

«The perfect afternoon slowly ripened». Inherent links between *The Garden-Party* and *Mrs Dalloway*

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ABSTRACT

While the importance of gardens for Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf has been widely acknowledged, no critical study has examined how the interconnections between the two writers and the natural world are reflected in Mansfield's short story "The Garden-Party" (1922) and Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Albeit Woolf claimed she would not read *The Garden-Party and Other Stories*, these works share key analogies, and the drafting of *Mrs Dalloway* overlaps with Mansfield's death in 1923, which deeply affected Woolf. Moving from the web of relations that gardens weave in the authors' lives and reflections on writing, epitomised by Ottoline Morrell's garden parties at Garsington Manor and the fictional gardens of "The Garden-Party" and *Mrs Dalloway*, this essay identifies the 'perfect hostesses' of the two literary works — Mrs Sheridan, her daughter Laura, and Clarissa Dalloway — with Demeter and Persephone, and explores the underlying links between nature, the feminine, and classical culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leonard Woolf — Virginia Woolf's husband — described the relationship between Katherine Mansfield and his wife by noticing the «profound feeling and understanding», as well as the ambiguity that marked it:

A curious friendship, with some deep roots, did spring up between them. When they did not meet, Katherine regarded Virginia with suspicion and hostility and Virginia was irritated [...]. But when

they met, all this as a rule fell away and there was a profound feeling and understanding between them.

(Woolf 1964: 205)

An amateur gardener, he used a horticultural metaphor («with some deep roots», «spring up») to define this «curious friendship», compared to a deep-rooted yet fragile plant. «Katherine» confirmed the profound understanding with «Virginia» in a 1917 letter to her written after a weekend at Asheham, the Woolfs' country house in Sussex at the time: «we have got the same job, Virginia & it is really very curious & thrilling that we should both, quite apart from each other, be after so very nearly the same thing. We are you know; there's no denying it» (Mansfield 1984: 327). Considering the relevance of the natural world in Woolf's and Mansfield's lives and literary production, widely acknowledged by critics (cf., among others, Czarnecki – Rohman 2010; Miao 2018) and recently compared (Wilson 2017; Jakubowicz 2018), it seems reasonable to imply that «the same thing» Mansfield alludes to could be, along with hers and Woolf's commitment to literature, «their common interest in the theme of gardens», as argued by Jakubowicz (2018: 79). Furthermore, Angela Smith (1999: 26) claims that both writers «emphasize the constant unraveling of myths of [...] femininity and masculinity in life, and every kind of writing», and makes reference to two of their best-known fictional works, Mansfield's short story «The Garden-Party» (1922)¹ and Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925): «just as, in «The Garden Party» and *Mrs Dalloway*, death and the party are elements of the same experience for Laura and Clarissa [the main characters of the short story and the novel, respectively], so the fictions and the critical and personal writings [of Mansfield and Woolf] open up a shared experience for the reader».

Gardens have been associated with the feminine since the dawn of civilisation: not by chance, the ancient Greek term for the garden, κήπος, was also used to indicate the *pudenda muliebria* (LSJ: 140), or

¹ I have maintained the original spelling of the title as published in 1922: its modern spelling is «The Garden Party».

the womb, and nature is traditionally represented as a woman or a goddess². “The Garden-Party” and *Mrs Dalloway* epitomise not only the links between women and gardens but also the ones between Mansfield and Woolf as these modernist works present key analogies in terms of style, structure, and themes: both are hinged around a party and cover a single day from start to finish; in both, gardens are a crucial element. The short story and the novel also sound appearance and introspection, youth and maturity in the female protagonists, and the impact of a stranger’s sudden death on them. Such similarity has not gone unnoticed. If McLaughlin (1978) and Smith (1999) have briefly mentioned it, recent studies testify to a growing interest in the topic with regard to the theme of death or the party (Tarrant-Hoskins 2014; Cortés Vieco 2020). However, the role of the natural dimension in the two literary works has never been analysed comparatively.

Admittedly, Woolf declared in a 1922 letter referring to *The Garden-Party and Other Stories*: «I’ve not read K. Mansfield and don’t mean to [...]. But she takes in all the reviewers, and I daresay I’m wrong. [...] People say we writers are jealous» (Woolf 1976: 514-515). Yet Mansfield’s premature death in 1923, of which the current year marks the centenary, coincides with the drafting of *Mrs Dalloway*. Albeit there is no evidence that Woolf eventually read the last collection of stories published in Mansfield’s lifetime, it is «the collection that is most frequently reflected in her own work», as McLaughlin (1984: 370) argues considering precisely “The Garden-Party” and *Mrs Dalloway* a prime example of such resemblance, and Mansfield became «a haunting pres-

² See Romero Allué (2005) for a detailed analysis of κήπος and the idea of gardens as a womb, Wilson (2017) for the personification of nature as a goddess and *anima mundi* in Mansfield’s and Woolf’s fictional works. The recurrence of the vegetal world in both writers’ literary production is evinced by the title of several of their stories, e.g., apart from “The Garden-Party”, Mansfield’s early sketch “In the Botanical Gardens” (1907), “The Aloe”, which was published as *Prelude* (1918) by the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press; Woolf’s *Kew Gardens* (1919) and “In the Orchard” (1923).

ence» (Smith 1999: 1) for Woolf throughout her life — especially during the composition of *Mrs Dalloway*, as her diary entries of the time attest. Moving from the web of relations that gardens weave in Woolf's and Mansfield's lives and creative process, this essay seeks to explore the interconnections between the natural world and the female protagonists of “The Garden-Party” and *Mrs Dalloway* from a biographical, symbolical, and mythical perspective, and to suggest that the two writers were indeed, even if «quite apart from each other», «after the same thing».

2. REAL AND FICTIONAL ‘GARDEN PARTIES’

Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf met at the beginning of 1917, and their early relationship revolved around a garden in particular, that is, Lady Ottoline Morrell's garden at Garsington Manor, the villa in Oxfordshire that Ottoline and her husband Philip Morrell turned into a retreat for conscientious objectors during the First World War. The estate hosted what can be defined ‘garden parties’, which were attended by the Bloomsbury Group (e.g., Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, Maynard Keynes, and the very Woolfs), the artists and writers patronised by Ottoline Morrell, and high society: according to the *OED*, a garden party is «a social event, often a large formal gathering, held in a garden» and usually organised by upper-class women like the aristocratic Lady Ottoline, even though the gatherings she held at Garsington were rather relaxed. Albeit Virginia Woolf visited the manor only in November 1917, when she had already met Mansfield, Leonard Woolf wrongly but significantly³ traced their first encounter to one of these occasions:

³ The incongruity has been noted also by Bell (1987: 37): «the Woolfs' first visit to Garsington was in November 1917. They [KM and her future husband John Middleton Murry] are first mentioned in Leonard's *Diary* on 12 January 1917».

The zenith of a Garsington week-end in late spring and early summer was Sunday afternoon; then, if the sun shone, a great convocation of young and old, of brilliant (and not so brilliant), of distinguished (and not so distinguished) men thronged the garden. [...] The only distinguished women whom I ever saw at Garsington were Margot [Asquith], Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia [...]. It was in Garsington too that we first came across Katherine Mansfield and Middleton Murry.

(Woolf 1964: 202-203)

In the summer of 1917 Mansfield praised Garsington in numerous letters to Ottoline Morrell. On 30 July she wrote: «when I think of it my inward eye is a succession of flashes! I shall never forget it, *never, never*». In the immediately preceding sentences, she mentions having seen «Virginia» in London the night before, and «Mrs Galloway» at Garsington: «that dreadful Mrs Galloway keeps floating into my minds [*sic*] eye» (Mansfield 1984: 319, emphasis in original). As the editors of the complete edition of Mansfield's letters have clarified, «the Galloways were a couple who lived for some time in one of the farm cottages» at the manor since, being conscientious objectors, they were «taken on as farm hands» (p. 320). Interestingly enough, in a letter to Morrell dated 15 August, Mansfield makes further reference to Mrs Galloway, envisioning her as the character of a possible story⁴: «your glimpse of the garden — all flying green and gold made me wonder again *who* is going to write about that flower garden», which the writer imagined as a hinge around which may revolve «several *pairs* of people, their conversation their slow pacing [...] as the flowers 'come in' [...] so much a 'flower of the mind' that he who looks at it is tempted for a moment to stoop & touch», and

⁴ The letter of 30 July is not included in the first edition of Mansfield's letters, ed. by Middleton Murray and published in 1928, and Mrs Galloway's name was omitted from the letter of 15 August. As a matter of fact, Murray «deleted names, and frequently references to people who were still alive; occasionally he omitted what he regarded as lapses of taste» (Mansfield 1984: xxii).

there must be a slight touch of enchantment — some of them seeming so extraordinarily ‘odd’ and separate from the flowers, but others quite related [...]. A kind of, musically speaking, conversation *set* to flowers. [...] I see the Pig of the Party — Mrs. Galloway — rooting in her little dark mind. [...] But it’s full of possibilities. I must have a fling at it as soon as I have time.

(p. 325, emphasis in original)

Allegedly, Mansfield wrote a similar but lost letter to Virginia Woolf, which can be inferred by Woolf’s account of it to Morrell⁵. Tarrant-Hoskins (2014: 40) has hinted at the manifest similarity between Mrs Galloway, «the Pig of the Party» of Mansfield’s idea for a story, and Mrs Dalloway, the protagonist of Woolf’s eponymous novel written seven years later, who is the hostess of a party. This is probably a coincidence as there are no elements to suggest that Woolf was aware of Mrs Galloway’s existence, and Mr and Mrs Dalloway had already appeared in her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, published in 1915, nonetheless it is a striking fluke if we consider that both writers conceived, «apart from each other», a character that appears almost identical not only in name but also in the ambiguous way she is introduced: Mrs Galloway «rooting in her little dark mind» recalls Mrs Dalloway’s apparently shallow mind/soul, actually pervaded by dark thoughts and compared to a «leaf-encumbered forest, [...] never to be content quite, [...] as if indeed there were a monster *grubbing at the roots*» (Woolf 1996: 15, emphasis added)⁶.

Moreover, in the letter to Woolf about «the same thing», dated 23 August 1917, Mansfield employs the same words of the above-quoted letter to Morrell concerning Garsington to convey her impression of Woolf’s country house, Asheham, forever stuck in her «inward eye»:

⁵ «Katherine Mansfield describes your garden, the rose leaves drying in the sun, [...] people wandering up and down in the moonlight. It calls out her romantic side» (Woolf 1976: 174).

⁶ All references from “The Garden-Party” and *Mrs Dalloway* will henceforth be indicated with the initials of the two literary works, *TGP* and *MD*, followed by page numbers.

«It is very wonderful and I feel that it will flash upon one corner of my inward eye for ever» (Mansfield 1984: 327). A few sentences below, Mansfield praises the draft of Woolf's story *Kew Gardens*, which is ultimately centred upon a flowerbed and describes some couples strolling along it, closely recalling Mansfield's ideas for a story inspired by Garsington. Mansfield's biographer Antony Alpers goes as far as to claim that her description of Garsington in the lost letter to Woolf, possibly on the same tones as that to Morrell, prompted Woolf to write *Kew Gardens*. Smith (1999: 137), on the other hand, dismisses this possibility but views it as further evidence of the affinity between the two writers at a time when gardens were the focus of their personal and literary interests, shared, as Jakubovicz (2018) has noted, by Ottoline Morrell. In May 1919 Mansfield invited both women to her house party, but none of them could attend it. «I wanted the private satisfaction of looking at the party *with you*», wrote Mansfield to Woolf, and to Morrell that she longed «to see Garsington — to be with you there and walk in the garden there [...]. My 'house party' is very miserable» (Mansfield 1984: 320-321, emphasis in original)⁷. Mansfield's and Woolf's common interest in gardens and parties is reflected in “The Garden-Party” and *Mrs Dalloway*, written in October 1921 and from 1922 to 1924 respectively, and in the fictional parties of the two literary works there can be found parallels, though perhaps unconscious on Mansfield's part⁸, with the garden parties held by Morrell and with Mansfield's above-quoted depiction of Garsington.

⁷ Smith (2013) claims that Mansfield felt an outsider to the house parties at Garsington as well, due to her colonial origins, class difference, and mistrust for the Bloomsbury Group, identifying herself with T.S. Eliot's Prufrock. However, Garsington's garden may be seen as a literal and metaphorical meeting point with both Woolf and Morrell, though not untainted: on Mansfield's ambivalence towards English gardens compared to the New Zealand ones, see Miao (2018).

⁸ Morrell was actually the first of Mansfield's acquaintances to praise *The Garden-Party and Other Stories* after its publication: «It's a joy to know that *The Garden Party* has given you pleasure [...] I have not heard from anyone whom I know personally since the book appeared. I didn't expect to hear and yet my 'subconscious

Criticism on Mansfield's fictional works is unanimous in considering "The Garden-Party" a New Zealand story based on her girlhood in a suburb of Wellington. An insightful observation by Todd Martin, however, sheds light on the similarities between the garden party of the Sheridans — the family that organises the event in the eponymous short story, centred on Mrs Sheridan's daughters Laura, Meg, and Jose — and Mansfield's earlier depictions of the Garsington garden, as well as on her enthusiasm for it: according to Martin (2017: 8), it is «likely that it was a reminder of the gardens she left behind [...] in Wellington».

"The Garden-Party" is indeed set in a private garden, like both Mansfield's paradise lost and Garsington (and unlike Woolf's *Kew Gardens*), in early summer: «they could not have had a more perfect day for a garden party if they had ordered it. Only the blue was veiled with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer» (*TGP*: 38). The garden party of the Sheridan women occurs in a «perfect afternoon»: «wherever you looked there were couples strolling, bending to the flowers, greeting, moving on over the lawn [...] like bright birds that had alighted in the Sheridans' garden for this one afternoon» (p. 48). Mansfield's decision to set the party in the garden is significant. Magalaner (1971) attributes it to the symbolism of the natural dimension, characterised by its ephemerality but also by the sempiternal and paradoxical cycle of life, death, and rebirth, mirroring, as we shall see, the sudden death of the carter and Laura's development throughout the short story. At the same time, it is worth noting that, according to Leonard Woolf, the zenith of a Garsington weekend was Sunday afternoon in late spring or early summer, and that the «couples strolling» in Mansfield's fictional garden evoke her view of the Garsington one, quoted above, as «green and gold», with «several *pairs* of people» slowly pacing and bending to touch the flowers. In her own letter to Morrell, moreover,

mind' has been intensely interested in whether there are any letters or not!» (Mansfield 1996: 88).

Woolf (1976: 174) recalls Mansfield's description of «people wandering up and down in the moonlight» in the garden of the manor⁹.

Mrs Dalloway originated as the short story "Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street", but in 1922 Woolf observed in her diary, with a horticultural image, that it «branched into a book» (1978: 207). Woolf's beloved London remains its core, while "The Garden-Party" is set in the periphery of a town and in part of the British Empire, reflecting Mansfield's colonial origins. What is more, Mrs Dalloway's evening party takes place at her London house and is more formal than the garden party of the Sheridans, but it is also held in early summer: Mrs Dalloway «loved life; London; this moment of June. For it was the middle of June» (*MD*: 6), of the year 1923. The novel includes Regent's Park, the backdrop of the shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith's hallucinations, and Mrs Dalloway's private garden, which is eulogised by a guest of her party, Mrs Hilbery:

Did they know, she asked, that they were surrounded by an enchanted garden? Lights and trees and wonderful gleaming lakes and the sky. Just a few fairy lamps, Clarissa Dalloway had said, in the back garden! But she was a magician! It was a park...

(pp. 209-210)

Considering that in Mansfield's 1917 ideas for a piece prompted by Garsington «there must be a slight touch of enchantment», it seems safe to assume that both writers held a similar view on the magical quality of gardens, linked with women. In fact, in "The Garden-Party" «the green bushes [of the roses] bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels» (*TGP*: 38), and «the fairylike Laura» (Magalaner 1971: 118) sees herself in the mirror as «a charming girl [...] in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies» (*TGP*: 47).

⁹ Although it did not feature a garden party yet but was centred on the song *This Life is Weary*, sung by the Sheridan sisters, the earliest draft of the short story was entitled "By Moonlight" (Magalaner 1971: 119).

A diary entry dated June 1923, written after a weekend at Garsington, suggests that Woolf consciously, and partly, modelled Mrs Dalloway on Ottoline Morrell and her social circle: «I am a great deal interested in my book suddenly. I want to bring in the despicableness of people like Ott. I want to give the slipperiness of the soul» such as that of Mrs Asquith, whom Woolf saw in the garden, «always being kind in order to say to herself at night, then Ottoline invites the poor little embroideress to her party and so round off her own picture of herself» (Woolf 1978: 244-245).

Such a portrayal of the hostess differs from Mrs Hilbery's praise of Clarissa, but the two views mark Woolf's ambivalent attitude towards Mrs Dalloway. The same applies to her attitude towards Katherine Mansfield, who died of tuberculosis at thirty-four in January 1923, during the writing process of *Mrs Dalloway*, originally entitled *The Hours*. Woolf recorded her feelings about the fellow writer in the diary, in which she imagines Mansfield wearing a wreath, a classical symbol of glory (let us think of the laurel wreath given to athletes and poets in ancient Greece) and immortality, visually representing the cycle of life:

How far am I obeying her “do not quite forget Katherine” which I read in one of her old letters? [...] Katherine's my rival no longer. More generously I felt: But though I can do this better than she could, where is she, who could do what I can't! Then, as usual with me, visual impressions kept coming and coming before me — always of Katherine putting on a white wreath, & leaving us, called away; made dignified, chosen [...]. Yet I still feel, somehow that friendship persists. Still there are things about writing I think of & want to tell Katherine [...]. Yet I certainly expected that we should meet again next summer, & start afresh. And I was jealous of her writing — the only writing I have ever been jealous of [...] I shall think of her at intervals all through life. Probably we had something in common which I shall never find in anyone else.

(pp. 225-226)

These words echo Mansfield's last letter to Woolf, written from France in 1920: «There are a thousand things I'd [sic] like to discuss [...] You are the only woman with whom I long to talk *work*. There will never be another. But leagues divide us», both literally and metaphorically as the two women grew apart in the ensuing years. The rest of the letter, concluded with «farewell dear friend. (May I call you that)», discloses their «friendship, with some deep roots» (Woolf 1964: 205), and the relevance of gardens in it: «I have taken this little house until the end of 1922. Perhaps you will come here before then. It is in the country & there is a garden [...]. Oh, how beautiful Life is, Virginia, it is marvellously beautiful» (Mansfield 1996: 154).

On 19 June 1923, close to the temporal setting of *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf (1978: 247-248) mused on «what K.M. said about her writing in *The Dove's Nest* [Mansfield's posthumous collection of stories] [...] about feeling things deeply. [...] Am I writing *The Hours* from deep emotion?». She then hints at the «mad parts» concerning Septimus Warren Smith, who in Regent's Park feels «the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body» (MD: 26) and hears the sparrows singing in Greek before the apparition of his friend Evans, a war victim. The allusions to the Great War scattered throughout *Mrs Dalloway* could be a late reply to Mansfield's critique of Woolf's second novel *Night and Day* (1919), deemed of ignoring its impact. By contrast *Jacob's Room*, published in October 1922¹⁰, and *Mrs Dalloway*, which Woolf started precisely in that timespan, are imbued with the theme of the war, albeit obliquely. *Jacob's Room* ends with the protagonist's empty room symbolising his death in the First World War, while Septimus survives the war but kills himself because of its unfathomed

¹⁰ Woolf's reluctance to read *The Garden-Party and Other Stories* could have been motivated by the fear that it might outshine her latest experimental novel: «K.M. bursts upon the world in glory next week; I have to hold over *Jacob's Room* till October; & I somehow fear that by that time it will appear to me sterile acrobatics» (Woolf 1978: 161). On the possible impact of Mansfield's negative review of *Night and Day* on *Mrs Dalloway*, and the theme of death and the war in the latter novel and in «The Garden-Party», see Tarrant-Hoskins (2014: 50-60).

trauma¹¹, and Mrs Dalloway, who learns of his suicide at her party («in the middle of my party, here's death», *MD*: 201), «gives herself to others [...] to offer consolation after the human failure of war» (Cortés Vieco 2020: 104).

In “The Garden-Party” there is no reference to the war, but a carter dies in an accident while the Sheridan women are planning the party:

“Mother, a man's been killed,” began Laura.

“Not in the garden?” interrupted her mother.

“No, no!”

(*TGP*: 46, emphasis in original)

The event then takes place despite Laura's objection that they «can't possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate» (45). Christine Darron relates this violent death to Mansfield's brother, killed in 1915 by a grenade, and suggests that Mansfield portrayed the carter's corpse, seen by Laura when she is sent to bring the leftovers to the widow, as «fast asleep», «peaceful» (51), «in contrast to the deadly energy of war in which people are blown to bits» (Darrohn 1998: 520).

Besides the parties and Laura's sublimated view of the carter, the presence of nature in “The Garden-Party” and *Mrs Dalloway* could be a further reaction to the war and its aftermath, poignantly expressed in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), whose first English edition was published in 1923 by the Hogarth Press (the printing press set out by Virginia and Leonard Woolf in 1917) and typeset by Virginia herself. Both Mansfield and Woolf reacted to the ‘waste land’, a «stony rubbish» (I, 20): where nothing grows, «by cultivating imaginary gardens in sheltered yet public spaces, in full, conscious awareness of the brutal [...] culture bombarding European civilization's walls» (Froula 2018: 62). Furthermore, since the term κήπος designates both the garden and

¹¹ Warren, formed by the word ‘war’, was added to Septimus's name late in the draft of the novel, possibly after Mansfield's death. In Oct. 1922 Woolf (1978: 207) wondered in the diary: «Septimus Smith? — is that a good name?».

the feminine, the natural environments in “The Garden-Party” and *Mrs Dalloway*, as much as Garsington, are not only opposed to the war and post-war society but also intertwined with their female owners.

3. MODERN(IST) EMBODIMENTS OF DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

“The Garden-Party” and *Mrs Dalloway* begin *in medias res* with an immediate reference to the natural dimension. «And after all the weather was ideal», we read in the opening paragraph of the short story; «the gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns», and the roses seem to understand they «are the only flowers that impress people at garden parties [...] Hundreds had come out in a single night». The next sentence — «breakfast was not yet over before the men came to put up the marquee» — is followed by a dialogue between Mrs Sheridan and her daughters: «“Where do you want the marquee put, mother?” “My dear child [...] I’m determined to leave everything to you children this year [...]. You’ll have to go, Laura, you are the artistic one» (*TGP*: 38). This order of appearance seems structured upon a climax from the garden to the Sheridan women, with the gardener and the workmen mediating between them and the natural world. *Mrs Dalloway*, conversely, opens with its heroine, who is directly linked with flowers from the very beginning: «Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her [...] Rumpelmayer’s men were coming» (*MD*: 5). Nevertheless, here too we find an upper-class woman, the flowers and the men contributing to the party preparations (Rumpelmayer’s was a catering firm).

The novel also starts in early morning: «and then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning — fresh as if issued to children on a beach» (*MD*: 5). Likewise, Laura Sheridan thinks: «and what a beautiful morning! But she mustn’t mention the morning. She must be business-like. The marquee» (*TGP*: 39). Indeed, if Mrs Dalloway embodies «the perfect hostess» (*MD*: 9), as her former suitor Peter Walsh called her when she was eighteen, and organises the party without involving her daughter Elizabeth, Mrs Sheridan delegates the task to Laura (Cortés Vieco

2020). Yet Laura soon discovers that her mother, like Mrs Dalloway, ordered the flowers for the party: «nothing but lilies — canna lilies, big pink flowers, wide open, radiant, almost frighteningly alive [...] they were in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast» (*TGP*: 41). Thus, «Mansfield plays on the boundaries between human and non-human in delineating reciprocal relations» (Wilson 2017: 22), i.e., the anthropomorphism of the canna lilies and the other way round, Laura's fusion with the flowers.

Daniel Weiss has briefly interpreted “The Garden-Party” in the light of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, as Laura's initiation journey from her sheltered home to the carter's cottage «at the very bottom of a steep rise that led up to the house» (*TGP*: 45): the two places would replicate «the garden of Proserpina and the mouth of Pluto's underworld. The garden, especially with a party going, is all life [...] the cottages are all death» (Weiss 1958-1959: 363). Mrs Sheridan is thus likened to Demeter, concerned about her daughter's descent into the reign of death, and Laura to Proserpina, the Latin name of Persephone or Kore in Greek mythology¹². The Greek term κόρη, ‘girl’, ‘maiden’, ‘daughter’, and ‘nymph’, is linked with its male counterpart κόρος, meaning ‘boy (even before birth)’, ‘son’, but also ‘shoot, sprout of a tree’ (*LSJ*; Romero Allué 2007: 71); thus the concepts of femininity, youth and generation are related with the vegetal dimension, as in κῆπος. Moving from the assumption that κόρη is the feminine form of κόρος, Kerényi has conjectured that, in an ancient stage of the myth, Kore could have been a corn plant and Demeter a «Corn Mother» (Jung — Kerényi 1951: 162). Accordingly, Laura may be read as a plant in a more generic sense, a canna lily in this case, and as a κόρη in all its possible meanings. As far as the association with Kore is concerned, it is worth mentioning that Ovid describes the *virgo* Proserpina picking lilies — traditional symbols of purity and innocence — before the rape: «*Proserpina [...] aut uiolas aut candida lilia carpit*» (*Met.* V, 391-392).

¹² The best-known Greek and Latin versions of the myth are narrated in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* and in the fifth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, respectively.

The name Laura further links the young Sheridan with vegetation as it comes from *Laurus*, ‘laurel’, a female noun like most plant names in Latin. Mansfield’s choice of name is probably not coincidental, given the similarity between the laurel and the karaka trees¹³ loved by Laura — «they were so lovely, with their broad, gleaming leaves [...]. Must they be hidden by a marquee?» (*TGP*: 39). In classical culture, the laurel is sacred to Apollo: according to the myth of Apollo and Daphne, the nymph was turned into a laurel whilst escaping from the god of poetry, music, and the arts. As a matter of fact, Laura is defined by her mother «the artistic one», and for Weiss (1958-1959: 362) this is precisely the reason why she «qualifies in her novitiate», due to her overall sensibility. Since the name Daphne is the Greek equivalent of Laura (δάφνη means ‘laurel’), moreover, Laura Sheridan could be a κόρη also in the sense of ‘nymph’. Both Daphne and Persephone experience a change of state caused by a male figure, Daphne’s metamorphosis to escape from Apollo and Kore’s abduction by Hades into his underworld. Similarly, Laura at first «only wanted to get out» from the carter’s cottage, but «she walked straight through into the bedroom, where the dead man was lying», and this sight provokes an inner change in her: «what did garden parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things» (*TGP*: 50).

If Laura is comparable to Persephone and her mother to Demeter, Clarissa Dalloway potentially embodies both figures. Woolf’s familiarity with Greek culture is attested by her essay “On Not Knowing Greek” (1925), published in the same year as *Mrs Dalloway*; in it, she states that, despite our impossibility of knowing the exact sounds and meanings of ancient Greek language, «the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there» (Woolf 1984: 27). Several studies

¹³ «The karaka-tree much resembles the laurel in its growth and foliage» (Wakefield 1845: 233, in ‘karaka’, *OED*); «‘karaka’ is a Maori name for a native tree with leaves rather like those of the English laurel» (Mansfield 1997: 156). Magalaner (1971: 112) argues that «it is no accident [...] that Laura’s own name has associations with a growing plant» but does not elaborate on its etymology.

have identified Mrs Dalloway with Demeter (Tyler 2005; Romero Al-lué 2007; 2008) and her daughter with Persephone, while Smith (2011) read Clarissa as Artemis and Persephone, and *Mrs Dalloway* as a feminist revision of the *Hymn to Demeter*. On the wake of these considerations, I believe that Clarissa Dalloway's young self could be identified with Kore, and her present fifty-two-year-old self with both Kore and Demeter¹⁴. In the novel past and present coexist from the very first page. Mrs Dalloway recalls her youth at Bourton, in the countryside, and, besides her initial connection with flowers, her young version too is presented in communion with nature:

How fresh [...] the air was in the early morning; [...] yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?"

(MD: 5)

On the one hand, Clarissa's immersion in the natural surroundings evokes Kore before the rape¹⁵. On the other hand, the feeling «that something awful was about to happen» may be interpreted as an omen of Kore's abduction, which symbolises marriage, likened to death: «lost maidenhood and the crossing of the borders of Hades are allegorical equivalents» and Persephone, like Clarissa, is «standing unsubdued on

¹⁴ Similarly, Wilson (2017) reads Mrs Ramsay from *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as Demeter, Persephone, and Rhea. If Mrs Dalloway anticipates her, the painter Lily Briscoe (the other female protagonist of *To the Lighthouse*) may be associated to the artistic 'lily' Laura Sheridan.

¹⁵ In the *Hymn*, Kore was «plucking flowers in the lush meadow — roses, [...] irises and hyacinth and the narcissus, which Earth grew as a snare for the flower-faced maiden» (Foley 1994: 2). Both young Clarissa and Laura can be regarded as 'flower-faced maidens', so is Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth, who is compared to «a hyacinth [...] with buds just tinted» (MD: 135), and to a lily (212).

the pinnacle of life and there meeting her fate [...] death in fulfilment and dominion in death» (Jung – Kerényi 1951: 152).

In the above-quoted passage, Clarissa's thoughts are interrupted by Peter Walsh, and later in the novel Mrs Dalloway recalls how he also interrupted her kiss with Sally Seton, once her intimate friend: «the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it; Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips [...] — when old Joseph and Peter faced them. “Star-gazing?” said Peter» (*MD*: 40). Smith (2011) relates such interruption to Kore's abduction with reference to Sally, who was picking a flower before Peter's arrival.

The intrusion of a man in this private moment also seems to anticipate Clarissa's marriage with Richard Dalloway, her symbolic death: Mrs Dalloway «had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; [...] not even Clarissa any more [*sic*] [...] Mrs. Richard Dalloway» (13). At the same time, she holds a «dominion in death» by means of her interior monologues and her separate bedroom, where she retires «like a nun» (34; cf. Tyler 2005). Moreover, Mrs Dalloway gives her party on the same day as the queen of England (Smith 2011: 165)¹⁶, thereby gaining a prominent authority. Similarly, Persephone is both «eternal virgin» and «wife to Hades» (Foley 1994: 110), *kore* and queen of the underworld.

The very name Clarissa implicitly refers to both virginity and the natural dimension by alluding to «the nuns “Clarissas”, the third order of Saint Francis and, thus, to Franciscan respect for the [...] vegetal world»; yet Clarissa Dalloway seems to be a pagan vegetation goddess: in a dream in Regent's Park, Peter Walsh sees her as a Demeter figure, «with cornucopias full of fruit» (Romero Allué 2008: 208, 210). Parallely, for Tyler (2005: 62) the meaning 'bright', from the Latin *clarus*, also likens the name Clarissa to Demeter, whose epithet in the *Homeric Hymn* is 'light-bearer': Mrs Dalloway's aim is «to kindle and illuminate» (*MD*: 7), and Demeter is often associated with light, for the torch

¹⁶ «It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace [...] she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party» (*MD*: 7).

she carried during the search of her daughter, and vegetation. It is therefore emblematic that the back garden of the perfect hostess, the magician, a mother and a *virgo* at the same time, is decorated with «fairy lamps» (p. 209). Considering that Sally and Peter hear Mrs Hilbery mention it towards the end of the novel, Mrs Dalloway's enchanted garden could also represent the ultimate link between past and present: «as the night grew later, as people went, one found old friends [...] and the loveliest views. Did they know, she asked, that they were surrounded by an enchanted garden?» (*ibidem*). In fact, «Mrs Hilbery's tribute is of another time, [...] more suited to Clarissa's childhood country home than the Dalloways' walled city garden» (Penner 2011: 80). Moreover, the other meaning of *clarus*, 'famous', may be an indirect allusion to Clarissa's sociability, to «her gift» of bringing people together at her parties; «it was an offering; to combine, to create» (*MD*: 135). In view of this creative act, numerous critics have compared Mrs Dalloway to an artist (cf. Cortés Vieco 2020: 101), not dissimilar from the artistic Laura Sheridan, who can be seen as her younger and more inexperienced version. Thus, Clarissa Dalloway embodies maidenhood (preserved even after marriage) and maturity, life and death, Kore and Demeter, Laura and Mrs Sheridan.

The garden party of the Sheridans is summarised by a vegetal metaphor that associates it to the unfurling and closing of a flower: «the perfect afternoon slowly ripened, slowly faded, slowly its petals closed» (*TGP*: 48). Given the relevance of nature in the two literary works under analysis and their similar structure, this metaphor epitomises both “The Garden-Party” and *Mrs Dalloway*, which end in late afternoon and at night, respectively. As the day fades, Laura and Clarissa return to life after a direct or indirect confrontation with death, evoking Kore's return from Hades. Clarissa's awakening occurs by means of Septimus's suicide: «She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself [...] Odd, incredible; she had never been so happy. Nothing could be slow enough; nothing last too long [...] as the day sank» (*MD*: 201, 203). When Laura emerges from the carter's cottage, she confronts her older

brother Laurie but is unable «to communicate her new knowledge» (Weiss 1958-1959: 364). “The Garden-Party” is open-ended:

Laurie put his arm round her shoulder. “Don’t cry [...] Was it awful?”

“No,” sobbed Laura. “It was simply marvellous. But, Laurie — [...] Isn’t life?” she stammered, “isn’t life —” But what life was she couldn’t explain. No matter. He quite understood.

“Isn’t it, darling?” said Laurie.

(TGP: 51)

The conclusion of *Mrs Dalloway*, expressed by Peter Walsh’s thoughts, seems the answer to Laura’s open question («isn’t life —»), as if Virginia Woolf were replying to the late Katherine Mansfield, both writers, consciously and unconsciously, «after so very nearly the same thing»:

What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? [...] What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?

It is Clarissa, he said.

For there she was.

(MD: 213)

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