And she did hold the baby [...] She held it and she loved it with a passionate violent protective love that had at its heart a trick and a betrayal, heath with a core of ice” (119). In *Under My Skin* Lessing describes how she felt the exact same emotions as Emily did in the same situation:

I was in a flame of rage and resentment. It was not my baby. It was their baby. But I can hear that persuasive lying voice, on and on and on, and it would go on till I gave in. The power of that rebellious flame, strong even now, tells me it was by no means the first time I was told, lyingly, what I must feel. [...] Probably Truby

King or even Montessori had prescribed that the older dispossessed child must be tricked into love, thus cleverly outwitting jealousy. I hated my mother for it. But I was helpless. [...] This is not only an authentic memory, every detail present after all this time, but deduction too. By this event and other of the same kind my emotional life was for ever determined. (24-25)¹¹

As for Lessing, the memory of the deceit is traumatic for the narrator who in the novel has reconstructed it. Again we have a depiction of shows the poor relationship that Lessing had with her mother, a matter which has coloured their whole life. The narrator, and perhaps also Lessing, needs to reconstruct this memory in order to understand and construct her identity.

The last of the “personal” scenes which I will include in this section is the scene where the narrator witnesses Emily eating her own excrement: “Emily, absorbed, oblivious. She was eating – chocolate. No, excrement. She had opened her bowels into the freshness of the white bed and had taken handfuls of the stuff and smeared it everywhere with quick shrieks of triumph and joy. She had smeared it on sheets and blankets, over the wood of the cot, over herself, over her face and into her hair” (123). This appears to be a nightmare memory of the infant Emily tasting her own excrement in ignorant bliss, before her mother discovers it:

This scene – child, cot, sunlit room – diminished sharply, dwindled in the beam of my vision, and was whisked away to be replaced by the same scene made smaller, reduced by the necessity to diminish and so to contain pain; for suddenly there were heavy clanging steps on the stone, a loud angry voice, slaps, heavy breathing – there were low mutters and then exclamations of disgust, and the child yelling and screaming, first in anger, and then after an interval when she was half-drowned by the vigour with which she was scrubbed and swished about in a deep and over-hot bath, in despair. [...] The mother was exclaiming over and over again in dislike of her the child was sobbing with exhaustion. (123-124)

The scene changes quickly, from being “sunlit” when Emily is happy, till it contains “pain” when the mother appears. Thus the narrator can reconstruct the feeling of three different kinds of emotion; the happiness in the first part of the memory, then the anger and despair in the second part. According to Lessing, her own mother was obsessed by cleanliness, as the child were supposed to be toilet-trained from very early age by Truby King’s methods: “one has to

¹¹ “The **Montessori method** is a child-centered alternative educational method for children, based on theories of child development originated by Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870-1952) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montessori_method 2008-12-06)

ask what need in a woman is fulfilled by making a baby 'clean' from the age of a few days, by spending hours in every day 'holding out' a baby over the pot – or making someone else do it? When the infant becomes 'clean', the mother's occupation is gone" (*Under My Skin* 100-101). The mother's anger over Emily's dirtiness in this scene reflects Lessing's own mother's obsession with cleanliness, and the narrator is forever left with the memory of how she was, according to her mother, a "dirty" child: "A child crying. The miserable lost sound of incomprehension. 'You are a naughty girl, Emily, naughty, naughty, naughty disgusting, filthy, dirty, dirty, dirty dirty dirty dirty, a dirty girl Emily, you are a dirty *naughty*, oh *disgusting*, you are a filthy dirty dirty girl, Emily'" (124). The negative connotation of these words sums up the negative impact that her childhood has had on the narrator.

The "Other" scenes

There are two other scenes in *Memoirs* which are rooted in the "personal" realm behind the wall, the scene with Emily's mother as a child; "For once, following a low sobbing, I walked into a room that was all white and clean and sterile, the nightmare colour of Emily's deprivation. A nursery. Whose?" (129) and the scene where the narrator and Hugo witnesses Emily trying on the scarlet dress; "And that was the last time I saw Emily there in what I have called the 'personal'" (159), both of which are slightly different from the rest of the "personal" scenes, because the narrator is now able to interact with the characters in the scenes. Because she is able to do so, I believe that both of these scenes represent constructed memories which the narrator has to go through in order to finish the reconstruction of her memory, because they can help her reconstruct her own identity.

