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On Edge: Liminality and the COVID Pandemic in Sarah Moss's *The Fell*

Abstract: Sarah Moss's novel *The Fell* (2021) is a fictional reflection upon the second UK lockdown in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to its topicality, the novel is likely to be read as a "time capsule," preserving the unprecedented experience of social isolation, anxiety and domestic incarceration. Starting with the assumption that living in a time of pestilence may be characterised as a borderline experience, this article argues that *The Fell* revolves around the paradigm of liminality. For the characters portrayed in the book the threshold is social, psychological and existential. Nevertheless, for the main protagonist the metaphorical and the literal merge when, driven to the limit of endurance, she falls off the edge of a cliff while taking a walk on the fells of the Peak District, in defiance of the quarantine restrictions. The article analyses various meanings of liminality in Moss's novel.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, liminality, Sarah Moss, *The Fell*

Abstrakt: Powieść Sarah Moss *The Fell* (2021) jest literackim odzwierciedleniem drugiego lockdownu w Wielkiej Brytanii w roku 2020 podczas pandemii COVID-19. Ze względu na swoją aktualność powieść może być odczytywana jako „kapsuła czasu” przechowująca bezprecedensowe doświadczenie społecznej izolacji, niepokoju i domowego uwięzienia. Wychodząc z założenia, że życie w czasach zarazy można scharakteryzować jako doświadczenie graniczne, niniejszy artykuł dowodzi, iż powieść *The Fell* jest zbudowana wokół paradygmatu liminalności. Dla bohaterów ukazanych w książce próg ma aspekt społeczny, psychologiczny i egzystencjalny. Dla głównej bohaterki natomiast znaczenia metaforyczne i dosłowne łączą się wtedy, kiedy będąc na skraju wytrzymałości, z naruszeniem przepisów kwarantanny wyrusza na spacer w Peak District i spada z krawędzi klifu. Artykuł analizuje różne znaczenia liminalności w powieści Moss.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia COVID-19, lockdown, liminalność, Sarah Moss, *The Fell*

The pandemic and liminality

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has not come to an end yet, there can be no doubt that it will go down in history as one of the defining events of the twenty-first century. Neither the global scale of the pestilence nor its concomitant social, political and economic effects have any precedent in living memory. The crisis has also initiated deep cultural reappraisals. Pramod K. Nayar contends that, by exposing human vulnerability, the Coronavirus has demolished “the myth of human sovereignty” (Nayar 2022, xiv). For one thing, human time began to intersect with “a viral, posthuman temporality”: “A time period of 14-day quarantines as well as the duration and dosage of the drugs to battle the infection became our temporal markers.” Our sense of space, Nayar suggests, has altered as well – in order to contain the spread of the contagion, we erected barriers that enforced isolation, lockdown and social distancing, which has resulted in a radical disruption to human interaction (Nayar 2022, xv).

Indeed, recurrent in the sociological analyses of the present situation is the assumption that the global spread of the virus has brought about a major disturbance and enforced a transformation in numerous aspects of life. The pandemic has both caused a profound, multifaceted crisis as well as aggravated the existing problems (van de Donk 2021, 225; Aarts et al. 2021, 6). Wim van de Donk regards the COVID-related upheaval in social life as a mirror image of the pathogen itself: like the virus, it has been “mutating and changing in an erratic way” (van de Donk 2021, 224). Also common in reflections on the current calamity is the conviction that the experience is so extraordinary as to be likely to leave a lasting mark on the way we live, work and interact with one another. In the Foreword to *The New Common: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Is Transforming Society*, published in 2021, Esmah Lahlah suggests that life will be very different for the duration of the pandemic, but also that it may never be the same again when it is finally over (Lahlah 2021, vii). Working with the concept of “the new common,” which the editors of the book promote in place of the widely used “new normal,” the fifty contributors attempt, as Peter Achterberg put it, “to make sense of the current COVID-19 crisis” from different perspectives, as well as try to envisage the post-pandemic future (Achterberg 2021, 17). Yet the editors acknowledge the provisionality of their study, which was compiled in the summer of 2020, in view of the “rapid spread” of the contagion and “its unforeseeable impact on society.” The book was eventually published in 2021 and was intended to be “a snapshot” of the time of crisis (Aarts et al. 2021, xi). The pandemic appears to be a state of transition, underpinned by confusion, dismay and uncertainty, especially from a vantage point located in the midst of the disaster.

