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Unlocking the domestic space. The party in Joyce, Mansfield and Woolf

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Abstract • The aim of the essay is to analyse the chronotopic motif of the party in some canonical texts of British Modernism: Joyce's *The Dead* (1914), Mansfield's *The Garden Party* (1922), Woolf 's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Although the home protects intimacy from unwelcome intrusions, the party transforms it into a liminal space where inside and outside, private and public interact: the external world with its turmoil enters the domestic space and the private dimension of the party, spoiling the festive mood, which may or may not successfully contain the intrusion. Frequently the intruder from the outside takes on the aspect of a deceased person, who challenges the principles of the individual and the society where they belong. Though Joyce's, Mansfield's and Woolf's narratives are set in a domestic space scantly described if compared to 19th century novels, places are nonetheless constantly evoked as the plot unfolds aptly foregrounding the final revelation and the ultimate meaning of the text.

Keywords • British Modernism; Domestic Space; Party; Death.

Abstract • Lo scopo del saggio è analizzare il motivo cronotopico della festa in alcuni testi canonici del modernismo britannico: *The Dead* di Joyce (1914), *The Garden Party* di Mansfield (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* e *To the Lighthouse* di Woolf (1925 e 1927). Sebbene la casa protegga l'intimità da intrusioni indesiderate, la festa la trasforma in uno spazio liminale, dove dentro e fuori, privato e pubblico interagiscono: il mondo esterno con le sue tensioni entra nello spazio domestico rovinando l'atmosfera della festa, che può o meno dimostrarsi capace di *contenere* l'intrusione. Spesso l'intruso assume le fattezze di un morto, che mette in questione i principi dell'individuo e della società a cui appartiene. Benché le storie di Joyce, Mansfield e Woolf siano ambientate in uno spazio poco descritto a differenza di quello del romanzo dell'800, i luoghi sono costantemente evocati nel corso della narrazione assecondando la rivelazione finale e l'emergere del significato del testo.

Parole chiave • Modernismo britannico; Spazio Domestico; Festa; Morte

Ledizioni

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1. Introductory remarks

Although, according to Foucault, "[o]ur epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites" (Foucault, 1986, p. 23), he believes that some spatial oppositions, such as those between private and public, family and social spaces, still exert a powerful and enduring influence on our lives. Associated with domesticity and intimacy, the home is the place where we are most ourselves, where our authentic nature and personal bonds can thrive shielded from the other's gaze – a walled and circumscribed site evoking secrecy, safety, protection from the unwelcome intrusion of the outside world. The outside world, however, can access the private space at times, by invitation, submitting to the social rules of hospitality, which deprive it of its menacing and dangerous potential. On such occasions, domestic boundaries reveal themselves permeable, doors and windows becoming passageways between spheres, and the enclosed space, conveniently rearranged and decorated, turns into a liminal one, favouring the contact and the interaction between outside and inside, the individual and society. Far from being spontaneous, parties, whether formal or informal, are carefully orchestrated events devised to bring people together in a space and a time which, temporarily reframed and transformed, give shape to a self-contained short-lived universe.

The private party is a phenomenon of the bourgeois society, which, as it became increasingly urbanised, secularised and industrialised, rejected earlier religious and communal festivals and promoted individual forms of entertainment unfettered from the calendar and collective ceremonial obligations.[1] Responding to the same social changes, "[t]he development of the modern novel is concurrent with the growth of the private party […]. As different as the two phenomena are, they address similar needs", both attempting to bridge the gap between the public and the private (Ames, 1991, p. 25). By its very nature, the party seems to epitomize the genre's multivocality, to feature its intrinsic heteroglossia. Moreover, it serves crucial narrative functions, such as assembling characters, supplying descriptions, openings, climactic moments and denouements, and, especially in modernist fiction, affording dramatic presentation - which is one of the reasons why party scenes are so frequently staged by Woolf in her novels. And since they also enable writers to explore the materiality of everyday routine, they often occur in early 20th century narratives, whose main concern is apparently to find a literary form for the representation of daily life. The single day time span is one of the distinctive features of modernist literature in sharp contrast to the 19th century novel which covers months or years and, besides providing a focus on ordinary details, gives scope to the modernist preoccupations with psychology, consciousness and memory: "[…] a single day can expand backwards and forwards, outwards

[1] According to Ames, the fascination with private social gatherings was first recorded in Restoration and eighteenth century literature, as many Restoration comedies attest:" A new focus of social activity was emerging, and with it a new literary focus" (Ames, 1991, p. 6).

and inwards, to map itself onto every other day in the individual's experience, and beyond" (Randall, 2010, p. 828).

In line with Modernism's keen interest in interiority and personal bonds, social gatherings explore the characters' selves and human relationships, frequently functioning as structural and symbolic centres "where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250). They prove a chronotopic motif in modernist literature, the updated version of the ancient motif of meeting, a common structuring device both in epic and the novel, characterised by the coincidence between the temporal marker ("at one and the same time") and the spatial marker ("in one and the same place") (Bakhtin, 1981, p.97). In Modernism, however, no longer included in the adventure-time chronotope nor linked to the chronotope of the road, it loses its random nature and acquires new functions and values, which concur to define the generic affiliation of the narrative text, also policing the actions characters are allowed to carry out in that particular fictional world: as Steinby reminds us, "[s]ocial localities are not a neutral, passive background of action but on the contrary determine its chronotopic form. What a person can do is conditioned by the setting and the locality. Here temporality is a temporality of experience and action" (Steinby, 2013, p.120). The salon and the parlour's appearance in literature as loci where time and space significantly intersect dates back to Stendhal and Balzac. In Modernism's poor plots, where temporal development is no longer crucial and little happens (mostly in the characters' consciousness), they shelter climactic moments of revelation, sudden and instantaneous, which are outside the ordinary string of time, owing to their intensity and unexpectedness. Following Kermode's distinction between *Chronos* (passing time) and *Kairos* ("moments of crisis", "a point in time charged with meaning"), we can identify revelations with the latter, an instance of "temporal integration" which "bundl[es] together perception of the present, memory of the past and expectation for the future" (Kermode, 1970, p. 46). Kairological time is also relevant to the Bakhtinian chronotope of the threshold, which marks a crisis in the protagonists' life and is often combined with the motif of meeting. In Dostoevsky's novels, for example, staircases, corridors, front halls are thresholds where falls, renewals, epiphanies occur: "In this chronotope time is essentially instantaneous, it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 248). During a party, the salon, the parlour, the drawing-room, the dining-room, the garden become thresholds, since they are liminal spaces where outside and inside meet and interact provoking major turning points in the life of the characters. The mutually dependent time and space determinations of this chronotopic motif are thus the kairological moment of illumination and the places where guests are received and entertained.

If the modernist party "is often a forum for testing the relationship of the individual to other people, exploring the nature of the self and critiquing the state" (McLoughlin, 2013, p.2), the salon is also the place where historical and public events intermingle with the private side of life. Although such weaving is certainly not so decisive here as it was in 19th century realism, where political, business and social careers and reputations were made and destroyed in salons and parlours and fates were given a twist, still history, far from being absent, as outdated interpretations of early 20th century literature maintain, is in fact a subtext which is constantly addressed and questioned. As we shall see, the external world with its political turmoil, its class- and gender-related conflicts enters the domestic space and the private dimension of the party, menacing the existing order and spoiling the festive mood, which may or may not successfully *contain* the intrusion. I contend that frequently the intruder from the outside takes on the aspect of a deceased person, whose death uncannily challenges the values, principles and beliefs of the individual and the society where he/she belongs. This, in my opinion, holds true for Septimus Warren Smith in Woolf's *Mrs*

Dalloway and Scott in Mansfield's *The Garden Party*, the shell-shocked veteran and the destitute carter whose deaths, though suggestive of inequalities and social imbalance, are in fact a tribute to the upper class's continuance and prosperity. But it also applies to a certain extent to Joyce's Michael Furey, who, in turn, reveals himself a force that cannot be easily neutralised leading to the disruption of Gabriel Conroy's seemingly well-ordered universe. In *To the Lighthouse*, on the contrary, death does not haunt Mrs Ramsay's party, but it follows it closely, conferring a ghostly touch on the so called Edwardian Garden Party, the last golden summer before the outbreak of World War I, ideally represented by the long dinner scene at the end of the first part of the novel (Rich, 2019, p. 64). Intimately connected with festivity, death is the very force behind celebration itself, as primitive and medieval festivals remind us, since it is what a community must celebrate against and triumph over in order to strengthen its cohesion and confirm its identity, allowing its member to come to terms with mortality. By embracing this traditional legacy while depriving it of its sacredness to adjust it to a largely secular age, the modernist party entails the ritual encounter with death - the unwelcome guest, the stone ghost who breaks into ordinary life, exposing its cracks and fissures and causing the changes and revelations connected with the Bakhtinian threshold.

In Joyce's *The Dead* (1914), Mansfield's *The Garden Party* (1922) and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse* (1925 and 1927 respectively) social gatherings share a subdued tone and the absence of serious disruptions, characterised as they are by no violent scenes or serious conflicts among the characters but by their dialogues and, especially in Woolf's case, interior monologues (Kaye, 1999, p. 90). On the whole, the emphasis on conversation and human intercourse leaves spatial descriptions in the background (Perrot, 2003, p. 518) but places, though scantily described if compared to 19th century detailed depictions of homes stuffed with objects and ornaments, are nonetheless constantly evoked as the plot unfolds, aptly foregrounding the final revelation and the ultimate meaning of the text. Only in *The Dead* does the Morkan sisters' apartment bear traces of the usual Victorian bric-a-brac - a picture of *Romeo and Juliet*, Aunt Julia's embroidery of Edward V and his brother Richard in the tower - which both suggest the family's allegiance to British history and culture and concur to give the domestic space its outmoded appearance in a story primarily concerned with the decline of a moribund society.

Despite particularly focusing on parlours, salons and gardens, Joyce, Woolf and Mansfield subsume the whole house with its compartmentalised areas and interior articulation into the narration, offering the reader a glimpse of downstairs and upstairs, kitchens and bedrooms, cloakrooms and halls, and moving the characters around so as to match space and narrative developments. In these texts the spatial configuration of domesticity aids the construction of meaning through a number of different strategies: opposing inside and outside (*The Dead*, *To The Lighthouse*), comparing dwellings that epitomise radical differences among the characters (*The Garden Party*), articulating the inner space so as to back up and foreground epiphanies and revelations (*Mrs Dalloway*), reflecting the characters' transformations (*To the Lighthouse*). The authors show the home being made up and prepared, no longer entirely familiar as it departs from everyday routine and takes on the special brilliancy of festivity: servants are hired, rooms are given new temporary functions, silver is polished and laid out, furniture is moved, flowers are arranged, while the house itself seems to become a living creature: "The house was alive with soft, quick steps and running voices. The green baize door that led to the kitchen regions swung open and shut with a muffled thud. […] Little faint winds were playing chase, in at the tops of the windows, out at the doors" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 249). If Mansfield leaves the party to the reader's imagination, in Woolf and Joyce, on the contrary, we can see the guests gathering,

talking, listening to music, dancing and eating. In Modernism, meals no longer have a simply mimetic function but acquire symbolic overtones related to the protagonists' inner life (Castle, 2019, pp. 36-37): food consumption, which plays such a major part in social gatherings, is not simply a material offer, but rather "an offer of humanity" (Apolito, 2014, p.198), the visible sign of their generosity and caring disposition - examples being Mrs Ramsay choosing the best pieces of her *Boeuf en Daube* for Mr Bankes, who lives alone and never eats properly, and the Morkan sister's sumptuous dinner, which epitomises Irish hospitality, a traditional value on the wane, according to their nephew Gabriel Conroy. Food – Godber's cream puffs in *The Garden Party*, Mrs Ramsay's French recipe, Mrs Dalloway's salmon, the fat brown goose in *The Dead* - is frequently recalled culminating in Woolf 's depiction of Rose's skilfully arranged dish of fruit in *To the Lighthouse* and, particularly, in Joyce's luscious description of the Morkan sisters' supper-room replete with delicious dishes and beverages.

2. Guess who's coming to dinner

In *The Dead* "Joyce carefully stages the Misses Morkan's New Year annual dance, which has followed a strictly scheduled routine for thirty years, going off "in splendid style, as long as anyone could remember" (Joyce, 1983 p. 191). The reader, however, readily suspects the *déjà vu*: even the guests, members of the family and old friends, are always the same and behave as they have always behaved for better or worse (like Freddy Malins, who is expected to be drunk as usual). The domestic space is entirely devoted to the party: as in a familiar choreography, people are shown in and enjoy the entertainment laid on for them swarming upstairs from the hall to the refreshment-, the drawing- and the supper-rooms. Even the snow, the heaviest in thirty years, promises to contribute to the overall effect of communion and closeness, since, in Bachelard's opinion, "[it] reduces the exterior world to nothing", while providing the house with "reserves and refinements of intimacy" (Bachelard, 1994: 40). But, although apparently nothing can be different, nothing can go wrong, the promises are not to be kept. As Munich affirms, "[h]ostilities, figured as warfare, structure the subtext of *The Dead*" (Munich, 1984, p. 173), whose party is in fact fraught with tensions from the start - from the very first scene, when unexpectedly Gabriel finds himself facing young Lily's sharp disappointment over her marriage prospects.

What infiltrates the enclosed domestic space which is about to celebrate its cherished traditions, is, I believe, the present with its major anxieties that the party cannot hold back nor dispel: the Irish question, the female question, the class conflict (possibly suggested by Lyly's bitter reaction to Gabriel's, a man and a bourgeois, innocent remark) – all pointing to the crisis of Edwardian England and the advent of modernity as we know it. The Misses Morkan's party becomes an arena where old customs contend with new ideas, under Gabriel's shortsighted eyes: engaged in a dance significantly named Lancers, he suffers the assault of Miss Molly Ivors, an Irish nationalist and a New Woman who is "quite well able to take care of [her]self" (Joyce, 1983, p. 212). She calls him West Briton because he reviews literature for *The Daily Express* and reproaches him for not being interested in his own land and his own language. Gabriel, who shares Joyce's cosmopolitanism, retreats, but is upset by "the unpleasant incident" with "the girl, or woman, or whatever she was" (Joyce, 1983, p. 207) - a phrase that shows how uneasy he is not only with her political faith, but also with her powerful femininity. The clash between the good old Irish values, represented by his aunts, and Miss Ivors' aggressive nationalism inspires his annual speech:

> I feel more strongly with every recurring year that our country has no tradition which does it so much honour and which it should guard so jealously as that of its hospitality. It is a tradition that is unique as far as my experience goes (and I have visited not a few places abroad) among the modern nations. A new generation is growing up in our midst, a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles. [It is serious and enthusiastic for these new ideas and its enthusiasm, even when it is misdirected, is, I believe, in the main sincere]. But we are living in a sceptical and, if I may use the phrase, a thought-tormented age: and sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hypereducated as it is, will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day. (Joyce, 1983, p. 220-211).

"The constant tension between the ecumenism of the 'party' and the fractiousness of antagonistic political parties" with their partisan attitude surfaces in the text (Rabatè, 2013, p. 70), suggesting that no party can achieve unity among political strife, as Stephen Dedalus himself will shortly realize in the Christmas dinner scene of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Although Gabriel seems to side with the old generation, nevertheless he cannot easily put up with his aunts' social gathering, an ambivalent metaphor for both a declining society and ancient Irish hospitality, whose stifling atmosphere he wants to escape, as his desire to be alone, to be outside in the snow and the biting cold demonstrates: "How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table!" (Joyce, 1983, p. 208). Gabriel, that is, "does not feel warm because it is cold out-of-doors" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 39), experiencing the winter's "happiness of inhabiting" with increased intensity - which gives further evidence of the loose, fractured nature of the Morkans' gathering, where the guests do not coalesce and assemble in the warm, circumscribed space they temporarily inhabit. The party's overall atmosphere is neither particularly pleasant nor relaxed, as suggested by Bartell D'Arcy's rude refusal to sing, Freddy Malins' embarrassing compliments to Aunt Julia on her voice, the four young men who quietly leave the room as soon as Mary Jane starts to play the piano, while Gabriel feels superior to his aunts' guests, who do not share his education, but at the same time does not want to make himself ridiculous by showing off, longing to be accepted and admired even if he cannot really merge with the others. Unable to communicate, he remains isolated and distant. His role in the party of "the Three Graces of the Dublin musical world" (Joyce, 1983, p. 222) is certainly a leading one (he is expected to carve the goose, to deliver the annual speech, to check on Freddy Malins on his aunts' behalf), but he can hardly fulfil it, proving a poor performer, a faulty entertainer – someone, that is, who cannot establish a "rhythmic community" by connecting people (Apolito, 2014, p. 47), eliciting and harmonising their emotions, luring them into celebrating. A rhythmic community is a group of individuals sharing a spontaneous and temporary festive mood, whose relationships, as if following a musical score, imply the tuning of their bodies, gestures and voices, so that they naturally respond one another - a mirroring process that heightens our reassuring feeling *of being at home in the world*. The guests enjoy themselves under the guide of a performer: he/she sets the pace of the entertainment, a role that, in the case of a private party, is taken by the host/hostess, who offers food, gives speeches, tells jokes: undoubtedly, the Morkans' visitors form no rhythmic community and Gabriel is no skilful performer.

However, Gabriel's most serious failure is to connect with the invisible forces that haunt the party: not the harmless dead, affectionately recalled throughout the evening who are properly placed in the past and who are not at odds with the atmosphere of the annual dance, but Michael Furey, his wife Gretta's suitor of old, whose uncanny presence launches the ultimate assault on his certainties in "a thought-tormented age", forcing him to acknowledge his misreading and poor mastery of reality and, as a consequence, his

ludicrous pettiness. A "well-meaning sentimentalist" (Joyce, 1983, p. 238) seemingly committed to the values of the past, his attitude to Gretta's former love story is nonetheless initially tainted by the ironical detachment which becomes sceptical modernity. Gabriel does not belong in a romantic, uncomplicated world where boys die for girls, still Michael Furey's untimely and somewhat heroic death confronts him with what he perceives as his diminutive role in his wife's life, questioning the success of his marriage and bearing on his future. Michael's appearance is anticipated by *The Lass of Aughrim*, the song he used to sing for Gretta, performed at the party by the tenor Bartell D'Arcy. Gabriel gazes at her from the hall: she is upstairs, leaning on the banisters, listening attentively as if lost in a reverie. The staircase, the Bakhtinian threshold that recurs in nine scenes of *The Dead*, heralds the final crisis, premising Gabriel's epiphany in the hotel room.

The party provides a contact zone where received traditions, accepted ideas, comfortable assumptions are infiltrated by the troubles and unrest of the outside world. It proves a passageway where Gabriel's former convictions about the past, the condition of Ireland, the relationship between the living and the dead, the bond between the sexes – in short, his position in the world - are tested, challenged and painfully subverted climaxing, thanks to Michael Furey's ghostly apparition, in the Conroys' mutual estrangement: "The story moves from the failed community of the party to the failed union of husband and wife […]" (Ames, 1991, p. 51), further highlighted by the change of setting of the last scene, no longer the Morkans' family house, but a hotel room anonymous and impersonal as can be, an undomestic site to emphasize the crisis of the couple's domesticity. Although at first the hotel spurs desire and excitation in Gabriel, reminding him of his honeymoon, it is however the place where his desire is frustrated by Gretta's confession and sad memories of Michael Furey and he, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, fully realises how commonplace and mean he is despite his self-conceit – a chilly place that defies intimacy, with no electric light of its own but faintly lit by the street lamps, where the inside/outside opposition appears to collapse like the life/death one, as the snow, equally falling on both the living and the dead, seems to imply. The celebrating community has neither disempowered Michael Furey's disruptive agency nor encompassed it in festivity's magic circle: rather, it is Gabriel who ideally follows him among the dead, heading westwards, his identity "fading out into a grey impalpable world" (Joyce, 1983, p. 242).

3. Laura's artistic touch

If *The Dea*d was conceived and written before the Great War, Mansfield's short story and Woolf's novels belong to the interwar period - a period, that is, when the country was trying to process the severe trauma of world conflict. Britain, whose major imperative was to go back to living (possibly in the same way as before), got out of the war much weaker and poorer, but all the more determined to forget casualties, destruction, grief and start again (Thomson, 1991, pp. 15-16). In postwar society celebrations were not only welcome signs of the return to normality (like in *Mrs Dalloway*, where Clarissa's party ideally celebrates the end of the war and of the Spanish flu), but also *performances* whose aim was to confirm and strengthen the community's shattered identity and bonds also reasserting its reassuring prewar hierarchical order. This is why, I argue, in *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Garden Party* the intrusion from the outside is successfully resisted. Mansfield describes a wealthy and conventional New Zealand family, the Sheridans, embodying the upper class's conservative ideology and utter lack of empathy for the working classes. Although Laura, the youngest daughter, seems to be different from the rest of them, she will in fact readily comply with

their principles and rules, her coming of age resulting, we are enticed to suppose, in her unintended acquiescence to and acceptance of her mother's role model. [2]

The Sheridans are part of such an advantaged class that a day of perfect weather for their garden party seems to be an inalienable right of theirs. From the very start the issue of class relationships appears to be the main theme of the short story: as a matter of fact, the characters are divided up into two groups, those who give orders and those who obey, getting the mansion and the garden, an extension of the domestic space, ready for the party. Laura, who is entrusted by her mother with the supervision of the men who have come to put up the marquee, initially does not know how to treat them, but as she progressively relaxes, she realizes how much she likes them: "Oh, how extraordinarily nice workmen were, she thought. Why couldn't she have workmen for her friends rather than the silly boys she danced with and who came to Sunday night supper?" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 247). Sheltered by her privileges, protected by the enclosed space which is her own by birthright, she rejects class distinctions and feels just like a working girl. And when the electric atmosphere of joyous preparations is ruined by the news of the death of a carter, father of five, who lives next door, Laura wants to stop the party. But, to her astonishment, her mother does not agree: "People like that don't expect sacrifices from us" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 255), she retorts; a revealing sentence, which, properly adjusted - *people like that are expected to sacrifice for us* – conveys the political message of the narration. Death does not cross the Sheridans' doorway, conveniently blocked at the back door by the servants of the house, until well-meaning but inexperienced Laura shows it in. Promptly pushed back by Mrs Sheridan, who gets her childish daughter distracted by giving her a gorgeous hat, it is definitely not admitted to the party, which results in an extraordinary success. Mrs Sheridan's diversion proves effective: with her hat on, Laura sees herself in the mirror as the young lady she is destined to become, an exterior transformation which affects her interiority (Freedman, 2003, p. 89), making her forget the carter's death and her insistence to stop the party. From now on her attitude changes: she behaves like a girl of her social standing, enjoying the gathering and playing the part of the perfect hostess. Both in *The Dead* and *The Garden Party* the mirror, a commonplace domestic object with a symbolic transformative power, conveys to the reader the characters' new self-perception: Gabriel's degrading view of himself as "a pennyboy for his aunts" (Joyce, 1983, p. 238) and Laura's surprising discovery of her beauty as a grown up girl: "Never had she imagined she could look like that" (Mansfield 1981, p. 256). Unlike Gabriel's, however, Laura's experience of death fails to be illuminating, affected as it is by her social background and upbringing.

In Mansfield the party itself remains undescribed, an empty core that ironically defies the title of the short story, a blank provocatively highlighting how trifling the grand event actually is. But it provides the narration with an ideal partition, first and foremost marked by the change of setting: from the Sheridans' colourful and scented garden, which smacks of luxury and good taste with its roses, canna lilies and Kanaka-trees, to the eyesore of the workmen's chocolate brown cottages with their barren garden patches: "The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridans' chimneys" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 254). Laura's unpleasant walk to the carter's house with a basket full of scraps from the party and her incongruous hat still on is a descent into hell, into a dark and smoky world, utterly alien to her, where women in black look like unfriendly underworld deities.

[2] According to Freedman, although in *The Garden Party* the war is not mentioned, it is the hidden subtext of the short story (Freedman, 2003, p. 84), Laura's ritual first encounter with death being reminiscent of Mansfield's sorrow for the loss of her beloved brother Leslie, killed during a training accident on the Ypres Salient.

Surprisingly enough, at first she can hardly detach herself from her earlier festive mood, but as she approaches the cottage, no longer shielded by her own home walls, she realises how *out of place* she is among people who are suffering and crying, whose swollen red faces are hardly human to her, and she longs to be somewhere else. Still, when she is introduced into the dead man's bedroom, she is taken aback at what she sees:

> There lay a young man, fast asleep - sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. […] He was given up to his dream. What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane. Happy ... happy ... All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content (Mansfield, 1981, p. 261).

Like in Baudrillard's closed systems which protect themselves from the referential and the anxiety it arouses, Laura's "consummate enjoyment of the signs of guilt, despair, violence and death are replacing guilt, anxiety and even death in the total euphoria of simulation" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 95). Her aestheticization of the young man's corpse suggests her disregard for those political and social issues that her spontaneous though undoubtedly naïve previous concern for the underdog implied. By giving Scott's death distinctive aesthetic traits, by changing him into a work of art, she deprives her ideals of social justice, her empathy with the lower classes - political and ethical questions which can produce ideological conflicts – of their disruptive potential and acquiesces to her family's ideological stance. Her encounter with death turns out to be a significant steppingstone in her coming of age, which in fact strengthens her class allegiance and her sense of belonging, also confirming her mother's view of her as "the artistic one". Once again Mrs Sheridan's words prove prophetic, since Laura's artistic touch seems to involve her ability to compose inequities and wrongs into the picture of the world as it should be – a world where a carter's death fits in the natural scheme of things and is nonchalantly accepted as a minor event by the ruling class who can go on celebrating and living as they wish. Like other party-givers and -goers in Mansfield's short stories, Laura experiences a moment of crisis which reveals a hidden part of her identity, but the epiphany remains elusive both for the reader and the protagonist (Smith, 2013, p. 79), who cannot voice her emotions, as is often the case in Mansfield's interrogative and irresolute endings: "'Isn't life,' she stammered, 'isn't life – 'But what life was she couldn't explain" (Mansfield 1981, p. 261).

4. The offering

In *Mrs Dalloway*, as we shall see, the party is both an aesthetic artefact and a political statement, whose intent is chiefly to confirm the upper class that has led the nation to war in its prominent role and enhance the ideological values of Englishness. In Woolf's intentions, the novel was meant "to criticize the social system, and to show it at work at its most intense" (Woolf, 1988, p. 248). The plot, set in a single day, focuses on the protagonist's party and its preparations. The treatment of space, following the outside/inside pattern, alternates London scenes and the Dalloways' house, the shrine of domesticity which provides Clarissa with purification after the long walk through Westminster where she mixed with the city crowd, making her feel like a nun withdrawing from the world. Despite her being a wife and a mother, after her illness, the Spanish flu, she feels increasingly virginal and sleeps alone in the attic: "There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. […] The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side.

Narrower and narrower would her bed be" (Woolf, 1992, pp. 33-34). Here, in this secluded space, a sort of sickroom where truths can be said "which the cautious respectability of health conceals" (Woolf, 1926, p. 36), she acknowledges the lesbian desires of her youth. If literary houses are archetypes of the character's interiority, "*tool[s] for the analysis* of the human soul" (Bachelard, 1994, p. XXXVII), Clarissa's bedroom reflects her thoughtful and introspective frame of mind following her illness and the trauma of war, just like her drawing room in the last part of the novel symbolises her restored love for life, her going back to her pre-war hostess role, whose parties, she thinks somewhat vaguely, are "an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?" (Woolf, 1992, p. 134). Like the artist, who combines words or lines and colours creating a work of art, the hostess combines people equally creating a magic circle that keeps the meaninglessness of life at bay, that imposes order on chaos, that shapes reality in such a way that it makes sense (Minow-Pinkney, 2010, pp. 237-238). Providing relief and pleasure in the midst of troublesome everyday life, they both realize an aesthetic whole, whose borders - the party's circumscribed time and space, the book cover, the picture frame - "set it apart from the outside world […] designating that a distinctive world exists within […]" (Ames, 1991, p. 108).

The community Mrs Dalloway assembles at her party is the ruling class whose members have shaped and still shape the destiny of the country: the Prime Minister, the conservative elite to which her husband Richard belongs, colonial civil servants, ladies and lords, such as Lady Bruton, who exerts her political influence over the Tories, and Hugh Whitbread, who has a position at court, a renowned psychiatrist such as doctor Bradshaw, whose prescriptive theory of proportion tells what is normal from what is not. However, other layers of English society are represented too: dissenting voices like Peter Walsh and Sally Seton and members of the middle class, down to Ellie Henderson, Clarissa's cousin of little means, who is glad to be invited just to see the ladies' elegant clothes. Although in principle a party is not a hierarchical space, in fact power imbalance infiltrates it (Randall, 2013, p. 104), as the Dalloways' twofold gathering - a dinner for the happy few followed by a much larger party - shows. But this, far from denying its unifying function (Rich, 2019, p. 60), in my opinion matches exactly the Dalloways' idea of the social scale as it should be, from the Prime Minister to Ellie Henderson, with its multilayered structure and differences, thus reinforcing the existing order.

The party's formal, quasi-official nature, its being a performance, an exhibition where power and wealth are on display, is emphasised by the striking similarity between Mrs Dalloway who welcomes her guests at the top of the staircase and the portrait of a young lady in evening dress that Woolf describes in *The Royal Academy* (1919), her review of the Academy's annual exhibition. Founded in 1768 with the purpose of improving the fine arts in the country, it was the stronghold of the traditional representational painting still cherished by the mainstream British public and, conversely, the target of the attacks of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, the Bloomsbury advocates of Post-impressionism. Their formalist theory, downplaying naturalistic depiction and the significance of the subject matter, gave prominence to lines and colours and the pure, aesthetic emotion they elicited in the onlookers.[3] In order to underline that the Academy pictures do not appeal to their contemplative

[3] See *Vision and Design* (1920), where Roger Fry writes: "[the Post-impressionists] do not seek […] to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities" (Fry, 1981, p. 167). He also distinguishes art from

imagination but rather resort to the associated ideas and ordinary emotions provoked by lifelike representation to move them, Woolf ingeniously feigns that the men and women in the pictures come alive and turns the exhibition into a party, where the visitors are greeted by the portrait of the lady in evening dress at the top of the staircase in Burlington House, the headquarters of the Academy. Like Mrs Dalloway, who says to everyone "How delightful to see you!" and "How awfully good of you to come!" (Woolf, 1992, pp. 183 and 187), she says "How nice of you to come!" to all her distinguished guests (Woolf, 2002, p. 150), i.e. the subjects of the other portraits on exhibit, who champion Englishness, featuring values such as chastity, honour, patriotism, wealth, power, and success, so that the whole exhibition seems proudly to declare: "This is England! These are the English!" (Woolf, 2002, p. 160). In like manner, at the Dalloways' the principles and beliefs of Englishness are put on display, two particularly impressive examples of the national identity being the Prime Minister, "symbol of what they all stood for, English society" (Woolf, 1992, pp.188-189), and Lady Bruton, who would be English even among the dead, we are told.

The alien, the other who does not fit in the chosen group upholding England's tradition and ideological stance, the uninvited guest, is Septimus Warren Smith, the soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder who has killed himself, whose death is reported by Lady Bradshaw, much to Mrs Dalloway's dismay: "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought. […] What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party?" (Woolf, 1992, p. 201). However, Septimus, the petty bourgeois willing to improve his social condition, is himself an advocate of Englishness who volunteered to save his civilization from extinction, fond of Shakespeare, Darwin and Shaw. Among Clarissa's guests of high rank, he is the one who has sacrificed his life to support national culture, ideas and customs, developing manliness in the trenches, adopting the stiff upper lip attitude to such a degree that, when his officer and friend Evans is killed, he congratulates himself upon his detachment and self-control. Septimus commits suicide because doctor Bradshaw decides to take him to an asylum, – one his *homes*: "Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views […]" (Woolf, 1992, p. 109). Bradshaw, that is, embodies England's postwar desire to forget and start again, her unwillingness to acknowledge the combatants' suffering, which is exactly what Septimus needs in order to make sense of his experience, as he himself says when he mutters that communication is health and happiness (DeMeester, 1998, p. 660).

Clarissa's movements through the interior space foreground her train of thought and emotions: on hearing of the veteran's death, she leaves the drawing-room where all her guests have gathered for the little room where the Prime Minister and Lady Bruton have recently withdrawn to talk about India. Here, where the chairs still keep the impression of their bodies, she receives a revelation of political import suddenly realising that Septimus' suicide is what preserves her class's lifestyle, what allows them to live as they wish, re-embracing their old beliefs, habits and social practices:

> The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; […] She felt somehow very like him — the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. […] He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She

life by stating that the former "presents a life freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence" (Fry, 1981, p. 15).

> must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room (Woolf, 1992, p. 204).

Joining her guests in the drawing-room, Mrs Dalloway wholeheartedly resumes her hostess role, weaving the threads of social relationships as she used to do before the war. Like Scott's death in *The Garden Party*, also the soldier's sacrifice for his country is part of the natural order of things, a ritual offering graciously accepted by the ruling class, represented by Laura and Clarissa: "Both women are privileged and upper-class – both men are of the class that is to them nearly invisible. These men can only become visible through their deaths and, paradoxically, through their deaths they seem to place the women under obligation" (Freedman, 2003, p. 85). If death, utterly annihilating from an individual perspective, can be perceived from a collective point of view as a phase of the cycle of regeneration wherein the community continues to live, Septimus's death becomes the symbolical centre of the party, ultimately nurturing the community it seemingly threatened, once the postwar years 'festive mood has proved strong enough to disempower and absorb it.

5. The Edwardian Garden Party

Unlike *Mrs Dalloway*, unlike Joyce's and Mansfield's short stories, in *To the Lighthouse* death does not show up unwelcome at Mrs Ramsay's dinner party. It rather follows it closely in the second part of the novel, *Time Pass*es, where the summerhouse, conquered by nature, stands ideally for war-torn Europe, while the party that immediately precedes it appears to be Woolf's symbolic rendering of the Edwardian Garden Party, which, though marked by unsettling signs of anxiety, was to be remembered as a gilded age after the highly distressing experience of world conflict. Charles Tansley, the young philosopher and pupil of Mr Ramsay, and the painter Lily Briscoe voice some such anxieties (class inequality, gender discrimination, the generation clash over women's changing roles), but Mrs Ramsay, the embodiment of the Victorian Angel in the House whose talent is to reconcile different views and bring people together, manages to create a congenial atmosphere by resorting to her traditional womanly skills and wisdom. Since the Ramsays are a middle-class family who spend their summer on the Isle of Skye surrounded by friends, their dinner, compared to Clarissa's, is fairly informal and familiar.

If shared meals in Woolf can sometimes be sites of alienation, fragmentation and disunity (Rich, 2019, p. 54), Mrs Ramsay's dinner party seems to be one of these: "The room (she looked around) was shabby. There was beauty nowhere. […] Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate" (Woolf, 2000, p. 91). The house, neglected and in need of maintenance, is the scene of the seemingly abortive gathering, where people do not mingle. The guest being difficult is Charles Tansley, who, as a lower-class member, has worked his way up by himself. He holds people like the Ramsays in contempt and imagines blowing them sky high someday, which suggests his radical ideology (we are also told that he attacks the government's economic policies). Moreover, he despises women – "Women can't write, women can't paint" he keeps repeating (Woolf, 2000, p. 94) – and observing Mrs Ramsay who is doing her best to make sure that her guests enjoy the meal and join the conversation, he thinks to himself that they make "civilization impossible with all their 'charm', all their silliness" (Woolf, 2000, p. 93). Conversely, charm, silliness and white lies - the attributes Woolf credits the Angel in the House with in the essay *Professions for Women* (1931) - are exactly what, in Mrs Ramsay's opinion, enables civilization, that she views as the consideration for other people's feelings and desires: civilization, that is, is gendered female. Lily Briscoe, however, who is some twenty years her junior and an

independent, unmarried woman, does not share her old-fashioned ideas and when is silently asked by her to be nice to Tansley, who is uncomfortable and isolated, she does not want to comply with the gendered code of behaviour she is expected to follow. But although Lily is willing to establish a new kind of interaction between men and women, at last she goes along with Mrs Ramsay's wishes and gives Tansley the chance to speak his mind and assert himself.

Fully mastering her performer role, Mrs Ramsay makes use of a social language which Woolf equates to French, a lingua franca known to them all, thus imposing unity and uniformity on the gathering and allowing the guests to communicate. From now on, the party thrives under her careful guidance, while the differences and divisions of everyday life vanish thanks to the spontaneous festive mood (Apolito, 2014, p. 67):

> Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily. Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there (Woolf, 2000, p. 106).

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Whereas in *The Dead* the tensions among the guests are not defused and the word "party" implicitly recalls partitioning and conflicting political organizations, in *To the Lighthouse* it is used twice to suggest a cohesive group of people who share a significant experience, which is precisely what a successful social gathering should result in. The dining-room, lit by eight candles, becomes agreeable and cozy, providing a shelter, a nest which protect them from the outside world concealed by the darkness of the night, whose "diminished entity", Bachelard would say, enhance the intensity of the intimacy experienced in the house (Bachelard, 1994, p. 41). In Woolf the window usually "marks the transition from a spatially limited interior to an unlimited exterior, and so in an existential sense it symbolises the place of the uniquely human, poised on the border between finitude and the infinite" (Spur, 2012, p. 65): here "the uniquely human" is represented by the guests who have "their common cause against the fluidity out there", so that the inside/outside dialectic encompasses also the oppositions between man and nature, stability and mutability, as Mrs Ramsay's moment of revelation shows: "[…] there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she [Mrs Ramsay] meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby […]" (Woolf, 2000, p. 114).

The time is ripe for the dinner party to become a sort of solemn rite, a service in a cathedral, which is also an unspoken thanksgiving to Mrs Ramsay, while the words she hears, Elton's *Luriana Lurilee* recited by her husband, seem to express effortlessly what she has been thinking the whole evening. Likewise, the shabby summerhouse is transfigured into a ceremonial site and all the ordinary details of everyday life are transformed accordingly, Mr Carmichael's napkin becoming a white robe, while he repeats the poem's lines and bows to her in homage. Mrs Ramsay's rhythmic community has made her guests experience unity and cohesion: the memory of her dinner party will stay with them, as Lily demonstrates when, ten years later, she thinks back to the old days when Mrs Ramsay was alive, acknowledging her talent for bringing people together and making the fleeting

moment permanent.[4] But permanence and stability belong to the human sphere: in the ten years when the house is deserted – the war years, the years of the death of Mrs Ramsay and two of her children – nature progressively violates and infiltrates the shrine of domesticity, undoing the inside/outside opposition at the climax of the dinner scene:

> Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and a basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. […] Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house was ramshackle after all) crept round corners and ventured indoors (Woolf, 2002, pp. 137-138).

The process is described in *Time Passes*, a *tour de force* that Woolf found extremely difficult to write: "I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passing of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to […]" (Woolf, 1987, p. 76). Here nature's invasiveness evokes human vulnerability and transience (Orlando, 1994, p. 43). The house, which has hitherto been the core of life, becomes a hollow place, whose abandoned objects are painful reminders of happier times. In this empty shell inhabited by the uncanny spectres of the past, the forsaken objects provide evidence of death, like Jacob's old shoes abandoned in the middle of his bedroom after he has been killed in the war in Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922):

> What people had shed and left – a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes – those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking glass had held a face; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure tuned, a hand flashed, the door opened, in came children rushing and tumbling; and went out again (Woolf, 2000, p. 141).

In *To The Lighthouse* death is not the stone ghost that shows up uninvited at the social gathering, but nonetheless it is closely connected to it, significantly following the party like the war followed England's glowing last summer of peace. Apparently, Woolf seems to be saying that no party can contain and disempower such large-scale violence; still, Mrs Ramsay's and Lily's epiphanies in the novel suggest that only care, affection and human bonds can act as an antidote to destruction and annihilation.

In conclusion, the chronotopic motive of the party serves as a common structuring device in modernist fiction, as exemplified by Woolf's novels and Joyce's and Mansfield's short stories. The party provides a space where the characters meet, outside and inside interact, and the current issues - those issues Modernism has been repeatedly accused of ignoring, "focused on the micro- rather than the macrocosm, and hence the individual more than the social" (Childs, 2000, p. 18) – are in fact discussed, affecting the characters' lives and yielding epiphanies. If the time of this chronotopic motif is the kairological time of revelation, its space is the space of the home, which temporarily renounces its privacy to welcome people from outside. In the narrative examined the spatial setting is often shaped by the interior/exterior opposition, which in the dinner scene of *To The Lighthouse* takes on a reassuring tinge, symbolising human connections and community vs the boundless and

[4] Like in Mrs Ramsay's epiphany, in Lily's too, permanence and stability are key concepts: "[…] Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation" (Woolf, 2000, p. 176). In *To the Lighthouse* the similarity between the hostess and the artist is explicitly stated.

unknowable world. Still, when a crisis occurs, whether private as in *The Dead* or public as in *Time Passes*, the opposition loses its significance and spatial connotations mix up, so that places such as the hotel room where Gabriel and Gretta spend the night or the Ramsays' deserted summerhouse, encompassing both the inside and outside, mirror the disorder the world has been thrown into. Elsewhere, in *Mrs Dalloway*, the house epitomises the nation and its values, which are being restored after the war thanks to people like Clarissa and the upper class she belongs to. The articulation of the domestic space is instrumental in ensuring the protagonist's moments of vision, as both the attic and the small room where she withdraws when she hears of Septimus' suicide attest, granting her solitude and seclusion. In *The Garden Party* space is made significant through the comparison between the Sheridans' grand mansion and the poor cottage where Laura sees the carter's dead body. Since the short story is condensed and concise and relies on few highly symbolic details to depict the narrative context, the two places are crucial to convey the meaningful contrast between the two families and their worlds. Here too, as in the other modernist text examined, the character's revelation is closely connected to the spatial structure of the text, which intersects with instantaneous time in the chronotopic motif of the party. If, as Bakthin states, "The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 85), the motif of the party, with its distinctive spatial and temporal indicators on which the possible actions taken by characters in the fictional world depend, certainly contributes to the image of man in modernist literature.

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