When the narrator, who has been seeking the crying child behind the wall, finally finds her, she realises that it is Emily's mother as an infant that is crying:

I never found Emily. But I did find... the thing is, what I did find was inevitable. I could have foreseen it. [...] Who else could it possibly be but Emily's mother [...] Up went the little arms, desperate for comfort, but they would be one day those great arms that had never been taught tenderness; the face, scarlet with need, was

solaced at last into a pain-drained exhaustion as the fair little child collapsed, head on my shoulder, and the soft wisps of gold baby-hair came up dry and pretty as I rubbed the dank strands gently through my fingers, to absorb the sweat. A pretty, fair little girl, at last finding comfort in my arms... (128)

According to Walker, “The narrator hears the wailing of Emily’s mother and other unidentified babies who have been denied love, going back through generations. These weeping, unconsolated, and inconsolable babies are “the world’s image” according to the narrator; they are the mothers who will in turn deny love to their children, creating such indelible need in them that it makes social exchange difficult and jeopardizes the possibility of society itself” (107). Like in the rest of her article, Walker continues to connect what is happening behind the wall to the matter of social exchange in the “real” world, as she believes that what happened to Emily in her, and others, childhood has made it difficult for her to carry out social exchange. Another critic who elaborates on the same scene is Cederstrom: “This mother-baby is ignored in turn by its mother in a process that has been repeated from generation to generation. The child is captured by time, history and ignorance. Alienated from the moment of birth, the child is only a lost ego, without connection, trapped in the rooms of memory” (126). Cederstrom thus has a slightly different interpretation than Walker, as she connects this scene with alienation of the ego, in the same way that the narrator and Emily are “alienated from the world outside, [...] not ready to move away from its limitations.” (126) However, both of these critics recognise the matter of repetition in the scene, a repetition which reinforces my argument from both chapter 1 and 2, that history has a tendency to repeat itself and that social patterns appear to be fixed.

As I mentioned in chapter 1 Lessing’s parents were brought up by methods similar to the ones of Dr. King, which means that Lessing’s mother passed her experiences to Doris: “The infant was supposed to be fed every two hours, and then every three hours [...] While between the baby must be left to howl and scream, otherwise the baby will call the tune [...] and above all, the baby will ‘get on top’ of the mother. [...] In my case, as my mother cheerfully told me,

again and again, I was starved for the first ten months of my life” (*Under My Skin* 23). This is exactly the same thing that happens in this particular scene in *Memoirs*:

The baby was desperate with hunger. [...] And screamed – for time must pass before she was fed, the strict order of the regime said it must be so: nothing could move that obdurate woman there, who had set her own needs and her relation with her baby according to some timetable alien to them both, and who would obey it to the end. I knew I was seeing an incident that was repeated again and again in Emily’s? her mother’s? – early life. It was a continuing thing; had gone on, day after day, month after month. (129)

The fact that the narrator is unable to tell whether what she witnesses is from Emily’s or Emily’s mother’s childhood only reinforces the notion that this is something that has been repeated generation after generation, and not only during Emily’s childhood. Also, I believe that the narrator needed to reconstruct this particular scene in order to somewhat be able to understand why she was treated the way she was by her mother, because it is an important part of her identity. The scene also emphasises Lessing’s own “traumatic” memories to a great extent, because this is part of her own childhood.

The last of the “personal” scene I also find to be a mixture of impersonal and “personal” because both Emily and her mother are able to see and interact with the narrator and Hugo: “But here she was, a few paces from us, and, sensing us there, her faithful animal and her anxious guardian, she turned her head, slow, slow, and looked at us with lowered lashes, her lips held apart for fantasy kisses” (158); “The mother’s face was twisted with dislike, but now it was this beast that was affecting her so. [...] ‘Go away you dirty filthy animal’” (159). The narrator suddenly moves “into the most incongruous scene you could imagine. How can I say ‘ill-timed’ of a world where time did not exist? All the same, even there, where one took what came, did not criticise the order of things, I was thinking: What a strange scene to show itself now” (157)! I believe that, because this is the last of the reconstructed, or rather constructed, memories that she encounters, the narrator is witnessing a scene of how Emily could have developed after the incidents of her traumatic childhood; the “tickling”, the possibly imposed sexual abuse, and the lack of love from her mother: “In the room, in front of a mirror that

ordinarily was not part of the room at all [...] a long, capacious mirror all scrolled and gilded and curlicued and fluted, the sort of mirror one associated with a film set or a smart dress shop or the theatre – in front of this mirror, here only because the atmosphere and emotional necessities of the scene needed more than the sober small square looking glass, was a young woman” (157). I find that because of the particular mirror which is placed in the room for the occasion, this reinforces my notion that this is a constructed memory rather than a real one.