Notwithstanding all its uniqueness, COVID-19 shares with other pandemics the aspect of liminality. As Bjørn Thomassen argues, on a social scale, the experience of liminality is typically induced by events such as invasions, natural disasters, or plagues (Thomassen 2014, 90). According to his definition, “Liminality refers to moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, creation and destruction” (Thomassen 2014, 1). The term is

derived from the Latin *limens* (threshold), and denotes “a fluid, ambiguous condition where normal social status and identity are suspended” (Vlachos 2020, 36). “Liminality” was first introduced within the discourse of anthropology, in Arnold van Gennep’s classic book *The Rites of Passage* (1909), in which the author analysed tribal rituals marking an individual’s passage from childhood to maturity. By participating in the communally prescribed rites, a person moves from one socially sanctioned position to another (Downey, Kinane and Parker 2016, 6–7). In van Gennep’s tripartite scheme liminality refers to the middle stage, the phase of transition, “in which a person is no longer what they were, but is not yet what they will be” (Buchanan 2010, 294).¹ Van Gennep’s insights were taken up in the 1960s by Victor Turner, who did further work on liminality, describing it in his first paper on the subject as a state “betwixt and between” (Thomassen 2015, 46).² Even though since then the concept of liminality has travelled beyond the confines of the initial research into tribal rituals, has gained a much wider currency and has become a nebulously all-encompassing term when compared with its first specific application in anthropological studies, it has preserved its original connotations of ambiguity, indeterminacy and transitoriness (Downey, Kinane and Parker 2016, 3). Thomassen extends the meaning of liminality to denote “the experience of inbetweenness itself,” arguing that it is a permanent feature of both individual and social life: “liminality is about how human beings, in their various social and cultural contexts, deal with change. That ‘dealing’ with change can pertain to something highly personal and deeply intimate like falling in love, or to a collective event, as when a community is forced to cope with a sudden occurrence like a natural disaster” (Thomassen 2015, 40).

In what follows I will argue that Sarah Moss’s lockdown novel *The Fell* (2021) is a fictional illustration of the liminal dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic. Set in November 2020, during the second lockdown in Britain, the novel is one of several literary responses to the crisis.³ Not only does the book deal with the characters’ experience of transition, confusion and anxiety, but in itself it represents what might be called a liminal stage in contemporary pandemic literature – it was written in the midst of the ongoing calamity, as an instant response to the ever-changing, contingent situation.

In her study of various kinds of natural disasters Kate Rigby argues that one way of distinguishing them is to take into account their spatiotemporal coordinates. Geographical calamities such as earthquakes or tsunamis occur over a very short

¹ Van Gennep distinguishes three phases of the rites of passage: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation (Thomassen 2015, 43).

² The paper, titled “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” was published in *The Forest of Symbols* (1967).

³ Apart from *The Fell*, Sarah Hall’s *Burntcoat* and Gary Shteyngart’s *Our Country Friends* – all published in 2021 – are set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Immediately after its onset, Denise Rose Hansen compiled an anthology of eighteen international writers’ first responses to the emergent disaster (*Tools for Extinction*, 2020). Of course, literary depictions of contagions have a much longer tradition, going back to antiquity (*Oedipus Rex* contains references to a deadly plague that ravages Thebes). Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), set in the twenty-first century, is the first novel to envisage the extinction of the human race as a result of a global pandemic.

span of time and are confined to a certain locality. By contrast, the outbreak of a contagious disease with a high mortality rate constitutes “a slow-onset or ‘creeping’ catastrophe” that may gradually spread over a large area (Rigby 2015, 52). This is corroborated by our experience of how COVID-19 developed. In her brief fictional rendition of the time of the pandemic, Sarah Moss⁴ chose to make the story revolve around a single event, related to the “creeping” COVID catastrophe although not directly a part of it. At the end of another day spent in quarantine, Kate, a middle-aged divorced mother, currently on furlough, feels so oppressed by her enforced isolation that she sneaks out for a walk on the nearby fells. However, what was meant to be a short walk “to stay alive” (Moss 2021, 64), ironically, brings Kate to the verge of death as she falls off a cliff and barely survives the accident. She is found early the following morning. At the end of the novel, Kate wakes up in hospital, but the extent of her injuries as well as the long-term consequences that she faces remain unclear.

