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(Im)perfect celebrations by intergenerational hostesses: Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" and Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

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ABSTRACT
Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf nourished a peculiar stream of parallel foreignness and kinship with each other as coetaneous writers. This article explores the likenesses and dialogues between Mansfield's story "The Garden Party" and Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway to detect and depict how bourgeois women, like Laura Sheridan and Clarissa Dalloway, albeit from two different generations, are indoctrinated by social etiquette, class consciousness and the prevailing archetype of domestic femininity inherited from Victorian times. Integrated into their compulsory roles as angelic daughters and wives, Laura and Clarissa gladly perform the role of the hostess to organise (im)perfect parties at home until death knocks at the door. Paradoxically that uninvited guest precipitates escapades of self-discovery and mental emancipation, leading to transient or enduring transformations in the lives of these two women.

KEYWORDS: "The Garden Party", Mrs. Dalloway, hostess, celebration, death.

1. INTRODUCTION: MUTUAL (UN)LIKENESS

'Home, sweet home!' Victorian homes have been envisaged as private refuges for men to escape from social and professional burdens beyond nineteenth-century Great Britain. Their interiors reflected the aura and touch of their angelic custodians: wives, mothers or daughters, whose unselfishness and self-sacrifice cultivated such havens of harmony for the sake of the male breadwinners in their lives: husbands, fathers or sons. This domestic sphere, which preserved the sacred family institution and the moral stability of the whole nation, was opened to exhibition through social gatherings for relatives, neighbours or acquaintances. Conversely, such events were also closed to outsiders to deepen intimacy among the familiar people invited to them. But traditional parties became more diversified and fragmented in

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modern times, because these festive events were not only forums for testing the interrelations among different individuals or the nature of the self, but also vehicles "for nihilistic experiences of despair and self-effacement leading to the debauchery of the death drive" (McLoughlin, 2013: 2). In the early twentieth century, Modernist women writers selected these genteel celebrations inherited from the recent past as symbols to illustrate women's continued stagnation and vulnerability in one of the few occasions allowed for their public exposure. To be the perfect hostess organising successful parties was, in fact, a major role of femininity for upper-middle class women beyond the Victorian era that tested their domestic accomplishments and mastery of social graces. Emily Blair states that under the assumption that gender is a socially-produced category, the hostess's personality was an artificial and laborious creation of pre-established normative conduct, which "embodies the tension between a private, authentic self, and a publicly constructed self: she is the self perceived as public behaviour, a self that is consciously directed to performance" (2007: 230-231). Indeed, this tension between the feminine and the female within the role of the hostess becomes highly compelling for literary purposes.

This essay discusses the intricate role of the hostess as a bourgeois ideal of femininity, subordinated to outer pressures yet also opened to female self-knowledge, in Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Garden Party" (1922) and in Virginia Woolf's novel Mrs. Dalloway (1925). Despotic fathers, whether living or dead, frighten the heroines of Woolf's To the Lighthouse (1927) or Mansfield's "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (1922) because patriarchal tyranny had begun at home: family houses would be less idyllic shelters than anyone had anticipated in former times. Nevertheless, these two modernist authors of the same generation also narrate more subtle episodes of gender oppression in the works selected for this article, where their two heroines seem to be liberated from despotic fathers, yet still limited by patriarchal 'monsters': equally autocratic mothers or burdensome social conventions. The analytical approach used in this essay primarily intertwines fictional and biographical elements to illustrate how parallels and divergences between Mansfield and Woolf, between their respective lives and those of their literary heroines, question social pressures and compulsory gender roles endured by upper-middle class women in the early twentieth century; for example, the burden of being ideal(ised) hostesses. Moreover, recent scholarship about modernist parties enhances the exploration in this article of the (im)perfect celebrations in houses in "The Garden Party" and Mrs. Dalloway, as liminal events between the everyday and the out-of-the-ordinary, between unawareness and epiphanic self-knowledge or, at least, transient moments of psychological introspection for women of two different ages: adolescence and maturity. Beyond its original use to analyse rites of passage, Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra argue that liminality captures "in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes" (2015: 2).

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The use of the term liminal to explain such crucial threshold situations is, thus, essential to assess the transformative nature of modern(ist) parties and the ambivalent role of the hostess, who must perform while mediating between external social repression and female self-expression, in both Mansfield's story and Woolf's novel.

2. WOMEN AND PARTIES BEYOND THE ORDINARY

Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf were literary rivals and friends in London during the decades of the 1910s and 1920s. They were professional authors committed to literature and to the faithful depiction of human experiences; daughters of educated gentlemen; childless wives who, as emancipated women, questioned gender inequality and sexual repression; sophisticated intellectuals exposed to artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, and patients suffering mental or physical chronic illnesses. Hence, beyond their mutual passion for writing, such astonishing parallels in the lives of Mansfield and Woolf also result in a peculiar kinship found in their fiction. Angela Smith's comparative reading of the letters, journals and literary works of these two modernist women writers suggest that "their intuitive understanding of each other enables their intellectual sympathy" and that a sense of likeness beyond writing was discovered by Woolf (1999: 41). In fact, both Mansfield and Woolf were "preoccupied by exploring the liminal territory they inhabit, between life and death, sanity and madness, between tradition and experiment, suspended between past and present, between feminine dependence and artistic adventurousness", confronting male prejudices (Smith 1999: 63). Katherine Mansfield was less attentive to the career of the rich, lady-like Virginia Woolf compared to the latter's professional jealousy and curiosity about the uninvited outsider from the colourful colony of New Zealand. Such feelings, according to Smith (1999), are expressed in Woolf's diaries and in her sorrow after Mansfield's premature death at age thirty-four. Following the tenets of Julia Kristeva, who identifies a shift in which the stranger and foreigner are acknowledged to be within and are not a hostile presence outside the self, Smith also argues that Mansfield and Woolf were "literally foreign to each other in terms of nationality and upbringing", but also familiar; and "in recognising the affinity between themselves, they were also recognising the foreign within, and acknowledging a kind of doubling" with desire and despise (Kristeva in Smith 1999: 29, 32). Mentally unsettling yet artistically enriching, this duality of awareness of kinship and foreignness within not only explains the dialogues between Mansfield and Woolf, but also affects the way they were both committed to experimental autobiographical writings, where the woman embraces the artist and the artist embraces the woman.

Robust scholarship and the biographies of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf reflect that, as nonconformists, feminists and bisexuals, both writers criticised and challenged the quintessence of Victorian femininity, the so-called 'Angel in the house', an ideal that had

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not vanished since the nineteenth century, as well as the validity of one of her main social roles, the hostess, during and after World War I. The term 'Angel in the house' derived from Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1854). It refers to the widely-accepted Victorian model of femininity, which designated compulsory roles of domesticity to women, linked to their expected virtues of self-denial, unworldliness and obedience to the authority of their husbands, fathers, sons or brothers. Although Woolf and Mansfield were personally repelled by Victorian gender constraints, the recurrence of the 'Angel in the house' in their works demonstrates that both authors were also haunted and seduced by this paradigm of domestic feminine excellence and by her social duty to be a hostess, as Woolf confesses in "Professions for Women": "It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing […] The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room" (2008: 141). Angela Smith's research on Katherine Mansfield's life-writings (1999) reveals that the New Zealand author fondly recalled the casualness of family parties from her girlhood in her home city Wellington, and that, as an adult bohemian writer in Europe, Mansfield was unburdened by the knowledge of the etiquette of formal gala parties. Conversely, Woolf's acute awareness of the importance of the normative expectations for those social events is rooted in her role as the daughter of intellectual, upper-class parents from cosmopolitan London (the Stephens) in late Victorian times. In fact, Woolf's daily existence was dictated by the public duties for a young lady during her adolescence, including the regular attendance at, and hosting of a variety of lunch, tea and evening parties, which, unlike her sister Vanessa Bell, Woolf found dull and difficult to bear (Randall, 2013: 95). In her mature years, Woolf recorded rapid changes in attitude towards parties, shifting between enjoyment and annoyance, when she "[didn't] want [them], but to live like a caterpillar on a leaf" (qtd. in Randall, 2013: 96). Before writing Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf also declared in her diary that "people have a number of states of consciousness: and I should like to investigate the party consciousness" (qtd. in Marcus, 2017: 276). Therefore, her fiction, including Mrs. Dalloway or To the Lighthouse, replicates Woolf's interest and ambivalence about hosting and attending family celebrations, understood as social obligations according to British custom. In turn, Mansfield, in stories like "The Garden Party", may suggest that in New Zealand, the relaxation of the rigid English manners is more likely to happen in festive gatherings; thus, enabling more liberating experiences for their hostesses.

The scholarly works of Angela Smith and Patricia Moran illustrate astonishing parallels between Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and Katherine Mansfield's "At the Bay" or "Bliss", respectively. However, this article chooses to compare Woolf's novel with Mansfield's coming-of-age story "The Garden Party", because both works are also surprisingly related to each other, and they involve a social gathering disrupted by a sudden death. In fact, these tragic events interrupt (extra)ordinary celebrations and provide their

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hostesses transient instances of self-revelation and truth, anticipating (or not) subsequent changes in their public roles and inner selves. Occurring in a single day of late spring or early summer in London and in Wellington respectively, Mrs. Dalloway and "The Garden Party" devote at least three quarters of their narrations to the preparation of a party. This first stage corresponds to the traditional narrative pattern of the rising action in Woolf's novel, whereas its climax happens during this social gathering, and the novel concludes at its heights with its heroine as the (im)perfect socialite and without an ultimate falling action. Instead, Mansfield also innovates by placing the rising action and climax in the early phase of previous arrangements, by omitting the party itself, and by offering a second peak after the celebration that aborts the falling action.

The respective protagonists of Mrs. Dalloway and "The Garden Party" represent different generations of women. Clarissa Dalloway is the middle-aged wife of a member of the Parliament, who grew up in imperial London during the late nineteenth century, and frequently organises parties. A sweet memory from Mansfield's own past family life in New Zealand, Laura Sheridan in "The Garden Party" is an adolescent girl from the early twentieth century, who still must learn how to be a competent hostess, as a crucial role in her formative years to become soon a bourgeois wife, exactly like her mother. The social conventions of the Edwardian motherland are reproduced through Laura's privileged domestic life in an imposing mansion upon a hill overlooking the slums of the poor working-classes and personified by her wealthy parents belonging to the governing white colonial community in peripheral New Zealand. Thomas Day argues that because the society represented in this story is addressed to a European audience, it can be mistaken for English society with its "obsession with quasi-feudal class distinctions, the green and pleasant garden party culture whiffing of the establishment, and the adjacent stench of the great unwashed" (2011: 135). The first lines of Mansfield's "The Garden Party" metaphorically insinuate that the socio-economic prominence of the Sheridan family could command for their celebration almost everything out of reach for their neighbours down the hill: "And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden party if they had ordered it" (Mansfield, 2002: 337). The prevailing class consciousness and imperial elitism, suggested in Mansfield's story, also perpetuate the Victorian norm of compulsory femininity: the 'Angel in the house'. This prescribed ideal of domesticity was grounded upon women's conformity with the limited gender roles of self-sacrificing mothers, wives or daughters. Mansfield and Woolf detect and detest the 'Angel in the House', because its haunting presence would inhibit the sense of the self and the freedom of women, as reflected in "The Garden Party" and Mrs. Dalloway. Furthermore, these two literary works, starting in medias res and concluding without a clear-cut resolution, illustrate estranged mother-daughter relationships, which hinder communication and empathy between women of different ages.

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Mansfield's Mrs. Sheridan is a domineering parent, who imposes strict, conventional behaviour and threatens her offspring if they dare to disobey her authority: "'Do you hear me, children, or shall I have to tell your father when he comes home to-night?'" (Mansfield, 2002: 341). In contrast, Woolf's Clarissa is a submissive mother who avoids vexing Elizabeth, her dissimilar only daughter, who is also her husband's favourite. However, the social dimension of hosting social gatherings at home also affects the family life of the Dalloways, because these public events contribute to Clarissa's estrangement from her own daughter. Like Laura in Mansfield's story, Elizabeth Dalloway is torn between her obedience to maternal power directing her to attend one of her first coming-out events and her own desire to mentally explore intellectual or more modern alternatives for women, different from the compulsory destiny of wifehood. Elizabeth's proud, poor and bookish governess of German origin, Doris Kilman, also dislikes these events, although she is never invited to them on account of her inferior social position, similar to that of the workmen preparing the garden party for the Sheridans in Mansfield's story. Alienated from her aloof employer, Ms. Kilman even criticises Clarissa Dalloway's worldliness and frivolity as a hostess, while she tries to dissuade her beloved pupil Elizabeth from "let[ting] parties absorb her" (Woolf, 1992: 144).

In their respective stories, Mrs. Dalloway and Laura Sheridan prepare their formal or family celebrations with industriousness, devotion and delight. They spend most of the day decorating, ordering food from caterers, mending gala dresses and giving instructions to the cook or servants, like setting tables or polishing the silver. This is a common activity for Clarissa as the wife of a conservative politician, but the first line of the novel foreshadows that this time seems to be different: "[She] said she would buy the flowers herself" (Woolf, 1992: 3). This party would be more hers than ever. In contrast, this is a premiere for Laura in "The Garden Party", because Mrs. Sheridan presumably relinquished her role as an accomplished hostess to her daughters this time: "'I'm determined to leave everything to you children this year. Forget I am your mother. Treat me as an honoured guest'" (Mansfield, 2002: 336). With the deliberate absence of male family members (her dear brother Laurie and her father busy at work), the more artistic Laura Sheridan takes the lead in preparing the home party instead of her sisters Meg and Jose. Thanks to this celebration, she envisages herself able to develop her creative powers. Moreover, she wants to prove that she can assume her future status of spotless wifehood, to please her vigilant mother and to pamper her guests, because she trusts her natural gift for hosting these events: "she loved having to arrange things; she always felt she could do it so much better than anybody else" (Mansfield, 2002: 336). William Atkinson contends that this story represents a rite of permanent passage for its heroine, because she moves from childhood to adulthood tutored by Mrs. Sheridan, but that it will also be a rite of temporary status reversal triggering female rebelliousness, because social hierarchies are momentarily out of order (2006: 54). Firstly, Laura and her

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sister Jose pretend to be already grown-up ladies. In fact, they mimic their mother's refined manners and haughty language in front of socially inferior workers and servants, but they cannot help behaving still like little girls when they see the patisseries that the cook is arranging for the garden party. In that precise moment, the two sisters instantly hurry to devour them: "Oh, impossible. Fancy cream puffs so soon after breakfast. The very idea made one shudder. All the time, two minutes later [they] were licking their fingers with that absorbed inward look that only comes from whipped cream" (Mansfield, 2002: 342). Secondly, Laura, embarrassed by her new adult talk before her subordinates, discovers that the young men who came to erect the marquee for the party are kind, obliging and smiling, which suddenly subverts the maintenance of class consciousness as indoctrinated by her wealthy family. Laura particularly contemplates and enjoys the view of a handsome, tall boy with striking blue eyes. This young worker delicately appreciates the smell of lavender and seems to be more attractive and tender than the insensitive gentlemen of her entourage, one of whom will probably become her future husband, as will be concocted by her mother. Then, Laura wonders: "why couldn't she have workmen for friends rather than the silly boys she danced with and who came to Sunday night supper? She would get on much better with men like these" (Mansfield, 2002: 338). Angela Smith holds that party-givers and party-goers in Mansfield's stories "want to project an image of themselves which is always undermined by a moment of disruption", where the author reveals an aspect of the secret self of her protagonists, who come close "to an epiphany which is often ultimately elusive" (2013: 79). Accordingly in Mansfield's story, Laura's encounter with the handsome young worker is a sudden instant of self-revelation, intertwining egalitarian views with an unexpected sexual awakening and daydreams of love, which shakes the quiet course of her day. Yet this moment of self-discovery soon surrenders to family pressures and death. While Mrs. Sheridan said she would not interfere in the garden celebration, she eventually imposes her will. For instance, she ordered canna lilies that her daughter does not find necessary for the party, and Mrs. Sheridan shows repeatedly that, as the lady of the house, she keeps the authority to command or scold florists, children and servants alike.

The party preparations are abruptly interrupted when the Laura Sheridan hears that Scott, a carter, passed away in an accident. She intends to cancel the party, but Jose opposes: '"don't be so absurd. Of course we can't do anything of the kind. Nobody expects us to. Don't be so extravagant"' (Mansfield, 2002: 343). Laura is furious when her sister, her mother's natural heiress, insinuates that the dead man from the slums was possibly drunk and thus, responsible for his own demise. Without engaging in any controversy with her daughter, Mrs. Sheridan settles the matter with the same aloof reaction that refuses to take her childish daughter seriously and finds that the tragedy of this poor neighbour is not hers. Relieved to learn that Scott did not die in her garden, her class consciousness and snobbery compel Laura to avoid changes in the party plans: "'People like that don't expect sacrifices

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from us. And it's not very sympathetic to spoil everybody's enjoyment as you're doing now'" (Mansfield, 2002: 345). As the true hostess in the dark, Mrs. Sheridan reminds her daughter-in-training that she must not be a philanthropist, but must remain as an angelic daughter, who only has domestic responsibilities towards the sacred family institution and the imminent party. Pamela Dunbar argues that the mother effectively distracts Laura with the gift of her hat, which symbolically transfers her own values and lifestyle in her daughter's critical passing into adulthood (1997: 169). Mrs. Sheridan actually succeeds in redirecting her child's mild impulse of nonconformity. Forgetting her sympathy for Scott and contemplating her beauty wearing this fashionable accessory, Laura postpones her confrontation with death to embrace her role of debutant hostess in her celebration: "I'll remember it again after the party's over, she decided" (2002: 345). In fact, the impending gathering symbolises this girl's rite of reincorporation to her family and social class, because she finds monstrous to think about death in the abstract, or to integrate it into a family celebration, so she follows her mother's advice to put this tragedy to one side (Atkinson, 2006: 58). However, Laura could conceal her newly-discovered true self against snobbery and allow herself to temporarily perform the patriarchal script of the hostess only during her liminal party.

For the enjoyment of her distinguished guests and for the glory of her husband Richard, Clarissa Dalloway in Woolf's novel prepares another formal gala in June 1923. That day is transcendental for her because she is hosting a celebration at home; every noise, sight or apprehension of the city she experiences seems to gain meaning, beauty and perfection in her life. She takes the decisions about whom she must formally invite to her party (the Prime Minister and her husband's Parliament colleagues) or about guests who spontaneously show up last minute (like her former suitor Peter Walsh), although she is also forced to invite unpleasant people, like Ellie Henderson, because Richard wants to see her at home that night. The preliminaries of this prestigious social event trigger Clarissa's self-absorptive exercise of journeying to the past and back to the present. While enjoying the sunshine in the streets of London, the ramblings of her mind are enraptured by sensual memories of her happy adolescence at the country home of Bourton and her treasured first kiss with her friend Sally interrupted by Peter, also at a party when she was just a girl, like Laura Sheridan in Mansfield's story. However, the hostile contemporary reality also invades Clarissa's self-consciousness when she acknowledges both her resentment and apathy about her social role of being only a wife (including a hostess), without an identity of her own apart from her husband's name: "She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown […] this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway" (Woolf, 1992: 11). Despite the inevitable pressures of the marriage institution, Clarissa's choice of Richard for her husband seems to be correct, because her husband gives her freedom: "For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house,

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which Richard gave her, and she him" (8). She opts for "dangerous passivity" by marrying him, instead of Peter, but she is not coerced by Richard and they keep spaces apart from one another; thus, privacy for Clarissa, where she can potentially discover her own identity (Webb, 1994: 286). However, being a hostess is an ambivalent gender role, because Richard allows his wife to organise parties by herself and to be congratulated for their success, while these events concurrently represent the theatrical exhibition of Clarissa being an economically dependent married woman.

The delights and sorrows of Mrs. Dalloway's meandering thoughts clash against the sounds of London clocks striking the hours that day of June, which remind her that a competent hostess like her should not be late or idle for the preparation of her gala. During that day of June, Mrs. Dalloway also resents that her husband and her friend Peter "criticised her very unfairly, laughed at her very unjustly, for her parties. That was it!" (Woolf, 1992: 132). She feels that these important men in her life mock or undervalue the importance of her parties, which are not banal or trivial for her. That is why Virginia Woolf enables her heroine to define her party as "an offering for the sake of an offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift. Nothing else had she of the slightest importance" (134). In line with this exaltation of the altruistic act of giving herself to others, Jeremy Hawthorn contends that hosting this celebration suppresses her egocentricity and contributes to something wider than her own self: going to social gatherings implies that her guests leave the separate rooms of their alienated lives and come together to create a sense of collectivity (1975: 86-87). Richard Russell also argues that hosting a party constitutes "Clarissa's triumphant act of empathy in the novel", whereby "she gives of herself repeatedly, kindling and illuminating sparks of life in others" (2015: 538). Despite Mrs. Dalloway's generous solution to build bridges of communication and friendship through her social celebrations at home, her existence devoted to hospitality and entertainment inhibits the discovery of her own female identity away from her public gender role as the perfect hostess.

Many scholars have concluded that Clarissa's creative self is embodied in her occupation as a hostess. For Jacob Littleton Mrs. Dalloway is the portrait of an artist as a middle-class woman because, if the nature of the artist is to transmute personal experience and feeling into a public act, Mrs. Dalloway is an artist (1995: 36). Meanwhile, Suzette Henke contends that in her novel, Woolf "pays tribute to the delicate and ephemeral art forms that grow out of the daily lives of women", Clarissa being a social artist weaving an evanescent web of friendship to create new opportunities for love, affiliation and collective joy for the people brought together at her parties (1981: 128). Hence, her celebrations become artworks, at least for her. Kate McLoughlin holds that Clarissa's fears of party failure reflect her anxiety as an author concerned about the viability of her work, and she sees herself as an insulted artist when others do not appreciate her wish to remove people's separateness and bring them together (2013: 4-5). In times when artistry and professional

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activities were not permitted to married women of Clarissa's high birth, education and social class, they could only channel their vocational talents towards domestic activities within the marriage institution, like hosting home parties or charity events. It is not coincidental that Virginia Woolf writes Mrs. Dalloway in the same decade when she publishes "A Room of One's Own". In that essay, she laments that being a woman is the only profession permitted to women, but she augurs positive changes as soon as women's artistic and intellectual potential can be socially recognised: "Anything may happen when womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation" (1998: 52). While still in force, this sole occupation for angelic wives and daughters would comprise the public yet domestic work of being the perfect hostess of festive events.

Mrs. Dalloway develops around Clarissa's sense of self. The heroine could find her true self in the art of party-giving, but she could also hide or ignore her identity beneath layers of social exposure in evening galas throughout the years. This public, social behaviour would protect her from the threatening possibility of not having any individual identity beyond her husband's surname and her public image as a hostess. Privately, in fact, she could be ambivalent about performing the role of Mrs. Dalloway, because being the best party-giver and wife provided the only sense of stability and order she knew as an upper-class lady, but it also "limits her, confines her and is just a superficial and ineffective substitute for the self she covets" (Forbes, 2005: 43). Clarissa's dismay and frustration with her artificial creation as a socialite artist are heightened by Peter's return from India. On that June day, her preformed and controlled schedule of preparations is disrupted by his visit, which irritates her: "It was outrageous to be interrupted at eleven o'clock on the morning of the day she was giving a party […] she opened her scissors, and said, did he mind her just finishing what she was doing to her dress, for they had a party that night?" (Woolf, 1992: 43, 45). In fact, Clarissa detests breaking her busy routine due to this uninvited male intrusion that could endanger her peace of mind or worse, the success of her gala, an event for which she has full responsibility. Peter's broken-heartedness after so many years when he remembers the past: "she would marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase; the perfect hostess he called her" (Woolf, 1992: 7-8) reflects his belief that Clarissa is the wife of a politician mainly for ambition or financial security. Peter's statement of unrequited love also confirms that, since Clarissa was a girl back in Bourton, he had identified her harmful potentiality of becoming a social starlet, hosting glamorous parties in the future. In fact, Peter detects that the hostess Mrs. Dalloway is not who Clarissa, the flesh-and-blood woman, really is. He observes that she skilfully performs her social role and behaves like an actress masterfully reproducing the same formulaic script of good manners, which regulates human interactions and builds an illusory sense of belonging to the same British elite by means of those parties that he perceives as hollow social rituals, as he expresses: "She had a sense of comedy that was really exquisite, but she needed people, always people, to bring it out, with the inevitable

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result that she frittered her time away, lunching, dining, giving these incessant parties of hers, talking nonsense, saying things she didn't mean" (Woolf, 1992: 86). Unlike Clarissa, who believes that she genuinely offers herself to her guests at her parties, Peter thinks that Mrs. Dalloway strictly adheres to artificial, insincere norms of social etiquette, not leading to communication between her guests, or between a hostess like her and a guest like himself. Meanwhile, Clarissa faces her impending celebration with anxiety, and she reminds both Peter and her daughter Elizabeth to come to the gala that she is organising that night. This demand is not only a plea that pitifully highlights her party's centrality to her life, but also represents her fear that familiar people around her may forget her celebration, because they might be careless about this artistic 'masterpiece' of hers, or they would refuse to accept her precious 'gift' to them.

Katherine Mansfield omits any particular description of the details of the actual family party in "The Garden Party". Nevertheless, its narrator confirms the success of this festive event, its prevailing atmosphere of joy and its intentional indifference to the proximity of human tragedy just beyond the family garden: "What happiness it is to be with people who all are happy, to press hands, press cheeks, smile into eyes […] the perfect afternoon slowly ripened, slowly faded, slowly its petals closed" (Mansfield, 2002: 345-346). Without reluctance, Mrs. Sheridan eventually assumes her role as the true hostess of the event, instead of her daughter-in-training: "'I'm exhausted. Yes, it's been very successful. But oh, these parties, these parties! Why will you children insist on giving parties!"' (346). Conversely, Virginia Woolf narrates the gala episode in precise detail to show Clarissa's liminal oscillation between sociability and withdrawal from the public eye, between outward perceptions of success and inner insecurities for a lady entertaining the British crème de la crème: "She was not enjoying it. It was too much like being–just anybody, standing there; anybody could do it […] Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another" (Woolf, 1992: 187). Mrs. Dalloway resents the uneasiness and insincerity of her social persona during her festive events. Her parties would be a public triumph of her savoir faire as a hostess, but they would be also inconsequential; they would not be her own artistic accomplishments or her special gift to her guests. In fact, she realises that her parties symbolise the pressures of her status as a wife of a politician, whose duty is to promote her husband's career at the British Parliament and simultaneously to maintain their bourgeois status and comfort at home. After a day of exciting preparations and happy anticipation, several reasons intensify her vespertine disillusionment with her gala and its guests. Her friend and possibly first love from adolescence, the unconventional Sally Seton, is now Lady Rosseter, a mother of five boys. Clarissa also feels that Peter constantly criticises her, as he does when he observes the affected, feigned manners of Mrs. Dalloway performing the conventional role of the hostess: "'How delightful to see you!' said [she]. She said it to every one […] She was at her worst–

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effusive, insincere. It was a great mistake to have come" (Woolf, 1992: 183). Moreover, she is careless about the political dimension of her party, which summons the London elite, including the Prime Minister, whom to Clarissa: "[he looks] so ordinary. You might have stood him behind a counter and bought biscuits –poor chap, all rigged up in gold lace" (188). In fact, this gala turns into the perfect social occasion, where the established government institution conspires with the family institution to mutually reinforce parallel forms of patriarchal authority, as well as to exclude women and other unrepresented outcasts and casualties from the public arena. Although Clarissa is the organising force behind the party, she is not its protagonist, because she is no longer the artist of the event once it occurs. After all the creative actions to prepare the gala, during the party the hostess, in fact, becomes a hieratic artwork as a wife, displayed for public exhibition to please Richard and the male visitors, who eventually steal the gala from her hands.

Although Mrs. Dalloway is centred on Clarissa's consciousness, the novel becomes a "communal elegy" mourning for the dead and for the losses of the survivors of both sexes during World War I, because they all have suffered the violence of that armed conflict or that of everyday life (Froula, 2005: 87). In turn, Alex Zwerdling diagnoses the repression of feelings and the strict self-control that the governing class believed necessary to retain power and to stay sane in Woolf's novel atrophies their heart and anesthetises them, while those people who cannot restrain their emotions are viewed in England as outsiders (1986: 188). Clarissa gives herself to others at her party to offer consolation after the human failure of war and to foster communication among the survivors. Nevertheless, her noble purposes seem to fail, because she must welcome certain visitors to her home, who are oblivious to the recent bloodshed and shedding of tears. Her artistic determination to organise the party and her command over its preparations, in fact, clash with the unartistic result: some guests boycott her altruistic act, due to their hostility to mourning and to their lack of sympathy for the war victims. Clarissa particularly dislikes the presence of Sir William Bradshaw because he marginalizes and quarantines war veterans. This eminent doctor believes that those surviving soldiers who suffer the trauma of "shell-shock" are unheroic lunatics. In contrast, Woolf's novel penetrates the mind of one of these war veterans (Septimus Warren Smith) to unveil the ongoing psychological replicas of bombardments after war, which painfully interrupt the ordinary course of his life back home.

At her party, Clarissa overhears a conversation between Bradshaw and her husband about a man, not coincidentally named Septimus Warren Smith, who was in the army and had just killed himself. At first, she dislikes that the psychiatrist invites an (un)desirable guest to her home: "in the middle of my party, here's death […] [its] splendour fell to the floor" (Woolf, 1992: 201). Septimus's suicide interrupts Clarissa's artificial role as a hostess, and causes her to retreat from the vanity fair of her party. Only when she is alone and no longer on stage does this tragic event allow Clarissa to liminally explore her inner self in the novel's

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climax of self-revelation. This fallen soldier has disrupted human silence and shared his loud cry of desperation with her. Although he is absent from her party, Clarissa feels his presence and understands that she is more akin to an unknown dead man than to her famous guests. In fact, she telepathically connects with him to understand his desperate act and to assimilate its meaning into her own life: "Death was defiance […] an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death" (202). Clarissa's sudden empathy for Septimus is actually based on their mutual disgust for what Bradshaw represents: the inhibiting structures of patriarchal power against war veterans and subservient ladies alike. She feels kinship with this stranger, not found in her party's familiar faces. Clarissa even seems to admire Septimus because his daring act of self-destruction permits her to intuit the freedom from people's incomprehension and insensitivity that he reaches through his suicide, but without having to follow his example that is, without risking her own life or killing herself. But more importantly, Septimus's death, as his ultimate resistance to social ostracism and captivity in a mental asylum, occurs at her party while Clarissa is complying with her duty to be Mrs. Richard Dalloway. This realization, in fact, compromises her positive perception of her occupation as a hostess, hitherto accomplished with the placidly passive activity of the 'Angel in the house'.

There are extensive scholarly debates about the tandem Septimus-Clarissa and about Mrs. Dalloway whether as a social starlet, fond of soirées, or as an introspective individual inclined to solitary retreat. For Henke, Septimus as a Christ-figure, whose suicide sacrifices his body to save his private soul and to expiate the sins of those who sent him to the Great War, while Clarissa becomes his mater dolorosa, who laments his death, but celebrates his offering and recognises his martyrdom as a triumph (1981: 140, 143). Septimus's self-destruction would also enable Clarissa to reconcile her personal tensions manifested during her party between her desire to open herself to her guests and her efforts to protect herself from social invasions that might endanger the privacy of her treasured inner self. Hence, she reflects a "laminated personality, made up of distinct layers that do not interpenetrate […] a conformist and a rebellious side" (Zwerdling, 1986: 139). She remains paralysed as Mrs. Dalloway and her feminine role of domesticity, but the invisible confines of her mind help her to be just Clarissa, a woman who freely moves in her own thoughts of social dissent and compassion for the fallen. This duality between outward resignation and angry inner mutiny permits her to transiently abandon her own self and mutate, so as to identify herself with Septimus and to understand his ultimate choice of death.

After this impromptu episode of liminal self-discovery, Clarissa Dalloway resumes the performance of her role as an (im)perfect hostess. She returns to life. She goes back her gala to attempt to rebuild bridges of communication with her friends: "Fear not more the heat of the sun. She must get back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very

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like him […] she felt glad that he had done it […] She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room" (Woolf, 1992: 204). Vicariously sharing the suffering of others like Septimus, Clarissa realises the everyday human triumph of living, so death cannot be excluded from her party, because it is an offering to life (Ames, 2010: 202). After this moment of revelation, Woolf's heroine finds the courage to enjoy her party as she intended it to be: her gift to the world and her personal masterpiece. Despite living her own winter season of maturity approaching the threshold of death and the still invincible gender barriers in interwar England, Clarissa indulges herself in celebrating the warmth of life after her liminal experience with self-destruction. The final party, anticipated during the entire day in June 1923 filled with the interconnected subjective experiences of different characters, culminates the novel's idea of healing, survival, togetherness and collectiveness: Peter, Sally, Clarissa, even the uninvited Septimus and Richard's display of tenderness toward his daughter Elizabeth. Meanwhile, Elaine Showalter states that Mrs. Dalloway is closest of all Woolf's works to Katherine Mansfield's stories in subject matter, style and the use of epiphanies as moments of revelation and collapse (2009: 202). Nevertheless, Clarissa manages to escape from them by projecting her anxieties onto someone else (Septimus), who becomes the scapegoat for her failures, while Mansfield's heroines become the scapegoats for themselves (202).

Virginia Woolf says goodbye with Clarissa and her guests staying in the liminal space of her unfinished, (im)perfect party, narratively in transit: life continues, the same way she re-joins her ongoing gala. In fact, the novel's last lines show the guests gazing at the heroine's return: "It is Clarissa […] For there she was" (Woolf, 1992: 213). This symbolises how she recovers the control of the party: she would be Clarissa, the artist-hostess, not the wife-hostess Mrs. Richard Dalloway. In Woolf's novel, death sequentially disturbs, enlightens and remains in the safe domains of abstract speculations in Clarissa's mind. By contrast, in Mansfield's "The Garden Party", Laura realistically trespasses the threshold of her lush garden after the celebration. That party was the perfect event for the Sheridan family, but the author is interested in its immediate aftermath for her heroine. From her sumptuous home on a hill, Laura reluctantly goes down to the poverty-stricken neighbourhood, previously forbidden for her and her siblings, to visit Scott's widow and his family, in order to bring a basket of party leftovers. This lady-like act of philanthropy concocted by Mrs. Sheridan paradoxically enables the girl's formative face-to-face confrontation with physical death before the tale ends: "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. Never wake him up again. […] 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" (Mansfield, 2002: 349).

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Laura's contemplation of Scott's corpse liberates her artistic self, hitherto limited to her role as a debutant hostess. The present dead body, thus, becomes an artwork that reveals the beautiful peacefulness in eternal rest, just as Mrs. Dalloway mentally removes the ugliness from Septimus's absent corpse to celebrate his victorious mutiny against social normalcy.

However, William Walsh holds that when Laura arrives at Scott's house, she finds the mystery of death "set about with cheapness, ugliness and oily neighbours" (1970: 170), an observation that fails to universalise the act dying, understood as the liminal passage between life and death. In contrast, William Atkinson argues that, in Mansfield's story, death is neutralised to a benign sleep and is reconciled with the Sheridans' party and class distinctions, because if the carter looks content, everyone else, including Laura, should be happy (2006: 55), which cannot explain the general meaning of death either. Laura's ritual passage into adulthood extends past the party and culminates in her knowledge that death is neither social nor cultural, but a universal occurrence in the life of the individual (Sorkin, 1978: 445). Laura's epiphany is to understand that death is the single experience, where class and gender factors cannot interfere. Yet, she remains inarticulate and does not explain this revelation, because she refuses or is incapable of sharing with Laurie what she just experienced when he comes to rescue her from the downtrodden neighbourhood. Referring to Mansfield's biography, Gerri Kimber finds that Laura's brother would be Leslie, Mansfield's own brother dead at war, and that this story is the author's personal response to World War I (2015: 83). Her tale equally articulates her exposure to mortal tuberculosis and her awareness of the proximity of her own death. War infects peace and sickness infects health; similarly, death infects life, but life is simultaneously intoxicated by the bliss from the Sheridans' pleasurable party, so death cannot transform life into a less cherished gift. Conversely, Karen Shaup argues that Laura's aesthetic viewing of the carter's body shows her inability to confront the harsh economic situation of Scott's surviving family, and how she can continue to enjoy her class privileges without the guilt or discomfort felt earlier that day (2015: 222). Nevertheless, Laura sobs in Scott's house and says: "forgive my hat" (Mansfield 2002: 349), which reveals that she is aware of the upper-class vanity encouraged by her mother that seduced her before the party, and that, consequently, she has betrayed the dispossessed.

The ambivalent ending of "The Garden Party" suggests that Laura's behaviour suits Mrs. Sheridan's expectations because patriarchal views prevail, or that her transitory reconciliation with her family foreshadows a future rebellion once she has discovered their snobbery (Murray, 1990: 29). Beyond these classic readings of the hat episode and the resolution of Mansfield's story, its heroine finishes her party while remaining in a liminal time-space of self-reflection, where the celebration is not physical anymore but mental. Laura still wonders about life, at least because readers must unravel the story's ambiguity. Irrespective of the narrative certainty of Laura's sympathy for Scott and her affinity for a handsome worker, readers need to solve a more important riddle: will Laura trespass the

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threshold of female independence from social pressures in the future or she will stay forever within the patriarchal institutions of family and class consciousness? In short, the avenue of interpretations for Mansfield's story is wide open to speculate about Laura's destiny: will she inevitably imitate her own mother, or will she forge her true self and escape from maternal indoctrination? Regarding the act of party-giving, Laura could apply her nascent creative skills as a hostess to traditional domesticity or transfer them to a breakthrough artistic personality, free to criticise class and gender conventionalisms. In any case, the seemingly ordinary party day is Laura's exceptional liminal journey, tinged with her aesthetic exposure to death and with potential growth or transformation of her own self.

3. (IN)CONCLUSION: STORIES WITHOUT ENDINGS

Death is an empty seat in Laura's garden; death is only a shadow in Clarissa's glamorous gala. Some readers may perceive that these protagonists' roles as hostesses are trivial or that their parties are mere trifles, but for both generations of women, party-giving had become a transcendental moment of being or moments of disruption, punctuated by the liminal experience of death as a rite of passage. The young Miss. Sheridan and the mature Mrs. Dalloway are surrounded by a chorus of voices, and they must engage in social interrelations with family and guests, while the parties simultaneously permit each of them to have solitary instances of self-introspection and transient or permanent change. Their daily lives will continue to be ruled by upper-class conventions and, possibly, by submissiveness when performing the socially expected ideal of domestic femininity in public: hosting parties, an activity which paradoxically allows them a sense of female artistic talent and the satisfaction of altruistic actions. Nevertheless, after their respective celebrations, their minds are more restless or enlightened by self-knowledge and by their liminally vicarious experiences at the threshold of death. Both heroines realise that life is less untroubled and pleasant than it used to be, even though neither is free to express discontentment or grief for deceased strangers, because such people are outcasts uninvited from festive events hosted by social elites. Mansfield's "The Garden Party" and Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway propose narratives of physical or telepathic encounters of sympathy and kinship between privileged women enduring gender injustice and other casualties of patriarchal institutions: working classes and soldiers fallen at war. In fact, Laura Sheridan and Clarissa Dalloway discover that social prejudices against outsiders or the proletariat mirror the gender inequalities they themselves suffer even as upper-middle class women, whether in New Zealand or in Great Britain during the early twentieth century. Mansfield wrote in a letter that a young girl like Laura understands "the diversity of life and how we try to fit in everything. Death included" (1989: 250). And so also does Clarissa learn how to incorporate death into life. Both understand that superficiality and transcendence, pain and joy, ugliness and beauty, living and dying coexist in their liminal

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celebrations at home. However, the abrupt closures of "The Garden Party" and Mrs. Dalloway do not allow readers to know whether the transformations of either heroine will go beyond evanescent self-knowledge to defy the status-quo of their contemporary patriarchal institutions. In contrast to the indeterminate potential of Laura and Mrs. Dalloway, their authors did, indeed, take up the challenge. Both Mansfield and Woolf took risks in living and in writing, ignoring the disapproval they incurred, for instance, the former for her sexual experiments and the latter for her determination to live with her friends after her father's death (Smith, 1999: 72).

In "Professions for Women" Woolf wrote: "killing the Angel in the house was part of the occupation of the woman writer" (2008: 142), and this occupation is partly achieved in her novels, as well as in stories from her rival-friend Mansfield. Laura Sheridan and Mrs. Dalloway cannot murder their preordained Victorian social role to act as impeccable hostesses of perfect parties. However, both heroines can explore their modern(ist) inner selves, no longer tied to familiar domesticity, but to experimental mental journeys of self-discovery and insubordination to prevailing rules of etiquette. Ultimately, being a hostess itself becomes a liminal state betwixt and between the stagnation of the social woman and the potentiality of the independent artist and critical thinker. Without regard to their respective ages, countries of residence and social positions, Laura and Clarissa recognise the unfeminine foreignness within their conventional selves and experience feelings of kinship with the unfamiliar ordeals of poverty-stricken neighbours, like the workman Scott, or the suicidal soldier Septimus–two men enduring or fighting in the same twentieth-century war against class hierarchies and the marginalization of dissenters. In short, Laura and Mrs. Dalloway could also join the battle against gender and social injustice, but in any case, they symbolically nourish the same peculiar stream of parallel foreignness and kinship with each other, as Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf shared in their own lives.

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