

## THE CHRONOTOPE OF “THE BEGINNINGS” IN DICKENS’S *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*: TWO HOUSES

*Abstract: This paper examines the significance of the house for two female city inhabitants in Dickens’s “Our Mutual Friend”. The analysis of these women’s movements in city spaces is based on their progress through rooms and houses in London realized in their inhabitant rhetoric. Their first house stands in a topical relationship to the successive rooms and houses that they inhabit, which can be established by analyzing the chronotope of “the beginnings” in the city. This analysis refrains from exploring other beginnings in London such as immigration and concentrates, instead, on exploring the importance of house space forming the two women as city consumers, which results in the topical plurality of the examined time-space whose essence is also established by applying topoanalysis to it. The proposed approach makes use of Bakhtin’s idea of the chronotope as a motif, which presupposes the existence of a pattern for transcultural and (trans)historical comparative analyses of cities and/or their literary representations.*

*Key words: inhabitant, rhetoric, chronotope, house, room, space, time, beginnings, city, urban, London, topoanalysis, topical.*

In his essay “London Calling: The Urban Chronotope of Romanticism” (2011), Walter Reed reviews the representations of London by writers from the period of Romanticism (Blake, Wordsworth, De Quincy) and claims that they can be explained by Bakhtin’s idea of the chronotope. This idea was developed in the essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1975) and defined by Bakhtin in the following manner: “We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Reed considers the application of the idea of the chronotope to the city very important as it allows seeing urban representations “in a usefully synoptic and generic way.” He also argues that:

... the chronotope helps us hear London calling, articulating a version of urban experience through imaginative writers of this period and persuasion with distinctive and distinguishable intonations, a type of urban utterance quite different from the ones we find in earlier Neo-classical representations or later Realist renderings of the city.

He, as stated by Bakhtin himself in his introduction of the term, also cautions against the co-existence of different chronotopes in the same epoch, or even in the same literary work. Moreover, Michael Holquist in analyzing a short story by Gogol, goes even further, proving that

---

<sup>1</sup> Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania

*all* texts intrinsically contain a plurality of chronotopes based on the different perspective through which we look at time-space (140). As regards the representation of London under scrutiny, this statement is also confirmed, most notably by David Wilkes's discussion of *clashing chronotopes* in "The Mudworm's Bower and Other Metropastoral Spaces: Novelization and Clashing Chronotopes in *Our Mutual Friend*" (2011), which explores the conflicting variations of time-space experienced by different city dwellers at identical places.

As city dwellers inhabit different spaces in Dickens's representations and appropriate them differently, we cannot but agree with Bachelard who sees the city as poetics of multiple *durées* coming together. We can also see the chronotope as friction of different temporalities in Bakhtin's definition of it as unity of time and place adapted to "temporalized place" – timed space or spaced time (e.g. the chronotope of the threshold and the staircase in Dostoyevsky) or as Jon May terms it, "a constellation of temporalities at a singular place" (190). Another useful view of the chronotope applied to cities, could be Lefebvre's idea of *rhythmanalysis*. Thus, he conceives of the city as being "diverse spaces affected by diverse times or rhythms (33). Related to the everyday, they reconstruct the rhythmic pattern of the city "linked to homogeneous time" (73).

The examples of the theoretical approaches above suggest a complexity of the matter with possible ramifications, which would render a chronotopical analysis inconclusive in its findings if it aims at the larger picture of the city. Instead of examining the chronotope of movement in street space or specific places as done by David Wilkes or suggested by Walter Reed, I propose taking the city inhabitants one level up to movements within the time-space of the urban representation through their code of appropriation of specific urban spaces (Augoyard 79). This approach will allow me to examine the urban chronotope in *Our Mutual Friend* as topical, returning to the classical view of the chronotope as a motif (Holquist 109) as its deeply symbolic and functional essence is crucial for the manner in which city inhabitants appropriate city spaces imbuing them with topicality. This analysis also incorporates the idea that the chronotope can be transcultural and at the same time (trans)historical – a structure "not unique to particular points in time" (Holquist 111-3), thus proposing a pattern applicable to a large number of urban representations within different historical periods.

For the specific purpose of this analysis, a common motif for the city dwellers is to be established, around which space-time is organized in cinematic sequences. The proposed analysis of the urban chronotope, therefore, examines the topical movement of the city inhabitant from the house as a container of intimate spaces (Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*). Its essence as topical time-space can be revealed through *topoanalysis* as the common beginnings of inhabiting the metropolis for residents born in London, significantly affecting the trajectories inscribed in the city by the city dwellers in forming the chronotope of "the beginnings". Thus, key points in the analysis will be the beginnings in the city and the oscillations from them and they will be seen as indicative of experiencing time-space in the novel through inhabitant rhetoric. This analysis can be considered an attempt to rationalize what Augoyard calls "scattered pluralities of lived experience" (5) in the imagined city.

The city dweller enters the examined urban representation through the London house, the topical recurrence of which results in sequencing city spaces, formative for the city residents in their becoming true Londoners and rendered through inhabitant rhetoric. The spatial dimensions of this type of rhetoric are defined by Augoyard as two basic types: *retentional* and *protentional* (130) or here called for short: tropes of *retention* and *protention*. The first can be summarized by the inhabitant's tendency to let himself/herself be led by space rather than transgress it. The second type is marked by telescoping topological succession of sites and failure to retain memories of dwelling, thus leaping from one site to another. A third type is also possible and it

combines the two given so far: *eurythmic composition* (130). Other types may also exist, for example – *vicissitude* – alternating spaces and sites, and consequently lived experience in a mobile reciprocity.

A good case study in *Our Mutual Friend* is the opposition of two types of houses as indicative of city inhabitants moving in house space. They are Gaffer Hexam's house, where Lizzie was born, and Reginald Wilfer's house, where Bella was born, examined against the house of the Veneerings. Even though the former are very different from what Bachelard calls an "oneiric house" – a dream house of three floors (25), they are easily contrasted to a more modern house – the one of the Veneerings in having one crucial differentiating element – the functioning hearth.

I begin my analysis with the house of the Veneerings against which the two examined houses are reflected and measured in architectural pragmatism and spirituality. Its ostentatious glamour is synecdochically represented by the monstrous looking glass above the sideboard (12) where partial truths reflect the identities of vanity of the respective wholes:

MR AND MRS VENEERING were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new, they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon, without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head. For, in the Veneering establishment, from the hall-chairs with the new coat of arms, to the grand pianoforte with the new action, and upstairs again to the new fire-escape, all things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings—the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky. (8)

In this representation of the nouveaux-riches in London, we see that they have everything a newcomer to the metropolis can dream of – everything in, around and about them is new. Dickens makes use of heavy iteration to emphasize the novelty of their situation in the city and of themselves. They are so much like their highly polished furniture, suggested in their family name as well, that they would produce even a "bran-new great-grandfather" upon demand. As a result, reflecting the cold sensibility of the new times, they have everything needed for the incipient epoch, but are completely closed to the extant world of pre-modernist humanity, also expressed in organic architecture, which is capable of protective and spiritual functionality, a recurrent motif in Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1922). The movements in the house time-space of *Our Mutual Friend* examined in two female city inhabitants are seen as both topical and tropical in relation to this house and the house of their beginnings.

I continue my analysis with the house where Lizzie was born. It is on the riverside and is clearly an amphibious place: "afloat— among bow-splits staring into windows, and windows staring into ships" (23). It is indiscernible on the refuse of the river and the riverboats moored near it. Despite its grim rickety appearance, however, it is not a repulsive place once Eugene and Charlie, Lizzie's brother have entered it. The room that they enter has an air of self-sufficiency imparted by its shape and interior. If subjected to the proposed topoanalysis (Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*) as a means of conceiving of and perceiving houses, it will appear to be much different from its off-putting outside appearance confirmed by this critic's discussion of the dialectics of

the outside and inside (211-231). Slipping on the refuse strewn on the stones next to the house, they are ushered into a different universe dominated by light:

‘Here’s my father’s, sir; where the light is.’ The low building had the look of having once been a mill. There was a rotten wart of wood upon its forehead that seemed to indicate where the sails had been, but the whole was very indistinctly seen in the obscurity of the night. The boy lifted the latch of the door, and they passed at once into a low circular room, where a man stood before a red fire, looking down into it, and a girl sat engaged in needlework. The fire was in a rusty brazier, not fitted to the hearth; and a common lamp, shaped like a hyacinth-root, smoked and flared in the neck of a stone bottle on the table. There was a wooden bunk or berth in a corner, and in another corner a wooden stair leading above—so clumsy and steep that it was little better than a ladder. Two or three old sculls and oars stood against the wall [...]. The roof of the room was not plastered, but was formed of the flooring of the room above. This, being very old, knotted, seamed, and beamed, gave a lowering aspect to the chamber; and roof, and walls, and floor, alike abounding in old smears of flour, red-lead (or some such stain which it had probably acquired in warehousing), and damp, alike had a look of decomposition. (23-24)

Even though the interior of the house is a natural continuation of the exterior, being made of the same materials, the room that they enter exudes cosiness. It is in a perfect harmony with the world without, shutting out its hostility in a similar way in which Eskimos’ igloos reflect and contrast the forbidding environment around them. Bachelard speaks of a “little threshold god” who is “incarnated in the door” (224). Moreover, Spengler perceives the house to be intrinsically ambivalent in its functionality as a material and spiritual shelter: “in the house, Janus is the door as god, Vesta the hearth as goddess, the two functions of the house are objectivized and deified at once” (403). It is a vehicle of producing dynamic time-space and indeed, it is the threshold and the opening door that recreate the self-sufficiency of the room and of the house by extension. In spite of its very harsh conditions, the house is not lacking in anything important. The sudden change from the hostile ambiance of the river refuse reveals a *circular room* embodying the “phenomenology of roundness” (Bachelard 232-241). In his discussion of the house as embodying intimate spaces, he speaks of “the roundness of being” (233), which in the room is achieved by its shape, resulting in a sense of completeness imparted to its inhabitants. Lizzie’s father, positioned by the fire, is not unlike a primitive god able to transform the world around him by using the transformative force of the fire. The picture is completed by Lizzie herself, who, like any other respectable daughter of the house, is engaged in *needlework* when seen by guests.

While the hearth and the brazier detached from it have a central position in the universe of Gaffer’s house, the corners emanate a sensation of haunted places with their being positioned farther from the centre and where the details of the objects that fill them remain unclear. Thus, one corner reveals a *bunk* or *berth* suggestive of previous usage of other inhabitants, whereas another one discloses the vertical dimension of the house – a *wooden stair* leading upward. In his discussion of house corners, Bachelard rationalizes inhabiting in its relationship to the most mysterious parts of the house, “a living creature fills an empty refuge, images inhabit, and all corners are haunted, if not inhabited” (140). Simplicity and pragmatism reign supreme in Gaffer’s house where the ceiling is made of the same material as the flooring of the room above, while the roof is camouflaged in the same material as the waste materials surrounding the house.

Christian aspects of the house such as its upward dimension, seeking contact with the celestial and divine, are at variance with disquieting images of the unstable road to it – the *wooden stair* as well as the patched roof. Moreover, the rusty brazier and the fact that it is detached from the hearth create a sensation of unsettling disengagement and a sense of imbalance. This patchwork of a house is finally the ultimate expression of Gaffer's assurance for Lizzie that the river gave all necessary materials for her cradle, bed and food (5), but which, no doubt, renders the house a product of city recycling.

In spite of Dickens's scathing criticism in the novel of "the pitiful conditions of riverside areas in these years" (Smith 168) following the flushing of the sewers into the Thames in 1849, with a decision of the Board of Health, Gaffer's house is not only functional, it transcends its insufficient materiality by being imbued with a sense of completion. Moreover, the burning light, its utter poverty as well as the solitary lives of Gaffer and his daughter, Lizzie, lead to a semblance with the *hermit hut*, "symbolic of the man who keeps vigil" (Bachelard 33). As Bachelard also claims, "through its light alone, the house becomes human. It sees like a man. It is an eye open to night" (35). Even though the religious connotations of his own house may have escaped Gaffer, it objectively offers the possibility of communion with God unhampered by human crowds. If the father appears to be unaffected by his own creation, persisting in his materialist exploitation of the river as a dredgerman, the aura of the secluded house has certainly influenced Lizzie. Thus, she conforms to Bachelard's denying a connection between materialism and the hermit hut: "The hut can receive none of the riches 'of this world'" (32). The intensity of its essence of lack of materiality is to be inhabited with spiritual meaning in response to Mr. Boffin's mock cynical comments on the incompatibility of poverty and pride to the point of the combination rendered nonsensical: "Why it stands to reason. A man, being poor, has nothing to be proud of" (492). They, however, corroborate the fact that *pride*, being of this world is also denied the inhabitants of the hut.

Furthermore, Bachelard continues, "it possesses the felicity of intense poverty ... it gives us access to absolute refuge" (492). Naturally, one could argue that this *forced spirituality* of being is unintended, and indeed Dickens, makes it clear that although it has taken place in Gaffer's house through Lizzie, even divine communion may be obstructed by the materialist perspective of the house crumbling to the pieces it is made of. However, this house has another redeeming element, which sustains its spiritual character on the brink – it is its hearth. The image of the hearth opposes the consistent image of the "black and shrill" night (74), a synecdochic representation of the classical image of the "black shrill city" in *Our Mutual Friend* (153).

The importance of the hearth becomes so much more obvious if we compare it to the house of the Veneerings – cold, lifeless, and inanimate like its inhabitants, all polished over resembling its furniture. If the city of London is a city of death, the hearth with its light, warmth and identification with home, is its antithesis, nothing less than life itself (Welsh 142-3). Gaffer's house, indeed, despite not complying completely with Bachelard's definition of the multi-floor house as the house of dreams, offers enough spaces to be one according to Sansot. So he states, "*car la maison onirique admet l'homme et la présence des disparus et celle des enfants*" (171) [as the dream house admits the man, the presence of the children and of the ones already gone, translation mine].

Having grown up in the spiritual geometry of Gaffer's house, a habitat of dreams, Lizzie, does not need to move to spirituality, standing in a tropical relation of *completion* to it. She, therefore, seeks to extend its influence to the regenerative river that has provided the material for the house, perfects her skills of fishing for dead bodies in it and is rewarded with the regeneration of Eugene. By extension, she becomes the embodiment of the house as a spiritual refuge that

Eugene may oscillate from, but where he wants to belong: “[to Lizzie] when you see me wandering away from this refuge that I have so ill deserved, speak to me by my name, and I think I shall come back” (797).

Lizzie’s inhabitant rhetoric is marked by *retention* as she retains the image of the *complete* house – Hexams’ house, an antipode to the “Enough House” in *Great Expectations*, which is self-sufficient only in recreating the eternal winter of Miss Havisham’s discontent.

The next house to be examined is the house of the Wilfer family, where Bella was born. It does not have the austere lines of reduced materialism and increased spirituality of the house of the Hexam family. Neither does it have the pretentious opulence of the house of the Veneerings. As a result, it is perceived as wanting in both aspects, which has affected its youngest inhabitants the strongest – Lavinia and Bella Wilfer.

The introduction to the house is given through its breadwinner, Reginald Wilfer in his perceived failure of being successful in London working as a clerk expressed in his inability to “wear a complete new suit of clothes, hat and boots included, at one time” (35). This deeply felt sense of deficiency of societal appropriateness in London is imparted to the house itself, which renders it insufficient. His house is just outside the city, north of London in the Holloway region. Between Battle Bridge and his house lies the inspiration for T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* – “a tract of suburban Sahara” with its kilns tainting the ever-present fog with “lurid smears” (37).

Even though the Wilfers consider their house *poor* (Mrs Wilfer: “it is the abode of conscious though independent Poverty,” 114), it is not so stripped of decency as Hexams’ house. It is also spacious enough to offer accommodation to Mr. John Rokesmith (John Harmon) having in mind that it already accommodates four members of the family – Bella, her sister, Lavinia, Mrs Wilfer and Mr. Wilfer. Upon John Harmon’s taking a lodging there, the house is seen as replete with tumultuous quarrels between Bella and her sister, her father and her mother, Mrs Wilfer, who seemingly acquiesces to everything Mr. Wilfer says, but effectively cuts off communication with him. Money is the incessant topic of discussions, especially between the two sisters. The house is initially not described in detail as pecuniary matters accompanied by Bella’s peevish remarks to her sister and mother, fill up house space. Still, details of the house mentioned at random reveal its being perceived as rather claustrophobic, made up of connected compressed spaces: “little hall,” “little front court,” while the doorplate is not renewed when worn down, but “burnished up” (37). Bella is the one who complains about poverty the most and who finds it humiliating to keep up appearances as regards her stature of a lady with the meagre conveniences the house offers, which avail her of a “flat candle and a few inches of looking-glass” (46).

The reason for Bella’s frustration at the house is the fact that continuous penury alternates with brief spells of opulence – the delicious and expensive dinner served at the table thanks to the money for the rented space. It evokes her father’s concluding remarks on the house and its location: “what might have been is not what is” (37). Her desire to consume is thus heavily impeded by the house. The narrow piece of mirror, compared to the giant one in Veneerings’ house reflects nothing but her greed. The upward dimension is not given at all, so all its inhabitants stay firmly *down to earth* and to the consumption demands of the city. Likewise, she is also deprived of experiencing spirituality in the spaces of this house. Even the hearth is stripped of its poetical and transcendental connotations and is reduced to a *fireside*, the function of which is unintentionally utilitarian as it helps disperse the perfume the girls use (45).

The Wilfers’ house as a city “beginning” is a house of *conscious* want both material and spiritual and is even more important than the Hexams’ house as its elements are seen against a number of other houses and rooms tracing Bella’s movements in city spaces. Hence, the Boffins’ invitation for Bella to share their house and Boffin’s Bower is a means of compensation, or as

John Harmon puts it, “makes amends” for their fortune (218), but offers only a partial solution to the problem as the spiritual deficiency remains unfilled. However, it is instrumental in Bella’s realizing that she needs to have a spiritual life, too, which serves to unlock a number of other houses and rooms for her attention by means of which she can discover spirituality. In the environment of the big city, it is to be found in inhabiting rooms and houses, whose interior is to reflect a sense of warmth and divinity.

The proposal to Bella is a challenge for her to reap the material benefits of her thwarted marriage to John Harmon, which has resulted in ridiculous widowhood requiring her to wear black. It is also a compensation for her inability to inhabit the same house as John’s wife as she cannot be married to him. The fact that she is going to inhabit Boffin’s house satisfies Bella’s material pretences, but does not quench her thirst for urban consumption expressed in potential commodities that money can buy. Once, she is found by John Harmon reading a book, just like the other angelic daughters of Dickens’s representations of London do. Unlike them, she is reading a book about economy and finances: “A love story, Miss Wilfer?” “Oh dear no, or I shouldn’t be reading it. It’s more about money than anything else” (216).

Bella’s overt preference of the new house where she becomes “an inmate, for an indefinite period” (221) conspicuously discarding her beginnings embodied in her father’s house, enters into polemics with Bachelard’s insistence on the significance of our first house (home). He claims that all mechanical gestures resulting from our interaction with other houses are nothing but repetitions of gestures, which will always be charged with intimacy only found in the first house (15). Not responding to this innate sensation of belonging to her beginnings turns the house into an accurate “*tool for analysis* of the human soul” (Stilgoe xxxvii). Furthermore, this critic claims, the human soul being an abode, “by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms,’ we learn to *abide* within ourselves” (xxxvii). Applied to the purposes of this analysis, these statements reveal Bella as *shallow*. Her interest in consumption is also clearly modernist in the perceived trend in city dwellers to move to consumerist practices in the London of 1865, evolving into full-blown consumerism on both sides of the Atlantic before and after the First World War.

An important correlation between the “first house” and the subsequent movements into represented urban space becomes evident. Enjoying a fuller set of rooms at the Boffins, Bella visits her home to be reminded that each of its current inhabitants (John Harmon included) has only one room. As her family wish to recreate a simulation of her luxury at the Boffins, they use the sitting room for her reception, which is John’s room and here serves the purpose of a drawing room (479). As Bella’s road to spirituality and suppressed materialism goes through interaction with room and house space, she is curious to explore John’s room and finds it to be a combination of pragmatism and spirituality in being “economically furnished” with “shelves of books in English French and Italian” (480). John’s room within Wilfers’ house is a subliminal indicator for Bella that spirituality and comfort are possible in humble abodes, his room offering a possible reconciliation of these two opposing principles of human habitation.

Bella continues her exploration of rooms comparing them to her own room in her father’s house so she benefits from seeing Lizzie’s room, the effects of which are amplified on her by Lizzie’s presence and the blazing fire in the hearth:

‘I am afraid it is a poor room for you,’ said Lizzie, with a smile of welcome, as she offered the post of honour by the fireside. ‘Not so poor as you think, my dear,’ returned Bella, ‘if you knew all.’ Indeed, though attained by some wonderful winding narrow stairs, which seemed to have been erected in a pure white chimney, and though very low in the ceiling, and very rugged in the floor, and rather blinking as to the proportions of its

lattice window, it was a pleasanter room than that despised chamber once at home [...]. The day was closing as the two girls looked at one another by the fireside. The dusky room was lighted by the fire. The grate might have been the old brazier, and the glow might have been the old hollow down by the flare. (556)

Lizzie's room, so described, clearly reflects the sense of spirituality that Lizzie emanates. It is made manifest in the location of the room itself – reached through the *wonderful winding narrow stairs* suggesting the precarious, but also lofty road leading to the divine, which on the horizontal level of a city dweller's life is invariably tortuous, very different from a straightforward *protentional* movement. If the room that Lizzie inhabits is the reflection of her soul, the winding staircase leading to Lizzie's room is a projection of her inner struggles, otherwise never disclosed, of prevailing spirituality at the expense of reduced materialism. It is the staircase itself that stands out as beautiful in a very rugged room by comparison with the regular room in a Victorian house, a modern example of which can be the house of the Veneerings. If compared to a described tower room in *The Poetics of Space*, "the abode of a gentle young girl" (Bachelard 24), a number of similarities and differences can be established. What the two rooms share is a steep narrow stairway, a narrow window and the "brief light" from the window, which in the depiction of Lizzie's room is "blinking". The differences are nearly as many as the similarities: Bachelard's depiction presents a "perfectly round room" with a "vaulted ceiling", rendering the dreamer's perfect abode.

By contrast, Dickens's depiction stays close to the urban realities of London – this room is not described as round as is the one on the first floor in Gaffer's house; instead of the vaulted ceiling in the poem, the ceiling here is described as "very low" (556). These meaningful distinctions point out the differences between a poetical vision and a realistic urban vision of spiritual habitation. In the case of Lizzie, in spite of its self-sufficiency embodied by her, spiritual architecture is always challenged by urbanity in the necessity for pragmatism realized in recycling materials as well as installing a low ceiling, which economizes space and building materials.

What Dickens suggests through Lizzie's portrayal as the embodiment of the spiritual house is that it is possible and achievable in the metropolis. Experiencing the pleasant effects of cosiness and apparent spirituality enables Bella to recall the elements of warmth – the brazier and the fire in her father's home and see them as prominent in her earlier pre-Boffin life. It is realized through the ritual of being placed by the fireside where she experiences a sense of silent communion with Lizzie as well as deep primordial forces antedating Christianity (Welsh 148). Furthermore, Spengler sees an organic presence in the city if it has the inherently rural elements of "hearth and door, floor and chamber" which are deified in pagan kindly spirits – "Vesta, Janus, Lares and Penates" (90) all prominently tangible in Lizzie's room. These elements, as Spengler admits, are fashioned by "the spirit of commercial enterprise," but it suffices for the hearth to retain its "pious meaning" (100) as the actual centre of a family for a city to preserve an organic connection to the land. By piety here, we are to understand a combination of household gods, who are "of flesh and blood" (Welsh 160) and, therefore, are divorced from the excesses of materialism.

These glimpses of *otherness* through the communication with Lizzie and the world that she represents allow Bella to reevaluate her priorities in life while being exposed to the unlimited luxury and flaunted cynicism of Boffins' mansion.

We must admit then that the Boffins' offer for Bella is a miraculous conceit, which is nothing less than a challenge for her *soul* without the implications of the gross materialism of Mr.



Dombey's offer to Edith (*Dombey and Son*), which exacts nothing but her selling herself to him, body and soul. Indeed, Bella can afford to be materialist without having to suffer the consequences the way Edith does. Another way of saying it would be that she has the advantage of being conceived in Dickens's mind in the year 1865, and not ten or fifteen years earlier, a year when even Dickens felt he had to give women a more substantial access to conspicuous consumption. Still, as admitted by some critics (Orwell 8; Schwarzbach 215), *Our Mutual Friend* is a return to earlier urban narratives and character portrayals for that matter. This return, however, is not a categorically "happy" one as it brings along tempo-spatial contradictions. For example, Bella is an early modernist consumer of the city marked by excessive materialism, but she has to give up some of her materialism and embrace spirituality. In other words, she must be capable of Victorian self-reformation. Moreover, in a curious inversion of a previous approach to the matter, still present in Lizzie, Bella is assisted along the way to spirituality through her transformative friendship with Lizzie, initial animosity to John Harmon and last, but not least Mr. Boffin's deliberately cynical attitude meant to expose the corrupting power of money.

Exercising the influence of spirituality, Lizzie intimates with her the distinct pattern of feminine sensibility – the essence of the woman's heart, which should harbour the sentiment of love, not gain (560). John, unlike male inhabitants from previous representations of London by Dickens, does not need to be reformed by a Victorian woman as this job has been done by the river as a *woman* with its power of effecting rebirth. As a result, under the cover of disguise, and using his ingeniousness, he effectuates the gradual change in her in a similar way to Professor Higgins's transformation of Eliza Doolittle in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912). Finally, Mr. Boffin's *coup de foudre* in the "golden dustman" at his worst, labels Bella as a girl *entitled* to marrying for money – "This young lady was lying in wait (as she was qualified to do) for money, and you [John Harmon] had no money" (625) insinuating that to John, Bella represents "pounds, shillings and pence" (629).

Even though this brutal attack aims to startle Bella into an awareness of her own nature, histrionics has said more than enough and done more than it should as Mr. Boffin's mock attack at John, in reality, rings true. Having set the house as the place for Bella's cathartic renouncement on materialism, John can have it only through a marriage with her. He cannot reclaim it without Bella, nor can he even restore his real name if he wants to profit from his father's inheritance without her accepting him as a husband.

These influences are telling in the end and lead to Bella's transformation. Bella, in the Boffins' house, unknowingly falls into a trap set up by her own mercenary nature about which she has previously been in the habit of joking with her cherubic doting father also known as Rumty. The joke turns *sour* in the house as she is subjected to a modern *reality show* experiment in which everyone but herself is playing psychological games with Mr. Boffin's cynicism ruthlessly exposing her own materialist nature. As a precaution, John has himself fired by Mr. Boffin so that he can claim complete poverty. Luckily for John, the experiment succeeds and Bella marries *poverty* believing it to be identical with spirituality. However, he will not take any chances with her and puts her on probation by marrying her and living with her for some time outside London, away from the temptations of city consumption.

If I return to the idea of abiding within ourselves through abiding in city spaces, Bella, unlike Lizzie, who is spiritually complete, needs to experience more houses through dwelling in them before her soul opens to spirituality, that is until her materialism is satiated. Dickens's own comment on Bella is that she is "spoilt first by poverty and then by wealth" (328), thus replacing one extreme with another. Only when they cancel each other out as two opposite polarities of the material, can she opt for the spiritual. After experiencing the wealth of Boffins' house against

Lizzie's, John's and Mr. Boffin's influences, Bella is finally repentant of her striving for wealth and angry with the people who have tempted her with it and wheedled her into it (the Boffins), but she wrongfully wants to replace it with poverty again, believing it is wealth that has undone her (632).

In rejecting wealth, Bella rejects the house space of opulence in a similar way as Edith does in the house of Dombey and awakens to a different perception of her beginnings. The difference is that to Edith it feels dead (*Dombey and Son*, 453) while to Bella, it has been a pleasant, but still an eye-opening experience:

‘Now, I am complete,’ said Bella. ‘It’s a little trying, but I have steeped my eyes in cold water, and I won’t cry any more. You have been a pleasant room to me, dear room. Adieu! We shall never see each other again.’ (637)

The sensation of *completion* that Bella experiences, is cathartic as she is purged of aspirations after wealth, which has opened room for spirituality. Although she feels anger for having had her soul tried by the wealthy house, she is also grateful for the experience to the extent that she ambiguously kisses the hall door (637), thus establishing an identification with this house and turning it into a projection of her soul, which is guilty of money lust. On the other side of the door as a divide between the inside and outside (Bachelard, 85-9), Bella feels, is the spiritual world that is hers to discover. This intimacy applied to the inanimate matter that the door is made of causes another trait to resurface – Bella's consumerist nature, which cannot be effaced so easily. In doing so, she tries to preserve the sense of comfort and material gain that she has experienced there, which is proved when she, already married to John, admits that she feels safer not having access to riches in the harm she may do to others or to herself (719). This is an answer, which must have left Dickens satisfied, as he did not think that money was evil, he only condemned excesses related to spending it.

Having married John Harmon, she goes through yet another house, a little cottage on Blackheath outside London where she gladly accepts the role of the housewife, doing all the numerous daily chores with the greatest pleasure and with the theoretical preparation from “The Complete British Family Housewife”. In order for her to be of more use to John who commutes to London every day, she resorts to mastering the art of reading and understanding newspapers (722). She also gives birth to a baby girl, who is named after her.

Finally, having taken her schooling from numerous houses and rooms, rich and poor, and already completely cleansed of her initial “mercenary spirit”, or so Dickens would have us believe, she can reclaim the Boffins' house as her own. Once John Harmon has entered into his lawful inheritance, she thinks of it as *gain* being located in London. Future excessive consumption, if it occurs, could be accounted for by providing the best for their child. Dickens, again, would have us assured that this eventuality is very unlikely so we sneak into the nursery in their new house (former Boffins') with Mr. Boffin opening the door softly to see Bella posing by the hearth with the baby. Thus, the hearth truly fulfils its function of the actual centre of the modern conjugal family (Welsh 144), here represented in the intimacy of mother and baby: “...there was nothing to see but Bella in a musing state of happiness, seated in a little low chair upon the hearth, with her child in her fair young arms, and her soft eyelashes shading her eyes from the fire.” (823-4)

Bella's movement to spirituality, which was in insufficient amounts in her beginnings (Wilfer's house), is therefore marked by the tropes of *antithesis* and *reconciliation*. Her movements in house space are marked by *vicissitude*, initially *protentional* towards filling the

material gaps in Wilfer's house, but subsequently *retroactive* as she opposes spirituality at first and embraces materialism. She then rejects it, re-activating a new *protentional* movement in opening herself to spirituality, which she seeks in her father's house. In the end, she will have to accept both in a reconciliatory downplaying of the materialist side of her as a pre-modernist consumer.

As this analysis has demonstrated, the topical chronotope of the house as one of the city inhabitant's possible beginnings in the modern city of London can be a useful tool in tracking that inhabitant's movements in city space. Topoanalysis has proved to be decisive in determining the city inhabitant rhetoric in movements taken place in successive houses. The proposed chronotope can be considered generic of the city in general and, therefore, relevant to establishing habitation in the modern city in particular. Residents, who have decided to make the city their permanent home in their centripetal movements to it, aim to inhabit increasingly larger houses related to their numerous consumerist practices, thus rendering themselves susceptible to this analysis.

## References

- Augoyard, Jean-François. *Step by Step*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas P, 1981.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. New York: Orion Press, 1994.
- Dickens, Charles. *Our Mutual Friend*. Jakarta: The Econarch Institute, 2009.
- Dickens, Charles. *Dombey and Son*. Jakarta: The Econarch Institute, 2009.
- Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- May, Jon. *Timespace: Geographies of Temporality*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Orwell, George. *Dickens, Dali and Others: Studies in Popular Culture*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946.
- Reed, Walter. "London Calling: The Urban Chronotope of Romanticism." *Nonsite.org*. Atlanta: Emory College of Arts and Sciences. (2011): n. pag. Web. 28 Dec. 2011.
- Sansot, Pierre. *Poétique de la ville*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1973.
- Schwarzbach, F.S. *Dickens and the City*. London: Athlone Press, 1979.
- Smith, Karl Ashley. *Dickens and the Unreal City: Searching for Spiritual Significance in Nineteen-Century London*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 2008.
- Spengler, Oswald. *The Decline of the West*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922.
- Stilgoe, John R. "Forward to the 1994 Edition." *The Poetics of Space*. New York: Orion Press, 1994.
- Welsh, Alexander. *The City of Dickens*. London: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Wilkes, David. "The Mudworm's Bower and Other Metropastoral Spaces: Novelization and Clashing Chronotopes in *Our Mutual Friend*." *Dickens Studies Annual* 42 (2011): 295-330.

