

# Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction



# Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction

Edited by

Sharon R. Wilson

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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## INTRODUCTION

### UTOPIAN, DYSTOPIAN, USTOPIAN, SCIENCE FICTION, AND SPECULATIVE FICTION

According to Jameson, Utopias, Dystopias, and Speculative Fiction all began at about the same time, either with Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) or earlier with Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). In most calculations, however, all of these genres and their fictional parallels have existed for hundreds of years, from Plato's *Republic* to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. The content of Utopian form, a subset of science fiction and in opposition to fantasy, emerges from the fairy tale (Jameson 33, 85). This may be one of the reasons that current utopias and dystopias frequently use fairy tale intertexts.

The words "utopia" and "dystopia" have more specific meanings than the term "speculative fiction." Although one may speculate about all sorts of things, like the other terms, speculative fiction is usually about the nature of the world. To think about utopia, however, one must think about the ideal or perfect. Dystopia involves utopia's opposite: a nightmare, the ultimate flawed world, or "a society worse than the existing one," such as *Brave New World* and *1984* (Moynan, *Demand* 9). Ironically, utopias unconsciously beget their own dystopias, a combination of the word "utopia" and its opposite that Atwood in her recent *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* calls "ustopias" (66). According to Moynan, oppositional utopian vision infused with politics of autonomy, democratic socialism, ecology, and especially feminism continue to challenge the industrial consumer society (Moynan 11), as is evident in many of the authors discussed in this book. As Jameson says, feminist, Marxist, and socialist projects still imagine utopia differently (355, qtd. Moynan, *Scraps* 247). Post 9/11, "Now it appears we face the prospect of two contradictory dystopias at once—open markets, closed minds—because state surveillance is back again with a vengeance" (Atwood, *In Other* 148).

Although little agreement exists about distinctions among science fiction, fantasy, speculative fiction, utopia, and dystopia, Atwood's *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* both clarifies and magnifies

the controversy. Atwood refers to science fiction, too often confused with realism, as “a mode of romance with a strong tendency towards myth,” and as “not of this here-and-now Earth.” Speculative fiction could happen but hasn’t yet and fantasy could not happen (5-7). Although Atwood refers to her own *The Handmaid’s Tale* as speculative fiction, however, she points out that this book does contain incidents that have already happened. Significantly, because she and Ursula Le Guin do not agree on their definitions, the different genres overlap.

## **Women’s Utopian and Dystopian Fiction**

*Women’s Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* is about how utopia and dystopia create new worlds, establish genre, and critique gender roles, traditions, and values. Like its subject, it is a book that promises to have wide appeal among college students and professors. Utopian and Dystopian texts are taught in most English programs, and their larger genres, science fiction and fantasy, are often required courses. Furthermore, even non-English majors and professors choose utopian and dystopian literature as leisure reading. Two of the writers covered in this book, Doris Lessing and Toni Morrison, are Nobel Prize winners, and two others are already classic writers (Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin). Modernism, Postmodernism, Intertextuality, Folklore, Eugenics, and other significant topics are covered as utopia and dystopia are defined, compared, and analyzed. A distinctive aspect of this book is the authors’ international perspectives, with writers teaching in Korea, Tunisia, England, Italy, and the US.

## **I Doris Lessing**

Three of the essays in this book are about the Nobel-prize winning, under-appreciated writer, Doris Lessing. While people liked her early impressionistic stories about Africa, she was initially considered a “traditional” writer too interested in women and politics. Critics dismissed her science fiction and even ridiculed her final novel, *The Cleft*.

Sun-Hwa Park’s essay, “An Opening in the Wall: Lessing’s *Memoirs of a Survivor as Autobiography*,” takes seriously Lessing’s claim that *Memoirs* is her autobiography and offers insights about Lessing’s childhood, particularly her relationship with her father, of which Lessing herself may not have been aware. She integrates the autobiographical reading with mythical aspects of the novel.



Sharon R. Wilson writes about story-telling in *Mara and Dann* and reveals storytelling as a preservation of knowledge, a way of learning, and a satire of culture. *Mara and Dann* is viewed as an ustopic text, a combination of utopian and dystopian features that satirize civilizations of past, present, and future while revealing multicultural greediness and blindness. Here Lessing uses the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale to warn humanity of its foolishness.

Noting irony and parody, Bootheina Majoul Aouadi's "The Exegesis of Doris Lessing's *The Cleft: Rethinking Being and Time*," investigates the much misunderstood *The Cleft*. Lessing satirically portrays creation myths and gender stereotypes. "*The Cleft* is thus a utopian fable denouncing dystopian realities." Because the Roman historian narrator raises doubts even about his own conclusions, he questions how history portrays "truths."

## II Other British and American Fiction

In "The Hand that Cradles the Rock: Nature, Gender and Subalternatives in the Works of Carol Emshwiller and Ursula Le Guin," Richard Hardack suggests that science fiction "can estrange the everyday" and that Le Guin and Emshwiller do so with empathy. Exploring the kinship between victimized women and victimized animals in these women's works, he notes that frequently animals evolve into women and women become animals, finally with no fixed borders.

Zeynep Z. Atayurt, in "Fay Weldon's *The Cloning of Joanna May* as a Feminist Dystopian Burlesque," discusses another dystopia that warns against the repercussions of current social and political trends and reveals their anxiety over the female body. Thus, Atayurt shows how Weldon's feminist dystopian burlesque mocks and challenges the objectification of women by satirizing the implications of technoscientific methods of reproduction and reconstruction.