The writer’s wish to capture the unfolding calamity in its immediacy has determined the structure and narration of the novel. Refusing to analyse the global or national backdrop to the characters’ crisis, the story spans a single night in a small village in the English Peak District. Apart from Kate, the novel features Matt, her teenage son, Alice, their elderly neighbour, and Rob, a member of the rescue team that finds Kate. During a few suspenseful hours, the stories of the four characters intersect. Although there are occasional explicit references to the global crisis in Moss’s novel, it has been transposed to the scale of individual lives and depicted from very limited, personal perspectives. Kate’s plight may be regarded as a condensed version of the anxiety and fear they have all recently undergone. The transitory nature of this liminal phase in both communal and individual life corresponds to the choice of the present tense as the tense of narration – the verb forms generate a sense of imminence and urgency while precluding retrospection. The characters, and predominantly the protagonist Kate, are caught in the midst of an ongoing process which, for the time being, is experienced as overwhelming, threatening, utterly confusing, and resistant to interpretation. It appears that similar reasons have guided the choice of narratorial perspective – despite deploying a third-person narrative mode, the perspective remains close to particular characters, frequently slipping into a technique close to focalisation or, occasionally, a stream of consciousness.

The reviewer Rosemary Goring praises Moss for capturing “a claustrophobic atmosphere of deepening dread and despair” (Goring 2021). India Lewis, in her review of *The Fell*, points out the narrowly circumscribed realm of the story by calling it “a slim snapshot of a moment of fear and danger in the year of Covid”: the writer “takes one moment, one instance of worry, and makes it stand for a year of pain and suffering” (Lewis 2021). Likewise, Beejay Silcox observes that the novel

⁴ Sarah Moss is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at University College, Dublin. *The Fell* is her eighth novel. It is not the first time she has written about a pandemic (though her previous work depicted an imaginary pandemic) – her debut novel, *Cold Earth* (2009), features a group of archaeologists investigating the extinction, possibly due to a disease, of Norse settlers in Greenland while a contemporary pandemic rages back at home.

ought to be treated as “a literary time capsule,” which “captures the listlessness and erosive interiority of lockdown,” however, without enhancing “our understanding of these fraught years” (Silcox 2021, 20). This last comment also seems pertinent, yet it need not be seen as a criticism of Moss’s project – her narrator shares the characters’ temporality and hence is unable to portray and assess the events from a knowing, hindsight perspective.

In-between – “the maddening times”

The characters’ sense of being caught in a state of transition, between the familiar routines of the old reality and the new circumstances that will emerge in an unspecified post-pandemic future, resonates with the threefold conceptual framework that designates liminality as the intermediary stage in a process of change. The feeling that the times are out of joint permeates the characters’ thinking and infiltrates their daily activities. They live in changed circumstances, and, despite having made the necessary adjustments, they still respond to the novelty with dismay, especially when the new reality is compared with what was taken for granted until very recently. Kate wonders: “Who would have imagined, a year ago, that it would be against the law to leave your house, that there’d be a police hotline for people to denounce their neighbours for going out, and folk using it, too, in the village?” (Moss 2021, 26). Even though the characters do not question the need to contain the disease, the lockdown rules and practices seem to them unnatural, aberrant, and conducive to odd, anomalous behaviours. The normal need for human interaction in times of crisis conflicts with the necessity and the obligation to keep a distance from others. Visible and invisible barriers have been erected – windows, walls, gates and computer screens now mark the separate spaces in which people live under lockdown.