Like the white dress that Emily tries on in the “real” world as a symbol of her physical and mental maturation, which I mentioned in chapter 2, this scarlet dress, like the scarlet curtains in the “personal” realm poses a threat to the narrator; “It is hard to describe what my feelings were on seeing it, seeing her. They were certainly violent. I was shocked by the dress, or rather that such dresses had ever been tolerated, ever been worn by any woman, because of what they made of the woman” (157-158). Thus the narrator is appalled by what she (and Hugo) witnesses, as she cannot believe what she sees, unlike the other scenes she encounters, which I believe strengthens my argument that this is a constructed memory. Furthermore, I cannot find any evidence that this particular scene is rooted in Lessing own childhood memories, which most of the other “personal” scenes are. Also, the fact that Hugo now is together with the narrator behind the wall reinforces the notion of a “dream world.” Furthermore, “[Her mother’s] appearance at once diminished Emily, made her smaller, so that she began to dwindle from the moment her mother stood there. Emily faced her, and as she shrank in size acted out her provocative sex, [...] The mother gazed, horrified full of dislike, while her daughter got smaller and smaller, was a tiny scarlet doll, [...] then vanished in a flash of red smoke, like a morality tale of the flesh and the devil” (158-159). That Emily vanishes when her mother appears indicates that the relationship with her mother still has a hold over Emily, as she even in this constructed memory feels inferior to her.

The Connection

I believe that throughout the novel the narrator's "real" world and the world behind the wall is constantly connected: "And this is my difficulty on describing that time: looking back now it is as if two ways of life, two lives, two worlds, lay side by side and closely connected. But then, one life excluded the other, and I did not expect the two worlds ever to link up. I had not thought at all of their being able to do so, and I would have said this was not possible" (25), even though it is not until the end that the wall permanently opens up. As I mentioned in chapter 2, Cederstrom believes that the city is the part of the psyche representing the conscious ego while the space behind the wall represents the unconscious self, and that the narrator, or the "protagonist" as Cederstrom has chosen to call her, has managed to create a link between these two worlds. However, although I agree that the narrator has managed to link the two worlds together, I do not necessarily associate the rooms behind the wall with the unconscious, at least not after the narrator deliberately tries to reconstruct her memories and thus also her identity. I also believe that the connection that is established between the two sets of world, that of the "real" world and that of memory, is necessary for the reconstruction of the narrator's identity, because the actions that takes place in the "real" world may function as triggers for the narrator's process of reconstruction, which the narrator maybe recognises: "It was about then I understood that the events on the pavement and what went on between me and Emily might have a connection with what I saw on my visits behind the wall" (37). Although what the narrator witnesses behind the wall may explain why Emily acts the way she does in the real world, it thus also functions the other way around.

When narrator's city collapses, even before "it", the narrator begins the process of reconstructing her identity, a reconstruction she finishes when she writes her "memoirs", and I believe that unconsciously the narrator is aware that she needs to reconstruct her memories in order to do so, as she eventually realises that what she is looking for is behind the wall: "Looking back I can say definitely that the growth of that other life or form of being behind

that wall had been there at the back of my mind for a long time before I *realised* what it was I had been listening to, listening for” (10). After the realisation the narrator becomes obsessed with the space behind the wall, as she may know what is there is important for the reconstruction of her identity:

I was feeling more and more that my ordinary life was irrelevant. Unimportant. That wall had become to me – but how can I put it? – I was going to say, an obsession. [...] I was feeling as if the centre of gravity of my life had moved, balances had shifted somewhere, and I was beginning to believe – uncomfortably, still – that what went on behind the wall might be every bit as important as my ordinary life in that neat and comfortable, if shabby flat. (13)

Even though the narrator feels uncomfortable with the idea of gaining memory of her childhood although she at this point is unaware that that is what she will remember, she still realises that it is important that she moves behind the wall. However she is never able to do so by force, although she tries to at one point after the crying of the baby invades her “real” world; “It was that afternoon I tried deliberately to reach behind the wall: I stood there a long time looking and waiting. [...] It was nonsense, I knew that; it was never because of my, or anybody’s, wanting when the wall went down and made a bridge or a door” (127), and the narrator believes that the choice to move behind the wall to reconstruct her memory never was her to make, and that something (“it”?) forced her to do it: “After all, it was never myself who ordained that now I must interrupt my ordinary life, since it was time to step from one life into another; not I who thinned the sunlight wall; not I who set the stage behind it. I had never had a choice” (88). This reinforces my notion that something, possibly the collapse of the city, triggered the narrator’s process of reconstruction. According to Guido Kuns in “Apocalypse and Utopia in Doris Lessing’s *The Memoirs of a Survivor*”, “there remain an abyss between the two realities which human beings do not seem able to cross by their own strength. Doris Lessing never presents a gradual transition, a growth from one reality to another; it is always the other, the superior Reality which reveals itself, which all of a sudden opens up” (83). However, I disagree with Kuns’ statement that there is an “abyss” between the two worlds,

because I find that the two worlds become more and more closely connected, and I believe that there in fact is a gradual transition. Furthermore, although the narrator is never able to open up the wall by force, and it appears to be the “superior reality which reveals itself, it may be caused by what happens in the real world.

At one point what happens behind the wall begins to invade the narrator’s “real” world, and I believe that this happens since now the narrator is able to recollect her memories outside of the world where she reconstructs them, at least parts of it: “though it was hard to maintain a knowledge of that other world with its scent and running waters and its many plants while I sat here in this dull shabby daytime room, the pavement outside seething as usual with its tribal life – I did hold it. I kept it in my mind. I was able to do this. Yes towards the end it was so; intimations of that life, or lives, became more powerful and frequent in ‘ordinary’ life” (137), because the crying child and the mother’s accusing voice are very strong childhood memories: “But now began a period when something of the flavour of the place behind the wall did continuously invade my real life. It was manifested at first in the sobbing of a child. Very faint, very distant. Sometimes inaudible, or nearly so, and my ears would strain after it and then lose it.[...] I could hear the complaint of the mother, the woman’s plaint, and the two sounds went on side by side, theme and descant” (125). The two worlds of the narrator are now connected, which they have to be for the narrator to be able to write her “memoirs”.

The Ending

The ending of the *Memoirs* is probably the most troublesome part of the novel, especially because now the other characters too can cross the border of the wall, which makes it difficult to defend any realism that may be left in the novel. In this section I have included the interpretation of the ending made by my main sources of criticism, and although I may not have the answer on how to interpret the ending, I will try to elucidate how I believe that the ending is somewhat in line with the rest of my interpretation of the function of the world

behind the wall. This elucidation also includes my interpretation of the garden in the novel, the egg, and most importantly “the One” which the narrator senses in the impersonal space behind the wall early on: “I walked from room to room through the unsubstantial walls, looking for their occupant, their inhabitant, the one whose presence I could feel strongly even now, when the forest had almost taken the place over” (86). According to Perrakis, “The first sighting of this figure represents a brief intimation of inner depths and capacities not previously imagined or realized by the Survivor. This symbolic call from the spiritual heart deep within initiates the psycho-spiritual journey of Lessing’s alter ego, the Survivor, toward attunement without an unknown dimension of the self” (49). Thus Perrakis believes that this familiar presence is what initiates the narrator’s spiritual journey from her earliest visits to the spaces behind the wall, which is in line with her overall interpretation of the novel. Also Cederstrom’s view of “the One” is in line with the rest of her psychological interpretation of *Memoirs*: “Instead of inevitability, the rooms provide an expansive, unlimited view. She has a vision of a “Whole,” a “one Presence” uniting and subduing all the isolated fragmentary beings who had ever lived in that place” (124). Furthermore, Cederstrom believes that “[The One] is the inner *imago dei*, a vision of the self as the center of the totality of the psyche. The protagonist has become one with the self as she incorporates and reconciles within herself all the contradictions and limitations of the world through which she moves” (130).¹² Thus Cederstrom believes that “the One” comprises all the different aspects of the narrator’s psyche, and the narrator is now “one with the self” she had set out to find when she began her spiritual journey. Greene on the other hand finds no specific answer to the question of who “the One” is, but suggests that it may be a “good mother”:

¹²“The **Image of God** (often appearing in Latin as *Imago Dei*) is a concept and theological doctrine that asserts that human beings are created in God's image and therefore have inherent value independent of their utility or function. According to the teaching of Islam, this concept is the result of the corruption of Biblical text.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image_of_God 2008-12-09)

That the animated presence is “she” suggests, perhaps, the “good mother,” [...] And that One, the mysterious she, “the *exiled* inhabitant” of the rooms – is it the narrators work on the rooms that has brought her home? And in bringing her home, does the narrator become her? If the narrator, like Emily, Hugo and the others, is “transmuted into another key”, is she transmuted into her – the Good Mother, mother to all us, nurturing, hatching out the world of her creatures [...]?” (156-157)

However, I believe “the One”, the “strong soft presence, an intimate, whose face would be known to me, had always been known to me” (86), may in fact be the narrator herself. Because that familiar presence “had always been known” to the narrator, and because the narrator is reconstructing her memories and thus also her identity, “the One” whose presence she feels but never sees until the end, is the person who the narrator becomes when her work of creating an identity is coming to an end. The fact that she has sensed “the One” throughout the whole novel during her effort to remember her childhood, and because she has finished reconstructing her memory in the world behind the wall, the narrator is now able to see herself as a whole person.

When the wall between the two worlds opens up and the narrator is able to bring Emily, Gerald and Hugo with her into the space behind the wall, there is a sudden break in whatever realism that is left in the novel. Like I said in the introduction, my immediate interpretation of the narrator’s visits behind the wall was that it was a way to mentally escape the collapse of the outside world, but because the narrator physically brings the others the other characters with her, it is now impossible to just call it a mental escape:

Emily took Gerald by the hand, and with Hugo walked through the screen into the forest... and now it is hard to say exactly what happened. We were in that place which might present us with anything – rooms furnished this way or that and spanning the tastes and customs of millennia; walls broken, falling, growing again; a house roof like a forest floor sprouting grasses and birds’ nests; rooms smashed, littered, robbed; a bright green lawn under thunderous and glaring clouds (181)

The world which the characters walk into is the impersonal, summed up by the narrator in one sentence. Why the narrator is able to bring the rest of the characters with her at this point is a bit difficult to say, but because this happens after the narrator is at the end of the process of

reconstructing her childhood memories, and therefore also her identity, which might enable her to do so. According to Greene, “Emily, Hugo, Gerald, Gerald’s children [...] get through the wall, and they do so because they fulfil their responsibilities towards one another; and the children get through because of the strength of Gerald’s caring” (153). According to Walker, “Some readers may feel shortchanged because the conclusion seems escapist. Characters who have had to scramble for food and compete for shelter in an increasingly threatening society are allowed at the end to take refuge behind the wall. And Lessing’s insistence that this real is more “real” than everyday reality doesn’t do much to quiet the reader who feels disappointed at the conclusion” (108-109). The ending may seem escapist, but at the same time Lessing has provided a way for the narrator to bring together both worlds in the novel, which is necessary for her in order to finish the reconstruction of the narrator’s identity, because both worlds, the “real” one and the one of her childhood memories, are equally important to her sense of identity. All of the characters from the “real” world she must bring with her when because she no longer needs the younger version of herself, Emily, and therefore also not the participants in Emily’s life either. The narrator needed Emily in the “real” world since she was part of her identity, and thereby the narrator also needed to observe Emily through her struggle with love, friendship and social exchange in order to fulfil the reconstruction of her identity, because Emily’s interaction with the “real” world was closely linked to the memories that the narrator needed to reconstruct behind the wall. Therefore, when the narrator’s reconstruction of her memories and is coming to an end, she can guide Emily, and thus also the participants in Emily’s life, back to where Emily was initially created, which is in the world behind the wall.

The world which the narrator and the rest of the characters encounter when they move behind the wall is not an unfamiliar place, as it is the garden which she once visited behind the wall, and I believe that that the garden may represent the coherence between the narrator’s “real” world and the world behind the wall: “I was in a garden between four walls [...] and there was a

fresh delightful sky above me that I knew was the sky of another world, not ours. [...] I became aware that under this garden was another. [...] I was down in the lower garden which was immediately under the first, and occupied the same area: the feeling of comfort and security this gave me is really not describable” (135). Thus the upper garden may represent the “real” world of the narrator, and the lower represents the world behind the wall, both equally important, and by being able to move between the two levels the narrator may realise that she can be able to bring Emily and the others with her there when the time is right, which may be why she feels “comfort and security” the first time she is there. When the narrator in the end brings the other characters from the “real” world to the garden, the egg, which the narrator has seen before behind the wall, “On the lawn was an egg. It was the size of a small house, but poised so lightly it moved in a breeze. Around this brilliant white egg, under a bright sky, moved Emily, her mother, and her father, and – this was an improbable an association of people as one could conceive – June too, close to Emily” (124), reveals itself again: “and on the lawn a giant black egg of pockmarked iron, but polished and glassy around which, and reflected in the black shine, stood Emily, Hugo, Gerald, her officer father, her large laughing gallant mother, and little Denis, the four-year-old criminal clinging to Gerald’s hand, clutching it and looking up into his face, smiling” (181-182). According to Robert Newman in the article “Doris Lessing’s Mythological Egg in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*”: “The egg serves two functions: through its mythological associations it underscores the ideas of psychic integration and rebirth and it also marks the transition in Lessing’s work from her earthbound setting to the intergalactic ones found in the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series” (3).¹³ I believe that because all of the characters from both of the narrator’s worlds are now joined together in the garden, this reinforces that because the narrator now is on the verge of finishing the reconstruction of her identity, all parts that has contributed to the creation of her identity, Emily and the

¹³ From 1979 to 1983 Lessing published five books in the “space fiction” series *Canopus in Argos: Archives*. (<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authots/?p=auth60> 2008-10-02)

participants in her life in the “real” world and her mother and father from her childhood memories, is now brought together, and the narrator is “reborn” as a whole person, “the One”. As “the One”, the narrator is now able to lead all the character away: “Beside her, then, as she turned to walk on and away and ahead while the world folded itself up around her, was Emily, and beside Emily was Hugo, and lingering after them, Gerald. [...] And then, at the very last moment, they came, his children came running, clinging to his hands and his clothes, and they all followed quickly on after the others as the last walls dissolved” (182). The narrator is able to do so because she does not need them any more, and she needs to begin the work of writing her “memoirs” to finish the reconstruction of her identity.

Chapter Conclusion

Like I said in the introduction of the chapter I believe that part of the reason why the narrator writes her “memoirs” is that the narrator wants to reconstruct her identity, and that she therefore must reconstruct her repressed childhood memories in order to do so. Because what the narrator witnesses in the “personal” scenes behind the wall are incidents from Emily’s childhood, this reinforces the notion that Emily is a younger version of the narrator, and thus the narrator reconstructs her own childhood memories. The impersonal space behind the wall, made especially clear by the scene within the six-sided room, represent the narrator’s process of reconstruction of memory, and as the story develops the narrator realises how extensive her memory is, because she can remember more and more of her childhood in the “personal” space behind the wall. Due to her reconstructed memories the narrator is now able to remember the poor and unloving relationship with her mother and the “violent” intrusion of her body during the “tickling” game by her father, and this has coloured the narrator since her childhood, a matter which the narrator has repressed up until now. Furthermore, because the narrator finds her mother as a child behind the wall, the narrator is also able to recognise that her mother treated the narrator in the same manner as the mother herself was treated as a child, and this

scene serves as another example in *Memoir* that history has a tendency to repeat itself. Furthermore, because *Memoirs* constantly breaks the notion of realism in the novel, it is difficult to argue that the narrator and Lessing is one and the same, but because the “personal” scenes behind the wall reflect Lessing’s own childhood there must be a connection between the narrator and Lessing. However, Lessing has never said that this is a conventional autobiography but rather an experiment, a “dream autobiography”, which is why I believe that Lessing has used the narrator as a tool to retell the incidents from Lessing’s childhood.

Conclusion

When I started out to work with the secondary material concerning *Memoirs*, I realised the extent of this intricate novel, as I became more and more confused about how to interpret “it”, the different character, its communities, its space, and of course the world behind the wall. Because of the all the different kinds of interpretations of the novel made by critics such as Greene, Walker, Cederstrom and Perrakis, it is easy to get lost in the jungle, so I realised that the best way to deal with my confusion was to focus on working out my own interpretation and rather use the criticism as a starting point. Because of the intricate plot of the novel, many readers such as me may be confused and dejected, which is why I have chosen to simplify my interpretation rather than complicate it like I believe that some critic tend to do. By focusing on specific matters such as the autobiographical aspect of *Memoir*, narrative perspectives and my own interpretation of the world behind the wall, it is easier for the reader to comprehend some of the intentions behind the novel, not only Lessing’s, but also the narrator’s. Furthermore, by leaving out of the thesis P.D James’ *The Children of Men*, the novel which I initially believed shared some traits with the seemingly dystopian *Memoirs*, I was able to concentrate solely on Lessing’s novel, which enabled me to explore more of the novel than I initially intended.

By focusing on the narrative perspective in *Memoirs*, the reader may be able to understand the role of the narrator in the novel. Because the narrator appears to be somewhat immobile in connection with the “real” world, at least in the beginning of the novel, it is her role as the observer of Emily and the life on the pavement that is in focus, a task she mainly performs from the inside of her apartment. Because Lessing has used an internal focalizer, rather than an external, the reliability of the narrator may be questioned, especially since the narrator is telling the story I retrospect. Thus the reader has to rely on the narrator’s ability to remember the incidents that she is focusing on in her “memoirs”. Because the plot in *Memoirs* appears to be rather simple in terms of character interaction and setting, at least in the “real” world of the novel, it is plausible that the narrator should be able to remember the details of

what she wishes to write about. However, the narrator may have simplified the action in her “memoirs”, but there is no way for the reader to know whether or not the narrator is capable of doing that. Furthermore, the narrator is coloured by her feelings about certain issues, a matter which becomes evident when the narrator “fell into despair at the precariousness of every human attempt and effort” (127) and temporarily abandons her role as the observer when Emily goes out to the pavement after Gerald has left her for one of the other females in his “harem”. As a result, the reader may question the narrator’s reliability, but because the only point of focalization lies with the narrator, the reader may find it impossible to determine the reliability of the narrator.

One of my main arguments throughout the thesis has been that Emily is a younger version of the narrator, and this becomes evident not only in the world behind the wall but also in the “real” world. I believe that the narrator is able to recognise this too, as she writes that “for my part, she, her condition, was as close to me as my own memories” (43), which is why she also wants to establish a mother-daughter relationship with Emily. Because the narrator is able to witness Emily’s childhood and poor relationship with her mother in the “personal” scenes behind the wall, and thus also remembers her own childhood, she recognises Emily’s need for a proper mother-daughter relationship. Emily on the other hand, although unable to remember her past, is subconsciously coloured by the traumas of the childhood, and thus keeps a distance to everyone around her, including the narrator. Although Emily is a younger version of the narrator it is not to conclude that they will act in the same manner in the “real” world, which becomes evident when the narrator complains to the reader about Emily’s decision to stay with Gerald and also about Emily’s inability to recognise the frail structure of Gerald’s household. However, align with Lessing’s argument in *Prisons* that, “the young people don’t know since they don’t read history” (25), Emily cannot recognise the mistakes that she makes because she is young and is incapable of knowing that history has a tendency to repeat itself,

while the narrator, who is one of the “educated” (96), is. This contradicts Cederstrom’s interpretation that Emily as a symbol of the narrator’s younger personality is a “repository of [the narrator’s] youthful attitudes” (120) as mentioned on page 38 in my thesis, because it is the elder narrator who contains the knowledge about history and not the younger Emily.

The narrator’s involvement and insightful comments on the issues that history has a tendency to repeat itself and that social patterns are fixed reinforces my belief that part of the narrator’s intentions to write her “memoirs” was to warn the reader about these issues. When she writes about “it” in the novel, that “‘it’ is a force, a power, taking the form of earthquake, a visiting comet whose balefulness hangs closer night by night distorting all thought but fear – ‘it’ can be, has been, pestilence, a war, the alteration of climate, a tyranny that twists men’s minds, the savagery of religion.” (130), the narrator speaks about the fact that former and future actions continue to repeat themselves in history without our recognition and acknowledgement. Because this is consistent with Lessing’s own thoughts about this issue in *Under My Skin*; “A general worsening of conditions goes on, as has happened in my lifetime. Waves of violence sweep past – represented by gangs of young and anarchic people – go by, and vanish. There are wars and movements like Hitler, Mussolini, Communism, white supremacy, systems of brutal ideas that seem for a time unassailable, then collapse” (29) and in *Prisons*; “To remember this history is not for the sake of keeping alive the memories of old tyrannies, but to recognize present tyranny, for these patterns are in us still. It would be strange if they were not. It is these patterns that I believe we should study, become conscious of, and recognize as they emerge in us and in the societies we live in.” (25-26), this reinforces my argument that Lessing uses the narrator as a tool to present her own opinions on the issue. Furthermore, the narrator’s preoccupations about social structures when it comes to the structure within Gerald’s commune are consistent with Walker and Greene’s argument that because of the fixed social patterns it is impossible to maintain such a community.

Furthermore, the issue of fixed social pattern is reflected in the world behind the wall as well in the “real” world, and because these social patterns resembles those of a family, Emily’s mother cannot help herself when she treats Emily the way she does, because that was the way she was treated herself. Because there is a parallel between the upbringing of Emily/Emily’s mother and the upbringing of Lessing/her mother, this reinforces my argument that both Lessing and the narrator in *Memoirs* believes that these matters are so important that they need to emphasise them; Lessing in her experimental autobiography and the narrator in her “memoirs”.

There are many interpretations of the world behind the wall, mostly psychological and spiritual ones like respectively Cederstrom's and Perrakis', and I believe that because of the intricate aspects of these interpretations, the reader (like myself) who tries to comprehend the different aspects of *Memoirs* may be confused by such interpretations unless he/she is familiar with psychology and Sufism. Cederstrom’s views that the world behind the wall represents the unconscious self of the narrator, and that all of the characters in the “real” world in *Memoirs* represent different aspects of the narrator’s psyche that all are combined in the end behind the wall, may be too complicated to grasp for the common reader, and so is also Perrakis belief that the different scenes that are being played out behind the wall represent the different stages in the narrator’s spiritual journey. By interpreting the world behind the wall in *Memoirs* as a representation of the process of constructing memories I believe that it is easier for the reader, and for me, to relate to the novel. Furthermore, because the reader is aware that the “personal” scenes behind the wall are incidents from Lessing’s own life, it may be easier to understand why Lessing labelled *Memoirs* “an Attempt at an Autobiography”. The process of reconstructing the narrator’s memory is particularly present in the scene within the six-sided room, where all the “[Pieces] was laid exactly on the design, and brought it to life” (69). This scene symbolises the process of reconstructing the narrator’s memory; separated the narrator’s different memories do not add up, put when put together her memory is recovered and brought

to life. Also, because Emily appears after the narrator's first visit to the impersonal space behind the wall, this indicates that the narrator produces (and remembers) the younger version of herself because she has started the process of reconstructing her repressed childhood memories. Furthermore, because I believe that part of the narrator's intentions when she wrote her "memoir" was to reconstruct her identity, Emily is therefore a very important part of the narrator, which is why most of the narrator's time is spent observing Emily, both in the "real" world and behind the wall.

Because Lessing has, probably intentionally, created a narrator whose reliability is difficult to determine it may be harder for the reader to accept the novel as an autobiography. However, Lessing never intended to write a conventional autobiography, as *Memoirs* was only an experiment, which especially the ending proves. Although I believe that the "One" that the narrator finally is able to see in the end may be herself as a whole person, it is especially the ending that proves to be the most difficult part for the reader to comprehend. The reader may be left with many questions that Lessing fails to answer, and because of that Lessing's "Attempt at an Autobiography" may have been an experiment gone wrong, at least for the common reader. However, because Lessing has used the narrator as a tool to promote her own opinions on the issues that *Memoirs* deal with and also to share her own childhood memories, Lessing has turned her life into fiction in an interesting manner that proves to be difficult even for the scholarly critics to comprehend. Thus by combining autobiography and fiction in the way that Lessing has done in *Memoirs*, Lessing proves that to change the self into a fictional character may be both a strength and weakness in *Memoirs*; a strength because this enables Lessing to share her opinions and experiences through an unnamed narrator, and a weakness because it may leave the reader in a state of confusion.

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