Soo Darcy's "Power, Surveillance and Reproductive Technology in P.D. James' *The Children of Men*" explores dystopian power and control in reference to reproduction and the body, suggesting the role of Western medicine and science in creating but not solving the problem. The pregnant woman, Julian, was constructed as unstable, marginal, and in need of medical treatment and surveillance. Ultimately, James shows the body is appropriated by technology.

Karen Stein's "Inclusion and Exclusion in Some Feminist Utopian Fictions" surveys the twentieth-century feminist utopian and dystopian fiction of Gilman, Charnas, Gearhart, Russ, Piercy, and others. She explores the Janus face, the idea of inclusion and exclusion, other

paradoxes in utopias, and concludes wondering what utopias might be written in today's atmosphere of cynicism.

In Kristin Distel's "Gendered Travel and Quiescence in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," she investigates the novel's appearance vs. reality theme, recognizing that neither the towns of Ruby nor Convent are true utopias for most of the novel. She sees the novel's "whitespace" and controversial ending—are the women alive or not?—in relationship to the Isis myth and implies that this novel most closely reaches toward "utopia."

### III Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood's recent fiction and her non-fiction book, *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination*, have by themselves stimulated renewed discussion of utopias and dystopias. After her forthcoming third volume that began with *Oryx and Crake* appears in 2013, the time will be suitable for a book on Atwood's utopias, ustopias, and dystopias.

Adelina Cataldo's "Breaking the Circle of Dystopia: Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," offers an original reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* through Atwood's early poem, "The Circle Game." Few of Atwood's admirers, particularly recent ones, are aware of Atwood's long and prestigious career as a poet. Through exploring circle/enclosure symbolism, Cataldo shows how *The Handmaid's Tale* breaks the boundaries represented by the circle of the narrator's dystopian society and even by the genre within which Atwood writes.

Charlotte Templin, in "Layers of Time: Margaret Atwood's Handling of Time in *The Handmaid's Tale*," discusses Atwood's "layers of time" to explore how Atwood creates strangeness in familiarity, or familiarity in strangeness, and avoids any easy dating of events in the novel. This "structuring of time," often disputed by critics, is how Atwood created her cautionary tale.

Katherine V. Snyder's "Screen Memories: Maternal After-Images in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Novels" discusses films and photographs as mediated memories, maternal after-images, and departures for seeing the future in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*. After we read the forthcoming end of Atwood's trilogy, Snyder encourages us to envision a hopeful future.

**I**

**DORIS LESSING**

AN OPENING IN THE WALL:  
LESSING'S *THE MEMOIRS OF A SURVIVOR*  
AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

SUN HWA PARK

Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) is a transitional novel from realistic narrative to space narrative. Lessing began to distrust the realistic narrative in the 1960s, which led her to explore experimental writing in the early 1970s. As Lynn Hanley mentions, she as a marginal writer has been unwilling to follow the main stream or literary trends (919) and so she tries to invent new styles to describe the multi-layered aspects of the circumstances in modern society. In such a transitional period, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* was classified as science fiction or fantasy. Alvin Sullivan and Bernard Duyhuizen call this the "future-history" novel (Sullivan 158; Duyhuizen 150), Guido Kuns calls it a "utopian novel" (80), and Heba Hosni sees this as a "post-apocalyptic fiction" (1). On the other hand, since the fact that Lessing received some counseling (Rubenstein 32), some Lessingian researchers such as Lorelei Cederstrom and Marilyn Charles have approached *The Memoirs of a Survivor* from the psychological perspectives to the exclusion of the genre of science fiction or fantasy. Other interpretations of this novel have caused confusion to readers as well as critics, and resulted in its being called "a ghost story of the future" (Maddocks 58).

On the contrary, it is to be noted that Lessing used the subtitle, *An Attempt at Autobiography* in 1974, which was later deleted by a publishing company without any explanation (Arntsen 21). In the interview with Claire Tomalin, Lessing mentions her attempt to write about her autobiographical story, and she is surprised that no one recognizes this.

When I wrote *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, I said that I was trying to write my autobiography. No one is remotely interested in this, nor ever has been, unfortunately. I was trying to write an autobiography in this form, because at some point in my life I thought it would be interesting to write an autobiography of dreams, in dream form. That is so difficult that I've given up on it – it really would take the whole rest of my life. In part I was

writing an autobiography in terms of metaphors- behind the dissolving wall is the most ancient symbol you possibly can find. I always use these old, hoary symbols, as they strike the unconscious. Behind the wall, there are three different kinds of things going on: the personal memories and the dreams, a lot of which come from my own, and the third is the impersonal. (Ingersoll 174)

Lessing makes it clear that the story of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is based on her own experiences but some critics, nevertheless, think of this novel as a science fiction or fantasy and then undertake to find out Lessing's ideas related to the genre. The confusion starts with "the dissolving wall." This novel has the similar device to *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice travels to a wonderland through a rabbit hole. The narrator, who lives in a city in the future in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, goes and comes out of the other world through "the dissolving wall." Here, Lessing reveals she uses "the dissolving wall" as a tool of the "dream form," not a device of fantasy or science fiction. She just makes the most use of the form of fantasy or science fiction so as to express her "personal memories and dreams."

At first, it seems that *The Memoirs of a Survivor* employs the devices of fantasy or science fiction using Emily Cartright, a twelve-year-old girl, who pops out of the wall before a middle-aged woman narrator without providing any information and clues about the route. Even Emily grows quickly from a baby to a girl and a woman crossing time zones. With these aspects, the "unrealistic elements" (Ingersoll 201) in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* cannot be disregarded. However, it should be considered that Lessing uses these devices to describe her childhood experiences. There are some reasons why this can be read as Lessing's autobiographical story. Emily as "the narrator's double" (Dooley 160) reflects the process of development of the narrator. Through "the dissolving wall," the narrator visits the dream region and meets twelve-year-old Emily, Emily in childhood, Emily in adolescence, and middle-aged Emily. The narrator tells readers the story of Emily, which is the same or similar to that of Lessing (Dooley 160). The name of Emily is Lessing's mother's and grandmother's Christian name (Arntsen 22). The narrator sees Emily's mother, that is, Lessing's mother in childhood, with Emily in childhood in the dream world. Lessing says, "In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, what the narrator believes that she is seeing behind the wall, that apparent dream world, actually represents her own life, her own childhood" (Ingersoll 148). In *Under My Skin* (1994), Lessing again mentions, "For years I had wondered if I could write a book, a personal history, but told through dreams" (29), and thereby she creates the dissolving wall. At this point,

readers might have interest in her story described in the dream form, not in realistic style. What she tells of, using this form, is probably connected to “accounts of lives that are a little too good to be true” (Abbott 138).

### **Narrator as a Focalizer and Emily in the Wonder Room**

The first person narrator in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* explains an event which occurs in an English city in the future. In the city public service such as electricity and water is cut. On the street where lots of ruins abound, loafers come and go, and some abandoned children fight against each other. The family life is broken in a society, where immorality and self-indulgence as well as chaos, disorder, and malice are prevalent. People cannot be sure whether inauspicious news which they receive through broadcasting and rumors is certain. People’s individuality and dignity are destroyed and, to make matters worse, it is said that some eat people’s flesh. The authorities the narrator call “They” (5) are just talkers who spend their lives in their eternal and interminable conferences, talking about what is happening and what should happen. They cannot take any action about what happened. The police only break up people’s gathering and disappear quickly after dispersing the crowd. The air is so contaminated that people have difficulty in breathing. In this situation, the narrator is stressed with whether she has to leave the city or not even though she has no alternative place to go. She just lives in an apartment complex with few remaining residents all hoping to leave. The narrator describes the future city as a dystopia where “gangs, disorder, pollution, defective public services, and an increasing paucity of goods and resources are not completely unknown” (Kuns 80-81). *The Memoirs of a Survivor* presents the apocalyptic vision of the breakdown of civilization which is indicated in *The Four-Gated City* (1969) among the *Children of Violence* series.

The anonymous narrator, who is only known as a middle-aged woman, is a survivor in the city which faces into the abyss and the “end” (3) or the ending and talks to “us” (3) about her experiences. She, however, has no idea of what the ending means. The city looks as if it were one in a SF movie and science fiction that is destroyed and remains desolate by the highly mechanized civilization. With this description *The Memoirs of a Survivor* can be considered a science fiction novel. Thereby it is likely to see the narrator as a survivor from the catastrophe, such as a nuclear war or an earthquake, and thereby some critics, like Alvin Sullivan, Bernard Duyhuizen, Guido Kuns and Heba Hosni, analyze *The Memoirs of a Survivor* with this perspective. It is noted that the narrator talks about the atmosphere of the ending, but she remains silent to the end about what the

ending is about. Then, what is she a survivor from? The narrator calls the crisis or the symptom of anxiety “it” (150). The “it” seems to hint the accident which is identical to the destruction of civilization.

Perhaps it might even have been more correct to have begun this chronicle with an attempt at a full description of “it.” But is it possible to write an account of anything at all without “it” - in some shape or another - being the main theme? Perhaps, indeed, “it” is the secret theme of all literature and history, like writing between the lines in invisible ink, which springs up, sharply black, dimming the old print we knew so well, as life, personal or public, unfolds unexpectedly and we see something where we never thought we could - we see “it” as the ground-swell of events, experience. (150-51)

The “it” is a force taking the form of earthquake or it is a comet whose fearfulfulness hangs closer step by step. When it becomes visible, it is like fear which distorts all thoughts. It can be “a war, the alteration of climate, a tyranny that twists men’s minds, the savagery of a religion” (151). The “it” can be helpless ignorance or “a consciousness of something ending” (151). Here, it is certain that the narrator tries to describe the meaning of “it” in detail but in vain. The “it” is an indicator of a dramatic change or a transitional event in her life which she has experienced as an inexplicable and personal thing. Her personal memory is likely to spring up without expectation, or it can pop up as an experience on an unexpected moment. The memory of “it” that is latent in her unconscious “unfolds unexpectedly,” and it can take over her consciousness, which makes her feel disturbed. The narrator can not be able to listen to what she is told when she is involved in the outer things, and even she refuses to listen to “it” repeatedly. She comes to believe that “it” has something to do with her personal thing that she is unaware of though she knows it and she forgets it though she knows what “it” is. It is time to face into the moment she has to accept “it.” So, she makes it clear that she is going to talk “not about the public pressures and events . . . but my own private discoveries” (7). In this aspect, the “it” is about her story where her “secret theme of all literature and history” (151) can pop up through the opening of the wall.

It is difficult for the readers to understand the opening of the wall. It is complicated to explain the way the narrator goes and comes through the wall. One day, the narrator catches the outlines of flowers, leaves, birds under the paint of the wallpaper (11). With the recognition of “it,” in the mornings the narrator starts to look at the wall the sun falls on:

. . . and then I was through the wall and I knew what was there. I did not, that first time, achieve much more than that there were a set of rooms. The

rooms were disused, had been for some time. Years, perhaps. There was no furniture. Paint had flaked off the wall in places, and lay in tiny shards on the floorboards with scraps of paper and dead flies and dust. I did not go in, 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. (12-13)

The narrator goes through the wall, following her own discovery which “became so urgent and which [was] making such a claim on me” (7) before she recognizes it. She realizes that she knows “a set of rooms” where “there were many windows and doors,” and that it is a “large, light, airy, delightful flat or house” (13). The narrator has a close relationship with the world she visits, and she is sure that something is going to happen in the “spaces that are familiar and seem reminiscent of ‘home,’ but are not home” (Charles 7). And, she is visited by Emily. One morning a man is standing in her living room with Emily and he is gone quickly after saying, “She’s your responsibility” (15). He disappears without a sign. She cannot understand how the two suddenly appear in her place, nor can the readers. The narrator regards this as “extraordinary” and “impossible” (17), and at the same time she accepts the irrelevant and impossible. Finally, she decides to take in Emily.

Yes, it was extraordinary. Yes, it was all impossible. But, after all, I had accepted the “impossible.” I lived with it. I had abandoned all expectations of the ordinary for my inner world, my real life in that place. (17-18)

The events and characters in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* are viewed through the eyes of the narrator, in which the readers follow the story. Then, is the narrator in charge of all the narratives? In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott points out that the narrator is just “an instrument, a construction, or a device” (68) used by the author, agreeing that narrators should not be confused with authors. Abbott presents three tools such as “voice,” “focalization” and “distance” in order to explain the device of the narrator. First, Abbott focuses on the important feature of “voice” in narration. It is important to determine what kind of person is used for a narrator because this lets the readers know how the narrator injects her own needs, desires and limitations into the narration, and whether the readers trust the information given by the narrator. Abbott introduces the coined term, “focalization,” rather than the vaguer and more disputed term “point of view.” It refers to the lens through which the readers see events and characters in the narrative, that is to say, the readers hear the narrator’s voice and see the actions through the narrator’s eyes. Abbott uses the term “distance” which refers to the narrator’s degree of involvement in the narrative. Depending on the extent to which the



narrator plays a part in the narrative, the readers are influenced when they assess what the narrator says.

Abbott's tools which are used to identify the narrator in the story are closely related to the narrator's reliability. As Wayne Booth refers to the unreliable narrator, the readers face the challenge to what extent they can rely on the narrator who gives them the information of the story and, when they are sure of the information, to what extent they can respect the narrator's opinions which she gives to them. Then, why does the author create the unreliable narrator? The author places the responsibility of the narration on the unreliable narrator in which the author has skillful obscurity. At the same time, the author obtains her desired result by presenting the narration itself which can be subverted by the readers' "interests, prejudices and blindnesses" (Abbott 76) as the theme of the narration. When the narrator's reliability is open to challenge and the narrative of the narrator arouses distrust, the narrator, paradoxically, gets more attention. The reliability of the narrator leads to the relation between the (real) author who creates the narrative and the implied author who is "a sensibility behind the narrative" (Abbott 84) in each narrative. With the implied author identified in the narrative, the readers understand how the narrative is constructed and what the narrative delivers to them. Abbott points out that the author is a complex and continually changing individual in whom the readers may not have any trust. The author may be equally uncertain as a guide in the narrative like the unreliable narrator. Here, the narrator, the author and the implied author in the narrative make "gaps" (Abbott 90) in reading the narrative. So the readers have to fill in the gaps in order to follow the narrative they read. The narrative comes alive as the readers fill in its gaps, and it also gains life by leaving some of the gaps unfilled. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* has the most gaps in Lessing's novels, which gives rise to multiple opinions not only in the form and but also in the subject. One of the reasons may have something to do with the roles which the author, the implied author and the narrator play in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*.

The gap, which in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is willingly unfilled by the author or the implied author, begins to be recognized as soon as the narrator stands on "the margin" (13) between the flat and the rooms behind the wall. The gap is similar to the rabbit hole that is a path to the underworld Alice visits in *Alice in Wonderland* and it looms clearly as Emily comes over to the flat through "the dissolving wall" where the narrator stays. As the wonderland in *Alice in Wonderland* is described in dream form, the author in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* insinuates that the encounter between Emily and the narrator is made "in dream form"

(Ingersoll 174). The author has the narrator accept “the impossible” like the showing up of Emily and then the narrator makes the readers believe this. In the dream world the impossible is possible. In the long run, the readers hear about Emily’s story which is developed in the dream world through the narrator’s eyes. Behind the story the implied author suggests that the narrator is expecting the encounter with Emily consciously or unconsciously. In part of her consciousness the narrator starts to recognize “the consciousness of that other life, developing there so close to me, hidden from me, was a slow thing . . . Such an opening, a growing, may be an affair of weeks, months, years” (7). Once the narrator listens to it, she realizes what it is. This “inner preoccupation” (7) predates the “it” event that the narrator mentions as the opening of the wall. Let’s go into the world behind the dissolving wall.

### **Reconstruction of the Past: Personal/ Impersonal Experiences behind the Wall**

In *Turning Her Life into Fiction*, Ann-Christin Arntsen believes that all of the different characters in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* represent different aspects of the narrator. Emily is a younger version of the narrator, and Lessing uses the narrator as a tool with the intention to tell the story of her own childhood (5-6). With this device, the readers have difficulty following the story of the narrator, Emily and Lessing. The mixed-voice of the three characters causes some confusion. Emily pops up before the narrator as if she uses magic and then the narrator visits the world behind the wall, and the readers have the moment they consider Emily and the narrator as the same character. And then the role of the narrator as a focalizer who sees and describes Emily is obscure because the narrative of the narrator and Emily is mixed, so the readers feel they do not have to distinguish the narrator from Emily. The narrator meets twelve-year old Emily in her flat, and after that she repeatedly sees four-year old Emily, Emily in adolescence, Emily in her early forties in the world behind the wall. Here, it is noted that the narrator sometimes sees or listens to Emily through the “looking-glass land” (Ackroyd 797) and sometimes she joins the events with Emily. At first, the narrator feels unfamiliar to Emily. As time goes by, the narrator realizes that she knows Emily very well and Emily is the reflection of her own past. The narrator forgets her role as a focalizer in the narrative in which she becomes Emily, or she sometimes plays her role as a focalizer with keeping her distance from Emily. In this aspect, this part is discussed on the premise that the story of Emily is that of the narrator and furthermore Lessing.

In the world behind the wall, the narrator continues to open the doors of the rooms or is turning the corners of the long corridors in order to find empty rooms. There is room after room after room. Every room is crammed with objects which seem to need some attention from the narrator. There the narrator finds out one room that seems to be hers. She likes the tidy room. However, she feels depressed at realizing that every object and piece of furniture has to be replaced, mended or cleaned. Every thing is dirty and impaired. She thinks that the whole place should be emptied, burned or thrown away. While the narrator visits the rooms behind the wall again and again, the narrator has the “personal” and “impersonal” experiences.

The two kinds, “personal” (though not necessarily, to me) and the other, existed in spheres quite different and separated. One, the “personal,” was instantly to be recognized 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 – like the rehabilitation of walls or furniture, cleaning, putting order into chaos – but in that realm there was a lightness, a freedom, a feeling of possibility. Yes, that was it, the space and the knowledge of the possibility of alternative action. One could refuse to clean that room; one could walk into another room altogether, choose another scene. But to enter the “personal” 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. (41-42)

As the narrator cooks, cleans and arranges her flat, she is allowed to do the same things in the impersonal realm behind the wall. She has the choice to mend old sofas or chairs and wash dusty curtains. Nevertheless, the narrator comes to feel frustrated, rather than the expectation and vitality she has at the first time when she discovers the rooms behind the wall. However hard she cleans the rooms, she sees that she has to do the same things again and again whenever she visits the rooms. The narrator recognizes that in a six-sided room the carpet is able to come to life when a piece of material from the jumble on the trestles is matched with the carpet, but she fails in carrying out her task because of some pressure when she thinks she finds out the right fragment for the carpet (79). Or, she cannot be satisfied even after eating up a sugar house like termites with Emily who “breaks off whole pieces of the roof and cramming them into her healthy mouth” (142). On the contrary, possibilities and alternatives abound in this realm, where the narrator has freedom (41). She makes progress through her repeated actions, and thereby the rooms she visits in the impersonal realm are changing. In a room, she removes some rotten

planks away for insects that are busy at their work of re-creation, and pulls back heavy curtains to let the sunlight in. Then, the smell of growth comes up from the stuffy old room. In such progress and development, she is also changing. Her rage of protest “(but against what?)” (100) with a restlessness and a hunger is relieved.

In the personal realm where “nothing can happen but what one sees happening” and like “a prison” closure, despair, anxiety and loneliness are prevalent, the narrator slowly and painfully recalls that Emily feels guilty because her mother sees her as an obstacle. The narrator watches the scene where Emily who on a white bed is covered with her excrement is caught by her mother, and then she hears a loud angry voice, slaps, low mutters and exclamations of disgust and the child screaming. The mother puts Emily in an over-hot bath and scrubs her, which leaves her skin red. The mother keeps exclaiming in disgust because of a faint tainted stink of shit. “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 a filthy dirty dirty girl, Emily” (144). In another scene, the narrator perceives strong waves of painful emotion from Emily who receives her mother’s talking to a woman visitor in the form of warnings, threats and messages of dislike. This is guilt that is connected to both Emily and the narrator’s uncomfortable self-reproach. The narrator often hears such painful complaints in the personal realm, and even in her flat she catches the voice coming from one of the rooms behind the wall.

About this point, the readers can have this doubt: why do the narrator and Emily’s mother see the daughter as naughty, and thereby condemned all the time? Why does the narrator fruitlessly clean and arrange the old rooms in the impersonal realm? Is it related to her past which is willingly not deleted? The more often she visits the rooms behind the wall, the more signs of the world behind the wall the narrator has in her flat. This sign is related to the sobbing of a child. This “sound of a child’s crying” (144) plays an important role as a main motif in the narration of the narrator. The sound of crying is faint, distant, and sometimes inaudible. On the other hand, even when she talks to Emily, the narrator hears the child’s crying. In fact, the narrator is drawn by “a child crying” (12) among sounds and voices in the rooms behind the wall while she puts her ear to the wall and waits for something. The sound of crying is a catalyst to the narrator who begins her journey to the rooms behind the wall. The point is that the sound of crying seems familiar to the narrator who thinks she has been hearing the sound all her life. With the sound of crying in the personal realm, the narrator cannot help having the “personal” which is with “dismay and a not-wanting” (66). This emotion of embarrassment may

have to do with the narrator's remark that Emily has "an invisible deformity, a hump on her back" (70), which is perhaps visible only to Emily and herself.

In a large chair set against the curtains, the soldier-like man sat with his knees apart, gripping between them the small girl who stood shrieking. On his face, under the moustache, was a small tight smile. 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. The child wore a long nightie, with frills at wrists and at the neck. Her hair had been brushed and was held by ribbon. A few minutes ago she had been a clean neat pretty little girl in a white nightdress, with a white ribbon in her hair, but now she was hot and sweating, and her body was contorting and twisting to escape the man's great hands that squeezed and dug into her ribs, to escape the great cruel face that bent so close over her with its look of private satisfaction. The room seemed filled with a hot anguish, the fear of being held tight there, the need for being held and tortured, since this was how she pleased her captors. She shrieked: "No, no, no, no . . . helpless, being explored and laid bare by this man. (86-87)

Next to the mother who is indifferent and who has no idea about what is going on with the little girl, the father lets his knees go slack, pretends to release the child and again reaches for a knee to steady her, and then, before the child can be freed from his knees, the father claps his knees on either side of the child. The torture begins again and the child screams. While the child suffers from the uncomfortable smell of unwashed clothes, the father's fingers recklessly dig into her sides. The mother is ignorant of this "tickling" game because the game is right, healthy and licensed based on her experiences from her own childhood. The narrator watches this scene where the father looks at his wife with "a wonderfully complex expression" (87), and points out the mother's indifference about this task. The father knows this game is wrong and should be stopped and, at the same time, because of this, he has a strange and unspeakable attraction to the game. He is surprised at the fact that this game is allowed and moreover encouraged by his wife. The father, with the guilt, looks down at the sleeping child.

He went into the nursery room, it's white, white, white everywhere. . . . He stood at the foot of it and looked at the little girl, now asleep. Her cheeks flamed scarlet. Beads of sweat stood on her forehead. She was only lightly asleep. She kicked off the bed clothes as he watched, turned herself,

and lay, her nightgown around her waist, showing small buttocks and the backs of pretty legs. The man bent lower and gazed, and gazed. (89)

Focused on the father's concealed satisfaction, Jeanie Warnock in "Unlocking the Prison of the Past: Childhood Trauma and Narrative in Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*" maintains that Lessing reveals her trauma hidden in her personal history in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (12). Warnock points out that, beside the mother-daughter relationship between Lessing and her mother which has attracted considerable attention, the relationship of father and daughter has to be re-viewed through the narrator who is not only a representative of Lessing, but also a mediator who draws the experiences, which are latent in her unconscious, into her consciousness from Lessing's own childhood. This is associated with Lessing's double-faced reaction to her father in that in *Under My Skin* she mentions her father is her supporter and at the same time she indicates that her father makes her "one of the walking wounded" (25) with the impact of the "tickling" game. Considering that the child is vulnerable and weak, it is likely for the daughter to idealize her father when she is unable to get over her father's influence. Emily shows that through the narrator she thinks that being tortured with the tickling game by her father, even though she does not want it, is one way how she can make her "captors" (87) pleased. In one thing or another way, the child has to follow the parents who lead the games. However, as it is shown in Lessing's confession in *Under My Skin* that the "tickling game" has shown up in her nightmares and she has clear memories of the nightmares (31), some games such as tickling, hugging and kissing can possibly provide children with over-stimulation, entrapment and helplessness (Davies 60; Warnock 13). In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, the narrator becomes aware of potential wrongfulness of the tickling game which seems simple and interesting and the game nevertheless burdens Emily. The narrator perceives this experience drags Emily into the dark. So the narrator really waits for Emily to step off the "merry-go-round," that is, the "escalator carrying her from the dark into the dark" (93).

As the uncomfortable memory about the father is open, the narrator attempts to re-define the "it" event and unsuccessfully tries to identify its meaning with a long-winded explanation. She mentions the "it" is like a cloud or an emission, but is invisible, and exists like the air in the room or the vapor of the air. The "it" cannot be defined easily or understood. It is unstable. It can be an illness, a tiredness, a boil. Then, the "it" can be "what you experienced . . . and was in the space behind the wall, moved the players behind the wall" (155). So, when the narrator comes to wonder if Emily remembers "anything of her memories or experiences" (45),

Lessing's voice seems to be reflected in the voice of the narrator. The narrator takes the place of the eyes and ears of Emily, through which the narrator seems to see and hear one part of Lessing's personal history, and then the narrator discovers "my[her] own private discoveries" (7) which are concealed until they come out, but unexpectedly pop out. The discoveries are hard to touch as well as painful to open, and, in spite of that, they need to be told. The discoveries are too much to describe in an autobiographical form, which is the reason *The Memoirs of a Survivor* has to be written in a science fiction or a fantasy genre and, in addition, unfolded with the double narrative style using Emily and the narrator. In the narrative that springs out from her inner preoccupation again and again, Lessing's "lost self, lost consciousness" (Sullivan 160) appears.

### **Autobiographical Writing as a Confession**

Betsy Draine in *Substance under Pressure* indicates that Lessing's intention to intersect the dream world and the real world in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is not carried out smoothly (133), and in "Changing Frames" she points out that the ending part of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is, literally, a failure (61). With multitudes of gaps in the form and in the subject, it is true that *The Memoirs of a Survivor* attracts various approaches and particularly the ending part draws extreme responses, like Draine's. As mentioned above, when Lessing writes *The Memoirs of a Survivor* in a dream form, the readers expect that like in the case of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, the narrator or Emily has to come back to the real world, waking from her dream, and have time to review what she dreams or share her dream with someone around her. While Alice talks to her sister about her dream after returning to her real world, Emily and the narrator walk across to another world in a critical situation where they are surrounded by a group of previously vicious young people.

Then, one morning, a weak yellow stain lay on the wall, and there, brought to life, was the hidden pattern. . . . Emily with Hugo walked through the screen of the forest into . . . and now it was hard to say exactly what happened. . . . and on the lawn a giant black egg of pockmarked iron but polished and glossy, around which, stood Emily, Hugo, Gerald, her officer father, her large laughing gallant mother and little Dennis. . . . That world was folding up as we stepped into it, was parcelling itself up, was vanishing, dwindling and going -all of it, trees and streams, grasses and rooms and people. But the one person I had been looking for all this time was there; there she was. . . . She was beautiful. I only saw her for a moment. . . . 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. Emily, yes, but quite beyond herself, transmuted, and in another key, and the yellow beast Hugo fitted her new self: a splendid animal, handsome, all kindly dignity and command, he walked beside her and her hand was on his neck. Both walked quickly behind that One who went ahead showing them the way out of this collapsed little world into another order of world together. Both, just for an instant, turned their faces as they passed that threshold. They smiled. (211-13)

In this scene, Emily and the narrator are about to enter into a new world, and there is a “beautiful” lady who shows them “the way out of this collapsed little world into another order of world” and there is even an event of the metamorphosis of an animal. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* consists of fourteen chapters that Lessing does not number. The readers may have a strong impression about the final chapter, as if reading a fantasy with a dramatic ending. The ending part of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is exactly the same as the ending of a fantasy or science fiction in which, when they confront an unavoidable crisis, pursued by enemies, the characters enter a round tunnel or a hole formed with a light beam or sunlight at an unexpected, but well-timed, moment. Malcolm Cowley and Victoria Glendinning make cynical remarks about the ending of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* as “a cop-out” that is used to finish the ending without any burden or explanation, or “deus ex machina,” that is, an unnatural and unreasonable ending like a fairy who helps Cinderella transform with one touch (Sullivan 157). Jeanne Murray Walker mentions that the ending which uses a dramatic change to solve the confronted deadlock suggests Lessing’s escapism (108-09).

As is well known, Lessing is the author of many different types of novels, and it can be contended that she is skillful in dealing with deadlock or obstacles, and furthermore she is likely to expect these kinds of criticisms and questions in advance. Therefore, the fact that Lessing should intend to create the ending in a fantasy fashion can be considered. The ending is connected to the matter of the structure of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* where the boundary of the personal and the impersonal realms has to be destroyed and then fused together. When the narrator watches “parceling itself up, vanishing, dwindling and going” scenes, the personal and impersonal realms are mixed and integrated. The “trees and streams, grasses and rooms and people” (212) fold up. Like the “dissolving wall,” the border of the two realms disappears, and Emily’s repressed “it” – “the almost unbearable memories or helplessness and inadequacy contained within her childhood” (Warnock 16) – is revealed and embraced and thereby Emily is able to accompany her father and mother into a new world.



As Emily changes into a new state of being, another opening which is connected to a utopian world is formed. In this world, everyone seeks reconciliation and harmony. Emily gets over her uncomfortable memories of her own childhood, and especially embraces her father, including her mother. Alvin Sullivan points out that the ending of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is the ultimate ending (160), which offers a chance to express the ultimate experience. That is, Lessing has to create her own utopian world that cannot be verbalized.

When *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is read with the subject of the recovery of the lost self, the symbolic meaning of “a giant black egg” described in the ending part is also to be considered. It is interesting to review the mythological analysis of Sharon R. Wilson on the positive meaning of the black egg in order to draw the subject of the self-recovery of Lessing. She uses the positive meaning of the color of black and the meaning of rebirth which the egg represents in the Ukraine. Also, she emphasizes the motif of rebirth which the ending part implies, by interpreting Emily who crosses the world behind the wall, the flat and then the new world as Persephone (6). The cat, Hugo, who stands next to Emily, shows his loyalty to the end as her companion, transforms from “an ugly beast” (21) into “a splendid and handsome animal” (213) and joins the process of rebirth. Here, the journey of the three worlds as “multiple layers of both inner and outer” (Charles 2) can be seen as a symbol of Emily’s spiritual growth.

Lessing mentions in an interview with Minda Bikman that “For a lot of women, when they start writing it’s a way of finding out who they are” (Ingersoll 60). So, most of Lessing’s novels are connected to self-realization or self-recovery. In *The Memoirs of a Survivor* the narrator, who is a representative of Lessing, explores the multiple hidden rooms, which are linked with the symbolic meaning of rooms, for instance “self, . . . , birth” (Charles 6). The narrator runs along room after room and passages and corridors, and finally finds “the weeping child who remained there, sobbing hopelessly alone and disowned” (148) in one room. The narrator takes the weeping child up with her arms and rubs the child gently, and the child finds comfort in her arms and turns into a “pretty, fair little girl” (149). Now, this girl is “transmuted” (213) into a being beyond herself and goes into a new world with a big smile. In this point, Lessing attempts to recover her lost and unsaid past in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* in journeying into her most painful childhood and creating her utopia.

*The Memoirs of a Survivor* is a memoir of Lessing’s “traumatic childhood” (Arntsen 8) and creates Emily who reconstructs her identity after reconstructing her memories in the world behind the wall. The

“smiling” Emily is invented by the narrator who receives the authority of the narrative from the author. Here, it is uncertain that the author intends to reveal that Emily overcomes her childhood experiences, in particular, her uncomfortable memories related to her father. That is, the author, Lessing herself, is “a complex and continuously changing” (Abbott 84) individual. Then, can the narrator be a reliable individual? For all that, the narrator of an autobiography basically describes all the events that have impact on the author, in which the narrator cannot control what pops out from the mind. Without knowledge, the narrator exposes that which she is unaware of. Regardless of the intention of the author who wants to control the narrator, the narrator reveals the implied author’s intention. The intention may exist between the lines in the narrative that is described by the narrator, or it can be suggested, or skillfully exposed to only some readers, like Warnock and me. This is the same in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. In the process of writing, proofreading and editing the author’s narrative, a concealed truth is revealed until the implied author exposes his or her voice. In this point, an autobiographical writing is related to writing a confession. If the act of confession is to have authority on the readers, the confessed story has to be proved true. An autobiography is naturally based on the fact that the author talks or writes about true things, in which the autobiography has power. It is true that some overlook autobiographical elements in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and some, like Gillian Dooley, begin to consider them with more attention. The fact that Lessing gives power to the narrator by making an experimental writing of her autobiography is undeniable. Thirty years after the publication of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, the voice of the implied author, who confesses one uncomfortable memory of Lessing’s childhood, is finally invested with power.

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# STORYTELLING IN LESSING'S *MARA AND DANN* AND OTHER TEXTS

SHARON R. WILSON

Much of the recent work of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and numerous contemporary writers has been dystopic, about the breakdown of societies through irresponsible science (including genetic engineering), worship of technology, social and gender conditioning, rigid class distinctions, warring tribes, and environmental disaster. Both Atwood and Lessing write apocalyptic fiction about the environment, the struggle for survival, and although less recognized, the nature of stories themselves. *Mara and Dann*; *The Story of Colonel Dann*, and *Mara's Daughter*, *Griot and the Snow Dog*; *Oryx and Crake*; and *The Year of the Flood* are dystopian novels that use myths, fairy tales, and other folklore to dramatize the power of storytelling. With allusions to other works, I will focus on *Mara and Dann* (1999). Atwood's recent *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination* theorizes what Atwood calls speculative fiction so that we can appreciate its history, distinctiveness, and uniqueness in examining twentieth-century women writers of utopias and dystopias, or as Atwood refers to this combination, "Utopias." An Utopia is about us: it contains a latent version of its opposite (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 66), and *Mara and Dann* is an excellent example of an Utopia.

Lessing's dystopias or utopias and their folkloric intertexts have received little critical attention. Set thousands of years in the future, *Mara and Dann* is about a brother and sister in continuous movement through the second ice age in Ifric (Africa), complete with drought, floods, desert, thirst, and hunger. *Mara and Dann* is centered on a strong character. "Mara's perspective grows in a traditional way as she experiences near starvation and death, alternating kinship and isolation, home and not-home, and identity and split on her and her brother Dann's quest for a better place, a place further north" (Wilson 71-72). According to Mona Knapp, Mara

is an ice-age Martha Quest who, . . .not wanting to change the world if she can just watch it go by from a safe place, is as unable to challenge her environment as was Mary Turner in the 1950 novel *The Grass is Singing*. With her very small personal voice, Mara brings fifty years of Lessing full circle (366).

“In this novel and its sequel, however, although the environment appears to rule everything as much as colonialism with its racism, sexism, and cultural conditioning ruled the worlds of Martha Quest and Mary Turner, the only realities are change and loss and the attempts to save knowledge, construct home and kinship, and tell the story” (Wilson 72). But Mara does tell the story. And, formerly Princess Shahana, she is a more sympathetic character than Dann in either book or than Mary Turner and Martha Quest. The memory of her and her values provides the second book with hope. “It is Mara who notices that women are not free, that tribes such as the Mahondis will die out, that power rules relationships, that people mistakenly believe what they have will continue, that the truth won’t be believed unless someone has experienced it” (Wilson 72), and that people and “cities are as temporary as dreams” (*Mara and Dann* 361). It is Mara who learns to value the uniqueness of different kinds of people, hears the flowers screaming for water (72; *Mara* 143), worries about species becoming extinct, and tries to pass on learning. With Lessing’s advancing years, after “the sweetest dream” of Marxism and the end of the British Empire, the destruction and recreation of the world in *Memoirs of a Survivor*, and her excursions into space fiction, her perspective has broadened so that, like Mara, Dann, and later Griot, she tells what she has seen, revealing all tyrannies and triumphs and even life on earth as short-lived” (Wilson 72). According to Theresa Crater, Lessing wrote *Mara and Dann* in part as a Sufi teaching story, “a corrective to the massive spiritual illness of the 1990s” (17). As early as her 1988 interview with Claire Tomalin, Lessing says her interviewer (and readers) have not seen what she has seen, including “the angry and destructive hoards” of migrating people also depicted in *Memoirs*, and take as permanent ideas or structures, such as the white regime in Rhodesia, that suddenly vanish (Tomalin Interview 174-75).

As Lessing’s “Author’s Note” indicates, in *Mara and Dann* she is consciously building upon “the oldest story in Europe” and in most cultures of the world (1). Both brother and sister may be heroic in such tales (Thompson VI 100-101, 709)<sup>1</sup> but, as in *Mara and Dann*, often there is a loyal, clever sister and an alternately loyal and betraying brother. The

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<sup>1</sup> Folklorists number tale types and motifs. See Aarne and Thompson.