In keeping with the sociological descriptions of the crisis, in the experience of Moss’s characters the pandemic has both created completely new problems as well as exacerbated the existing ones; in *The Fell*, COVID is not the sole cause of the characters’ current plight but it certainly has brought their previous troubles into sharp focus. Kate has struggled with memories of failed relationships and a lack of professional success. Now, deprived of her income and of the small social circle she belonged to, she feels acutely isolated and financially destitute – she has to economise on both food and heating. The inertia enforced by lockdown makes her obsessively ruminate on her numerous mistakes that brought her to this point. The night-time walk that was supposed to provide temporary relief from her current confinement only aggravates her situation when she suffers a near-fatal fall. Also, Kate’s estrangement from her family means that at the time of her accident her adolescent son has no one to turn to. And Alice, for her part, has to face loneliness and dread after her husband’s recent death and her own cancer diagnosis. Now, the national lockdown intensifies her fear and isolation.

The few glimpses of the characters’ everyday life that the novel offers foreground the defamiliarising effect of the pandemic as the characters try to adjust to

their new circumstances. For example, in the evening when Kate steps out on her ill-starred ramble her neighbour Alice prepares to have supper with her daughter; however, the daughter will not actually be present – this is going to be a socially distanced meal, with each woman in her own house, in front of her own iPad. Before the crisis, Kate was in the habit of taking daily walks on the fells. But now that the country is in lockdown and she is in quarantine following contact with an infected person, the simple action of opening her garden gate and going out amounts to an act of transgression. When she goes missing, her son Matt hesitates to do what he would normally have done. He realises that informing the police would get his mother into trouble for breaking quarantine and would incur a fine that she is unable to pay. Another sensible solution, that is seeking help and comfort from their neighbour, is barred as well since he also is in quarantine and Alice, as a cancer patient, is in the Especially Vulnerable category. When he eventually musters up the courage to go round and ring her bell, Matt wraps his hand in a plastic bag so as not to contaminate Alice's door. She would like to invite him in but is afraid to do so, and so their forbidden contact takes place across her threshold. Eventually Alice decides to ring the police. While the rescuers search for Kate, the mentally vulnerable teenager and the physically vulnerable elderly woman spend sleepless hours alone, on opposite sides of the wall between their two houses. As Alice reflects, unnatural situations have produced correspondingly unnatural use, or misuse, of language: "Social distancing, whoever came up with that, there's not much that's less social than acting as if everyone's unclean and dangerous [...] and when did 'distance' become a verb?" (Moss 2021, 16).

Indeed, Sarah Moss's fictional snapshot of the time of the pandemic focuses on the current situation's deviance from pre-lockdown life: Kate does not go to work because the café where she is employed remains closed, she does not sing in her choir, she does not go walking and does not visit her neighbours, her son does not go to school and does not see his friends, Alice is not visited by her family. In response, the characters find themselves developing new routines: Kate has begun to compulsively tidy her house, Matt spends much more time in the virtual world of computer games, Alice indulges in baking and eating biscuits. Nevertheless, each intuits that this cannot be endorsed as what is widely called "the new normal" – the actions they undertake are temporary, provisional reactions to the abnormality of the lockdown. Alice's conviction that "nothing feels real any more" (Moss 2021, 17) reflects the shared sense of being thrown off balance, adrift in a world which has lost its bearings and is yet to settle into a new shape. To paraphrase a definition of liminality, the world is no longer what it used to be, and not yet what it is going to become. The simple pleasures of pre-lockdown life, such as going out for coffee, are evoked by Alice in "a little dream of ordinariness" (Moss 2021, 152). However, whereas the present predicament is conducive to nostalgia for the lost ordinariness, from a perspective situated in the in-between stage it is difficult to look ahead and imagine how and when the present upheaval will end. Kate prefers not to indulge in speculating about the world that will emerge after the disaster: "There is no point in thinking about how this will ever end. All the other plagues ended, sooner or later, though most of them went away as well as

coming back, some years, some decades [...]. And of course life won't go back to the way it was, it never does and rarely should" (Moss 2021, 58).

The unsettling experience of the pandemic-related changes has also generated a new sense of time. On the one hand, the changes are rapid and radical enough for the characters to feel, as Alice does, that the times are "maddening" (Moss 2021, 128) and it is difficult to adjust. On the other hand, paradoxically, lockdown induces a state of stagnation and inertia. Incarcerated at home, Kate resents the tedium of "spend[ing] your life cowering away, weeks and months ticking by," with the brain slowing down, "almost a survival strategy" (Moss 2021, 22–23). In a condition of uncertainty, which is an inherent feature of liminality, change, or the possibility of overcoming the current crisis, is both eagerly awaited and feared. Those contradictory attitudes culminate in the experience of Kate's son as he waits for news about his mother. At this moment, his anxiety is so acute that he would be prepared to willingly embrace the oppressiveness of being locked down with her at home as the new normal. He indulges in a fantasy of a happy ending to Kate's misadventure: "they'll both go to bed and in the morning everything will be back to normal, to the extent that there is a normal these days, but that normal will do, he thinks, he'll take that normal, no problem" (Moss 2021, 170). Yet, increasingly convinced that the news will be bad, he refuses to take the call from the police when it eventually comes, preferring the state of suspense: "This is like the seconds between falling and landing [...], you know how it's going to end and you don't want it to" (Moss 2021, 170).

The ultimate liminality

What Matt fears, though prefers not to articulate, is that his mother may have died. Matt's apprehension may be generalised to express a common attitude towards death – it is the only certain and inevitable thing and yet in our day-to-day life we try to delay or deny it. As Peter Berger observes in his Introduction to *Ultimate Ambiguities: Investigating Death and Liminality*,

beside the fact that as humans we all share the condition of a limited lifespan, beyond the datum of inescapable annihilation at some point in our lives, death remains distressingly ambiguous [...]. We do not know when we will die, or how, or where, let alone are we able to be sure of what follows death or what the exact status of a deceased person is (Berger 2016, 1).

Berger contends that death not only has qualities of ambiguity and in-betweenness, but is itself "paradigmatic of liminality" (Berger 2016, 2).

The prospect of death looms large in Moss's novel. In her review, Gwendolyn Smith suggests that "[t]he novel's core message seems to be how the pandemic has made us scrutinise our mortality afresh" (Smith 2021). Crucial to the sense of fear and anxiety felt by the characters is the mortal danger posed by the virus. Above all, a shared and ubiquitous effect of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was that, in the words of Pramod K. Nayar, "all lives were rendered precarious"

(Nayar 2022, xvi). The need to protect human lives is at the heart of all the restrictive measures, and indirectly is the cause of the current turmoil in social and individual life. Although none of the characters has been ill with COVID, they all know people who have – Matt’s friend’s father was in intensive care for three weeks, someone’s grandparents died, Matt’s teacher has breathing problems after the infection, Rob’s rescue team is depleted owing to the incidence of COVID. The danger is becoming more and more tangible – currently in quarantine, Kate and Matt examine themselves for possible symptoms of infection.

Nevertheless, although during the fateful night depicted in the novel all the characters – either directly or vicariously – confront mortality, the contagion is the backdrop to thoughts of finality rather than the immediate trigger. Terminally ill, Alice is in fact already in the process of dying. Without referring to the concept, she pictures death as a liminal stage. It is, as she reminds herself, “the one thing we do know,” yet the actual transition to the state of non-being is surrounded by mystery and obscurity (Moss 2021, 124). Even though she takes care to avoid the virus, she cannot miss the irony of the effort in view of her mortal illness: “Shielding, they call it, silly military metaphors, first you have to battle cancer and then you have to shield from a virus, as if life was one of those wargames where there’s nothing to do but kill or be killed” (Moss 2021, 126). In her increasingly impersonal and apocalyptic vision, the current pandemic becomes a manifestation of the disasters that periodically and inevitably visit mankind: “Humans could always hear the four horsemen if we listened for them” (Moss 2021, 126). Except, of course, the present calamity is likely to coincide with the end of her own life – a prospect on which she tries not to dwell, instead thinking about her neighbour’s predicament.

In the context of the collective and individual crisis depicted in the novel, Kate’s fall from the edge of a fell takes on symbolic meanings. Her hazardous night-time walk, her compulsion to go up and go further, despite knowing that “the dangers are at the edges” (Moss 2021, 63), is a reaction to the oppression of lockdown as well as other personal pressures,⁵ which eventually culminate in her uncertainty as to whether she wants to survive at all. Lauren Elkin suggests that the protagonist’s escapade “appears to be an allegory for the pandemic itself: we’ve set out on this path, but we have no idea where we are on the mountain” (Elkin 2021). Immediately before her breaking of the quarantine regulations, Kate is mentally on edge – the degree of tension and anxiety she is experiencing overrides all other concerns and makes her risk violating the rules. The momentary wish to escape the hardships of lockdown is not so very far from the protagonist’s earlier suicidal urges which her musings reveal. Her determination to look after her son is undercut by fairly concrete schemes as to how to end her life: the nearby railway line, the cliffs, and a packet of tablets stored away during the first lockdown remain easily accessible options (Moss 2021, 26). Kate reflects that reverting to dust – which she interprets in biological rather than religious terms – might be

⁵ In the stream of the character’s thoughts following the accident “failing” and “falling” become almost interchangeable (Moss 2021, 139).

a desirable alternative to hiding from the virus (Moss 2021, 22). Just before her accident, she realises that the longer the pandemic goes on, “the less she objects to dying” (Moss 2021, 36). Her half-acknowledged longing for annihilation is echoed in the thoughts of Rob, one of the rescuers. He sympathises with what he suspects is the missing woman’s self-destructive tendency, realising that he might be driven to follow in her footsteps.

The prolonged depiction of Kate’s struggle after her fall is an exemplary illustration of the dimension of liminality inherent in death, or death-like states. Caught between life and death, the protagonist is suspended between the determination to return home and carry on with her life, and the temptation to give up the fight and drift into the oblivion of the last sleep. Her confusion and physical pain blur the boundary between reality and delusion. Her dialogue with the raven – actual or imaginary – that accompanies her on her arduous crawl on the moors appears to be an externalisation of her dilemma. In Kate’s mind, the vision of her own end merges with a sense of the imminent demise of all humanity, just as her own liminal condition appears to be part of the condition of the rest of mankind: “the end is nigh, we do know that” (Moss 2021, 114) – a nuclear war, global overheating, another, “more conclusive plague” will soon bring about the end of times (Moss 2021, 114–115). The sinister raven, which, as Kate suspects, waits for a chance to peck her eyes, is pictured as a harbinger of death. It is also possible that her vision of a raven has been triggered by the name of a Renaissance poet – Kate involuntarily recalls Thomas Ravenscroft’s religious hymn that she used to sing with her choir.⁶ Lines from the song, in which the poet reminds man of mortality, prey on her mind: “Remember o thou man, thy time is spent” (Moss 2021, 59).⁷ In the protagonist’s view, we are currently in a state of transition, when the prospect of finality is both certain and yet so far nebulous and indefinite: “humanity’s ending appears to be slow, lacking in cliffhangers or indeed any satisfactory narrative shape” (Moss 2021, 115).

Kate’s final realisation in the novel, that she has survived the fall and so her life is to continue, “somehow” (Moss 2021, 180), hints at no closure, and the novel itself, as Hephzibah Anderson notes, “doesn’t provide quite the release or comfort that might be expected, despite its outcome” (Anderson 2021). The pandemic is of course still there, just as all the personal problems that the characters have struggled with remain in place. At the end of the novel, there is no prospect of either the social or the individual crisis coming to an end. If anything, the protagonist has made her situation even more dire and faces a very uncertain future. In other words, the state of liminality persists. In her review of the novel, Natalie K. Watson suggests that “there may be a time when what is described here is [...] in the

⁶ Perhaps she is also familiar with his Madrigal XX, which contains an image of three ravens preparing to feast on the body of a slain knight (Ravenscroft 2016, 240–241).

⁷ Ravenscroft’s song is a Christmas carol, first published in *Melismata* (1611). The lines that Kate sings to herself come from the first stanza:

“Remember, O thou man,
O thou man, O thou man,
Remember, O thou man,
Thy time is spent” (Ravenscroft 2016, 245–246).

past, and a novel like *The Fell* will help us to remember” (Watson 2021). This indeed seems to be the primary aim of Sarah Moss’s novel: to leave a snapshot of a very unusual time, before the world settles into a new normal.

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This research was funded by the program "Excellence Initiative – Research University" at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow.