Between

The spaces of the feminine in family sagas

Claudia Cao

Abstract

This contribution illustrates the process of reconfiguration of female roles within domestic spaces and the consequent questioning of the traditional family institution that took place between the 1880s and the 1930s. To this end, it examines the gradual emancipation of female characters in three family sagas set in that period – John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-1921), Rebecca West's Aubrey trilogy (1956-1985), and the TV series *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) – and it respectively identifies three chronotopes: the Robin Hill country house, the music room, the car. These spaces symbolise the overcoming of physical and metaphorical barriers and express the protagonists' liberation from the limited space of the house as they gain access to the public sphere.

Keywords

Family saga; Domestic spaces; The Forsyte Saga; Aubrey Trilogy; Downton Abbey

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> and I thought of […] the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in.
>
> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Introduction

Every family saga, being multigenerational, relies on chronology as the main structural principle[2]. However, the relationship between domestic and public spaces provides another important framework. In fact, the binary tensions between 'inside' and 'outside' in this genre play a key role by reflecting the dialectic between family norm and self-determination, centripetal and centrifugal forces, masculine and feminine, domination and freedom[3].

Even if domestic spaces have always constituted an important backdrop for the representation of female roles, in the nineteenth century the new centrality of the family and privacy began to exacerbate the dichotomy between public and private life in relation to the male and female spheres

[1] This contribution is conceived in continuity with my essays "Revising the family novel: a cross-reading of Rebecca West's Aubrey trilogy and Virginia Woolf's *The Years*", and "Dalla *Saga dei Forsyte* a *Downton Abbey*: la saga familiare come specchio di un'epoca".

[2] See Calabrese 2003: 638; Polacco 2004: 96; 111; Tobin 1978: 1-15; Welge 2015: 2-5; Abignente 2021: 34.

[3] See Ru 1992: 79-81; Polacco 2004: 114; Welge 2020: 50.

of action[4].

Between the 1880s and the 1930s, however, the process of redefining female roles within domestic spaces accelerated, leading to women's gradual emancipation from them through increased access to the public sphere. The family sagas examined here – John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-1921), Rebecca West's Aubrey trilogy (1956-1985), and the TV series *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) – immortalise two generations of women who experienced this process of questioning the traditional family institution and the limits it entails.

Even if the family saga is commonly considered a conservative genre – since it is characterised by its focus on the motifs of tradition and heritage –the choice to tell stories of female emancipation through this genre should not be surprising[5].

This essay investigates the contradictory and paradoxical features of these sagas[6]. On the one hand they celebrate the traditional family, its norms and values, and on the other they question it and highlight its anachronisms; they underline the rigidity of the border between the house and the outside world as well as the inflexibility of internal hierarchies, but they also record a gradual shift towards more inclusive forms of community; they highlight the deterministic value of family belonging, capable of binding the fate of individuals to the clan's will or fate[7], and yet conversely illustrate the inevitability of external forces that transcend any family resistance.

The family saga label adopted thus far is meant in the sense of an «inter-artistic and intermediate genre» (Baldini 2020: 265)[8] which includes both novels and television products set in the decades in question[9]. The genre performs a metaphorical and metonymic function in relation to the historical and cultural context of the events depicted[10]: the paths of Irene Forsyte in *The Forsyte Saga*, of Clare Aubrey and her daughters in the Aubrey trilogy, and

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[4] See Cohen 1998: 1-2; Foster 2002: 1-6; 98-99; Mazei – Briganti 2002: 839.

[5] See Thody 1969: 88; Ru 1992: 116; Polacco 2004: 124; Abignente 2021: 39.

[6] See Mecozzi 2020: 121-122; Bertoni 2021: 105-120.

[7] Scarfone 2020: 7-8.

[8] All translations from Italian texts are mine.

[9] In particular, this essay considers an adaptation – *The Forsyte Saga*, written by Kate Brooke and Phil Woods and aired between 2002 and 2003 on ITV – and an original TV series – Julian Fellowes' *Downton Abbey* – that aired on the same channel between 2010 and 2015.

[10] See Ru 1992: 169 *et passim*; Polacco 2004: 121.

of Edith and Mary Crawley in *Downton Abbey* will therefore be read within a network of references that is generated first and foremost from the female characters' role in redefining the traditional family institution and their position between the public and private spheres. The stories of these women also represent, in microcosm, a process of emancipation that spanned two generations of women and different social classes: the Aubrey lower middle class, the Forsyte upper middle class, the Crawley aristocratic class.

No investigation of the internal/external spaces in which this phenomenon takes place would be complete without mentioning the contributions of Virginia Woolf, whose essays explore the material and metaphorical meanings of rooms while analysing the dialectic between public and private life. Even if *A Room of One's Own* (1929) celebrates the centrality of the room in relation to artistic production in a material sense, it is also true that the room of one's own metaphorises the removal from family duties[11] and from economic dependence on fathers and husbands[12], the main obstacles to women's artistic and professional achievement and to their access to the public sphere. The dialectic between *inside* and *outside* also assumes an important role in the second of Woolf's essays, *Three Guineas* (1938), as evidenced by her consideration of other possible titles, «'The Open Door' or 'Opening the Door'»[13], which are found in her *Diaries*. Whereas *A Room of One's Own* depicts an impasse between "being locked out" and "being locked in"[14], in *Three Guineas* she prefigures a «society of outsiders» (Woolf 2019: 235 *et passim*) based on values of horizontality and self-determination.

Another spatial and conceptual coordinate suggested by Virginia Woolf and adopted in this study as a point of departure is the matrix image of the «rocky vault» (Woolf 2019: 269), the crypt, to which Creon destined the still-living Antigone, and in which Woolf finds the origin of that old cry that still resounds in fathers' and husbands' words of possession and dominion. It is not difficult to recognise the reflections of Sophocles' images in these family sagas, in which the recurrent presence of the oppression and darkness of Victorian homes generates a dense network of cross-references

[11] See Woolf 2019: 43.

[12] See Woolf 2019: 20.

[13] Bell – McNeil 1982: 6. See also Foster 2002: 98.

[14] See Woolf 2019: 21: «and I thought of […] the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in».

between the concepts of imprisonment, exclusion, and female isolation suggested by Woolf's essays[15].

This contribution's analysis of the texts will follow the path traced by Irene, the female protagonist of Galsworthy's saga – here considered as an archetype of the genre[16] – in order to observe her legacy and the overcoming of her condition of domestic oppression in the contemporary family saga through Rebecca West's trilogy and the TV series *Downton Abbey*[17]. For each work, this essay identifies a chronotope – the Robin Hill country house, the music room, the car – as a space that symbolises the gradual overcoming of physical and metaphorical barriers. At the end of this process, the characters' domestic and familial lives will be redefined together with the role of the three female protagonists Irene Forsyte, Rose Aubrey, and Edith Crawley.

The path of outward growth is divided into three stages. First, the house, which initially appears to be a protective space for women – a space exclusively reserved to them in opposition to the male public sphere – gradually becomes a contact zone violated by the irruption of the outside world or of History. In the second stage, the relationship of these female characters with the domestic space changes: their initial immobility and limitations give way to an intensification of the centrifugal forces that upset and undermine the family system from within.

These first two phases lead to the rejection of the family norm – at the cost of isolation, exclusion from the family and social system, that "being locked out" to which Woolf referred –, but the third stage represents a moment of synthesis: it shows the creation of a new domestic reality through a marriage based on reciprocal choice and on mutual compatibility[18]. In the end, the first two stages are revealed as necessary prerequisites to achieve this new balance between conservation and self-determination, which allows the protagonists to overcome the initial impasse between exclusion and confinement.

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[15] See Saunders 2014: 226: «nineteenth-century interiors were akin to cases and coffins; they fitted snugly and securely round the person, protecting them, in their similarity, from the outside world». See also Fuss 2004: 4 and Benjamin 1999: 220-221.

[16] See Ru 1992.

[17] *The Years* (1937) by Virginia Woolf is a pivotal work for this analysis. See also Foster 2002, on which is partially based the methodological approach of the present essay.

[18] See Stone 1983: 301-302.

Crypts

In the case of *The Forsyte Saga* the association between the home and the crypt is suggested since Galsworthy's preface to the French edition of the first volume[19]. Understanding Irene's domestic oppression in *The Man of Property* therefore means to recognise her positioning within a set of narratological and metaphorical frames.

In *The Forsyte Saga*, as well as in *Downton Abbey*, the dialectic between *inside* and *outside*, *us* and *them* primarily refers to the defence of the clan from external threats which undermine the unity of the family and the Forsytes' class belonging, be they menaces of an economic, political, or social nature[20]. Property, competition, and the ability to safeguard their heritage – both in the material sense and in the figurative one of continuity – are therefore the main values around which turn Soames Forsyte's life and choices.

From the first chapter of the trilogy, the figure of Irene is inscribed within the borders of the London map within which the Foryste properties are located. This limited frame – among their houses, the court, their legal office, the church, and the club – reflects the prestige of the family, but also communicates the Forsytes' narrow vision of the world, which will eventually lead to the frustration of Soames' wishes and the failure of his marriage to Irene[21]. The settings in which their meetings take place corroborate the sense of claustrophobia of a Forsyte's life: their houses, the law firm, and the club are the main background of their gatherings, and it is indicative that even Soames' visits to the countryside at Robin Hill are solely aimed at defining the boundaries of his new property and directing the construction of his new house.

> All Forsytes, as is generally admitted, have shells, like that extremely useful little animal which is made into Turkish delight; in other words, they are never seen, or if seen would not be recognised, without habitats, composed of circumstances, property, acquaintances, and wives,

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19 See Coudriou 1980: 84: «Dans la préface de l'édition française du *Propriétaire* (1925), Galsworthy rappelle que "ce n'est pas tant un reste de puritanisme qui consacrait sous Victoria les droits du mari et du père que la peur du ridicule et le désir d'assumer les apparences du succès. Pourvu qu'il fût blanchi, le foyer victorien pouvait bien être un sépulcre".».

20 Ru 1992.

21 See Hapgood 2000: 167; Saunders 2014: 226.

> which seem to move along with them in their passage through a world composed of thousands of other Forsytes with their habitats. Without a habitat a Forsyte is inconceivable – he would be like a novel without a plot, which is well-known to be an anomaly. (Galsworthy 2012: 67)

It is no coincidence that the only ones who move around in open spaces (gardens and parks) are family dissidents such as Young Jolyon, who paints landscapes that metonymically communicate the breadth of his gaze compared to Soames' limited vision. By evading the family law that mandates the generation of profit and the safeguarding of appearances, Young Jolyon has in fact renounced his inheritance to become «one of these artistic chaps» (Galsworthy 2012: 16), divorce his well-born first wife, and marry a working-class woman.

It is in this suffocating context, characterised by continuous tensions due to their sense of threat and competition, that Irene finds herself. The symbolic significance of the spaces in her story is clear from the opening episode of the novel, an "at home"[22] for June's engagement with the architect Philip Bosinney: family gossip – when not commenting upon the eccentricity of June's choice – focuses on the rumour that Irene and Soames have not shared a bedroom for some time. The choice, in addition to being unusual in a bourgeois couple, draws attention to the character's violation of the concept of the bedroom as a «sanctuary of love and motherhood» (Perrot 2011: 79), in other words, as impediment to the possibility of generating successors for Soames' rich inheritance. The lock on the door of Irene's new room therefore represents an interdiction: it is a reaffirmation of her bodily autonomy – a rebellion against her husband's control[23] – and at the same time it is a way to reacquire «space and freedom» (*ibid*.: 69) which every couple loses with the custom of sharing a bedroom with her/his spouse.

Irene's origins in a lower-class family further contribute to her isolation and subordination. The 2002 television adaptation sheds light on this aspect and amplifies the backstory of the marriage by expanding the novel's hints and memories into a full-fledged prologue: Irene's stepmother's economic hardship after her husband's death and her need for a second marriage entail the exclusion of Irene from her new family life. The ad-

[22] «'At Home' at Old Jolyon's» is the title of the first chapter in *The Man of Property* (Galsworthy 2012: 3).

[23] See Perrot 2011: 152.

aptation thus highlights the limbo in which Irene is suspended between being *locked out* (from a family unit and from society) and being *locked in*, literally in Soames's house, and metaphorically in the stifling environment of his family. One of her first lines in the novel expresses the weight of these limitations: shortly after Bosinney's engagement with June, she gives him Dante's warning, «Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!» (Galsworthy 2012: 35), referring to that "panopticon" «of watchfulness and desire» (*ibid*.: 8) represented by a family that conditions her every action.

In addition, Galsworthy's narrative choices in portraying her character emphasise the sense of enclosure and limitation within a multiplication of thresholds that are reflected from the formal level to that of the content: throughout the course of *The Man of Property* the reader knows Irene's character only in an oblique way, filtered through her husband's or the other Forsytes' perspective. Irene, in consequence, emerges primarily from her effects on others, as a sensual and destructive force. It is necessary to wait for *The Indian Summer of a Forsyte*, the interlude between the first two volumes, to learn her thoughts, to hear her words as direct discourse, and to witness her transition from being a character who is *acted upon* to an *agent* in her own right. Her ability to affirm her own identity first necessitates achieving liberation from the stereotypes and clichés inherited from the nineteenth-century commonplace of the *femme fatale*, impressed on her by the Forsytes' gaze[24].

In terms of material thresholds, Irene is confined within the London home of Soames, as the narrator underlines during the first scene at dinner together («it was hard […] that she should sit there, looking – looking as if she saw the walls of the room closing in», *ibid*.: 50). After a long meditation on the details of the old-fashioned Victorian house – where «there were countless nooks resembling birds' nests» (*ibid*.: 48), a proliferation of rooms, walls, and narrow spaces that multiply the internal divisions in the name of privacy, allowing for meetings that are «screened from the eyes of the curious» (*ibid*.) – Galsworthy establishes a series of parallels between the furnishings of the house and Irene herself, emphasizing the frustration of Soames' «right to own her» (*ibid*.: 50):

> Soames only experienced a sense of exasperation amounting to pain, that he did not own her as it was his right to own her […] Out of his other property, out of all the things he had collected, his silver,

[24] See Hojoh 1980: 23-37.

> his picture, his houses, his investments, he got a secret and intimate feeling; out of her he got none. (*Ibid*.)

As we will see, it is the same desires for vigilance and control over Irene that launch the plot of the first volume of the *Forsyte Saga*, as they push Soames to create a new domestic space outside the London environment, with the effect of definitively undermining the function of the conjugal house as a place of protection for Irene.

It is the images of the crypt and the grave that lead us from Irene's marriage to that of Clare Aubrey in Rebecca West's *Saga of the Century*. The words of her daughter Rose, who acts as narrator, make explicit the parallelism between marriage and burial:

> But this made us still more determined not to marry. She [Clare] had committed herself to this marriage without knowing what it was going to cost her. If we who had seen her pay the price condemned ourselves to such misery, even for the same reward, there would be something suicidal about it, and that could be contrary to the desire to go on living which was her chief characteristic. Indeed, marriage was to us a descent into a crypt where, by the tremulous light of smoking torches, there was celebrated a glorious rite of a sacrificial nature. (West 1987: 6)

Clare is a talented pianist, who had been able to travel the world during her youth thanks to her music, and who has sacrificed her artistic career for her family after her brother's death. Having lost the freedom of an unmarried woman, weighed down by the duties of motherhood and further oppressed by her husband's debts, she is portrayed as buried alive in her own home («And Mamma had had all of us, and had been very worried, and now she was past forty, and her fingers were getting stiff, and her nerves were bad, and she would never go back to playing again», West 2011: 9).

The cultural and social restrictions binding Clare – supported by other West's autobiographical writings[25] – highlight the limitations that, starting from the ideological level, have confined Clare to the private and domestic sphere from the moment of her birth. The comparison with the men of the family sheds light on the causes of her exclusion from public life and on the fewer opportunities available to her: firstly, her family's greater investment in her brother's artistic training is remarked upon[26],

[25] See West 1914, 1925, 1952.

[26] See West 1925: 67; Erickson – Blodgett 2009: 90. See also Woolf 2019: 146.

and secondly, in her adult life, it is noteworthy that her less talented cousin Jock is able to achieve fame as a flautist thanks to his wife Constance, who bears the full responsibility for household management[27], and due to his greater career opportunities[28], since Clare, as a woman, is not allowed to perform as a soloist[29].

The multiplicity of closed doors for Clare is figuratively suggested in an episode full of symbolic significance, when Mr. Morpurgo – hitherto her family's undercover benefactor – for the first time enters the scene to receive the keys to the office of the recently departed Piers:

> She emptied the box over the table, and lots and lots of keys fell out […] 'I found this box with some keys in it, and our servant and I have put in it all the keys we could find lying about the house, and it turns out that I have many more keys than I have things that lock. […] These can go, they are all trunk keys. (West 2011: 385-386)

It is significant that the scene of the liberation from the keys takes place upon the arrival of Morpurgo, a figure who symbolises the overcoming of the patriarchal ideal of the family, a new putative father for Clare's daughters, as well as her symmetrical counterpart in the redefinition of the family community starting from this moment. The scene metaphorises not only the multiplicity of doors that have seen her locked out until that moment, but also those related to her confinement during the marriage, as also remarked by the emblematic trip to Kew Gardens after Piers departs.

The redefinition of the role of Clare's daughters – especially that of the twins Rose and Mary – between domestic and public life that will occur in the following two volumes of the trilogy, therefore, is possible only after the overcoming of the economic, ideological, and social barriers experienced by their mother Clare. Rebecca West's intention to dismantle the family conventions of the time is clear from the opening pages of the novel, where there is a clear overturning of the family novel's traits: after twenty years of «nomadic life» (West 2011: 105), Clare and her four children go to live on a farm in the Pentland Hills, a «lonely place» (*ibid*.: 2), after renting their heavily mortgaged apartment. The only inheritance for their future home in Lovegrove is the empire-style furniture left by Clare's aunt.

[27] See West 1925: 207.
[28] See West 1925: 67; Frigerio 2006: 126.
[29] See West 1952.

The loving detail with which these pieces are described in the opening dialogue emphasises the sting when they are lost shortly thereafter due to Piers' new debts[30].

In contrast to one of the pivotal *topoi* of the conventional family novel, in which the house and inheritance are symbols of genealogical continuity, the opening chapters make manifest West's iconoclastic intent: in the first volume, *The Fountain Overflows*, the instability of the Aubreys, who have returned to England from South Africa after having lost everything, is in contrast to the traditional ideals of continuity and the transmission of property. If, as Perrot observes, the old furniture for bourgeois families has a memorial value, their «not owning it is a sign of marginality» (Perrot 2011: 65).

The perspective from which the facts are narrated, therefore, is reversed compared to the traditional family novel; the story is told from the margins, and Rose and Mary, given their social marginality, after reaching marriageable age, are therefore suspended in the same limbo in which Irene Forsyte found herself.

It is possible to recognise numerous references to the Aubrey sisters' exclusion, at school as well as at the parties or on the few public occasions in which they are involved: the poverty and eccentricity of the family make them constantly marginalised figures, and the additional fact of their being women further limits their potential for social advancement, as evidenced by the comparison with their brother Richard Quin, who easily manages to make his way into Lovegrove's society.

When we consider the position of the Crawley sisters in *Downton Abbey*, the concept of the house as a symbolic place for the defence of patriarchal law and genealogical continuity is foregrounded due to the iconographic choices of the TV series: as evidenced by the posters chosen throughout the six seasons – which show Robert Crawley, Earl of Grantham, in the foreground, with the Downton mansion standing out in the background overlooking the cast – the semantic significance of the titular house is clear, as is its role as a driving force of the plot and its correlation to the figure of the head of the family[31]. This is confirmed by the opening episode of the series, which metonymically assumes historical significance and can be extended to the entire noble class: the sinking of the Titanic and the death of Patrick, heir of Downton Abbey and betrothed to the firstborn daughter

[30] See West 2011: 41.

[31] See Polidoro 2016; Natale 2021: 141-152.

Mary Crawley, is a sign of the precariousness of the aristocratic condition in those decades of rapid economic and social changes[32] and it emphasises the importance of ownership for the continuity of the genealogy. The mansion is a reflection of the patriarchal norm that rules the life of the family community within its borders[33]. A confirmation of this starting condition is found in the Earl's decision not to contest his father's succession clause: the inheritance of the estate and the title must belong to the same person, and it cannot be a woman to acquire them. Thus Mary, his firstborn, will lose all of the family's status and property unless she marries well. The first episodes therefore clarify the multiplicity of norms and conventions that condition the opportunities and the fate of the Crawley sisters after they reach marriageable age.

Since no nobleman will marry Mary given her exclusion from the estate's inheritance – as explicated by the Duke of Crowborough's refusal (s1.e1) – the mission assigned to her in order not to lose Downton is to marry the man who will inherit the title. The younger daughters, Edith and Sybil, as they lack any right of succession, must only make a marriage worthy of their family name in order to safeguard their family's prestige. In this case, too, it is their maternal inheritance that marks the path that lies ahead of them: Cora, despite her lack of titles, her bourgeois and American origins, was able to marry an aristocratic man thanks to her rich dowry[34], necessary to save the estate from the debts inherited by Robert.

If the same opening episode immediately assumes the significance of an irruption of History into the domestic sphere – undermining the vision of the house as a protective shell against the advance of exogenous forces that threaten the family's stability – it is sufficient to continue until the third episode to prove the fallacy of this conception of the domestic environment and the constant frustration of paternal authority: the violation of Mary's bed by the Turkish ambassador, a guest at Downton, will not only traumatise her, but also lead to the potential exclusion of her and her sisters from the marriage market.

As in the aforementioned works, the first season of *Downton Abbey* also frames the three young women within clear limits that define their range of action and choice. The opportunities envisaged for them are in fact reduced to the mere possibility of meeting within the domestic walls,

[32] See Brogi 2019.
[33] See Baena – Byker 2015: 6.
[34] See Stone 1983: 351.

being the only place approved by the family. For this reason, Mary and Edith appear at first to be trapped within a patriarchal paradigm that forces them into constant competition for the conquest of a man, while remaining within spatial and normative boundaries established by the patriarchy, in an apparent retracing of the traditional "sister plot"[35]. The second-born, Edith, seems to be suspended in a condition of in-betweenness: less beautiful and charming than the firstborn Mary, and less courageous and determined than the youngest sister, Sybil, Edith's only chance to define her identity is reduced to the imitation of an ideal.

Starting from the second season of the series, the outbreak of the first World War – which represents an even greater violation of the walls of Downton, which is turned into a shelter for convalescents[36] – coincides with a drastic change on the axiological and cultural level after which not only will the estate's management be profoundly reconfigured and modernised, but in which the identity of each character will also be redefined, in particular that of Edith. The house transforms from a protective shell against the outside world into a contact zone, a place for sociality, in which horizontality replaces the usual hierarchies of class and power.

«Space, air, light»[37]

In the second stage of each of these sagas, centrifugal forces remove the female protagonists from the now-weakened and violated family home. Both physically and metaphorically, the women are forced to create new domestic realities outside of the frameworks of tradition and their ancestral houses.

In *The Forsyte Saga*, in a twist of fate characteristic of Galsworthy's style[38], it is Soames' desire for control over his wife that lays the foundations for a new domestic reality for Irene. Soames' choice to move to the Robin Hill house, aimed at removing his wife from the temptations of London life and at increasing her isolation, in fact ends up putting her in contact with Philip Bosinney, the architect of the villa who ultimately wins her heart[39].

[35] See Bertoni 2021: 105-120.

[36] On the functions of the house see Natale 2021: 141-152.

[37] Galsworthy 2012: 72.

[38] See Furst 2006.

[39] Another twist of fate occurs in the second volume, when Soames' attempt to prove that Irene has a lover in order to divorce her leads to her meeting Young

Over the course of three volumes, then, Robin Hill turns from a place of captivity into a symbol of both the redefinition of the family community and of Irene's role within it. Designed and built for her – first according to Soames' wishes and then by her lover Bosinney – Robin Hill becomes a metonymy of the values of modernity, freedom, and self-determination that Irene comes to represent.

In fact, the suburban villa is a chronotope carrying multiple layers of meaning, starting above all from its position in the London suburbs[40]. Located between the countryside and the city, the new family home emblematises an «intermediate territory» (Hapgood 2000: 164), «'new kind' of community» (*ibid*.: 163), and a «locus of the future» (*ibid*.) which reflects the social and political changes underway. It is significant that at the end of the villa's construction, Soames does not take possession of it as intended; for he is not the protagonist of the early twentieth-century migration of the middle class from the city to the suburbs. His narrow vision of the world does not allow him to grasp the meaning of the villa beyond its pure economic value. If Robin Hill is an «unwritten textual space» (*ibid*.: 171), a reflection of an era in transition, it is not surprising that Old Jolyon becomes its first owner, since he is the only one who understands the epochal change in progress[41]. It is he who embraces this transformation by giving the house to a new family capable of overcoming the social barriers of bourgeois conventions: his son Young Jolyon with his second wife, and the three children born from his two marriages.

The failure of Soames' project is clear from the very blueprints for the house: in contrast to the oppressive darkness of his London home, Robin Hill expresses those twentieth-century ideals of «space, air and light» (Galsworthy 2012: 72) identified by Benjamin as elements of rupture in relation to nineteenth-century architecture[42]. The play of transparencies generated by «a glass roof», the high columns that replace the walls in

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Jolyon and falling in love. It is significant that Irene's escape from Soames once again leads to a third space, Paris, which reflects both Irene's condition of exile and potential exclusion from society as a divorcee, as well as the freedom that she cannot experience in London, a city dominated by the Forsytes.

[40] See Hapgood 2000 e Brown 2007: 75-76.

[41] See the chapter title "Passing of an age" (Galsworthy 2012: 475) in the second volume.

[42] See Benjamin 1999: 221: «The twentieth century with its porosity and transparency, its tendency toward well-lit and airy, has to put an end to dwelling in the old sense». See also Brown 2007: 87-93.

the inner court, illuminated by «a north light» (Galsworthy 2012: 71), with the «end wall [which] is all window» (*ibid*.) and from which arrives «a southeast light» (*ibid*.), underline the desire to create a house where they «should have room to breathe» (*ibid*.: 70) and the intent of synthesis between inside and outside, an *open* home environment in harmony with the surrounding nature.

However, the first volume closes with a reaffirmation of the centripetal forces which, at least for the moment, overshadow the centrifugal ones to reinforce Irene's passivity. Two domestic thresholds are the chronotope at the centre of the two episodes of *crisis* and *break*[43] in which Soames' domination on his wife is reaffirmed. When Irene forgets to lock the door one night and her husband breaks in, then rapes her upon discovering her extra-marital relationship, she becomes a captive in the house once again, confirming the superficiality of the Victorian ideal of the house as a «place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division» (Cohen 1998: 1)[44]. With no possibility of escape following the death of her lover, still trapped within the same economic conditions that had pushed her to marry Soames, Irene is forced to return to the conjugal roof.

The second episode is the dialogue between Soames and Young Jolyon on the doorstep of the Forsytes' house, which, while reconfirming Irene's condition of seclusion, also anticipates the turning point of the second volume:

> 'My wife can see no one' […] There in the drawing-room doorway stood Irene […] In the sight of both men that light vanished from her face; her hands dropped to her sides; *she stood like stone*. […] 'This is my house' he [Soames] said. […] We are not at home". And in young Jolyon's face he slammed the door. (Galsworthy 2012: 245)[45]

If the simile of the final scene cyclically recalls Irene's condition of being buried alive, petrified within the domestic walls, at the same time, the symmetrical position of her and Jolyon – respectively on the threshold of the hall and on that of the main entrance – highlights the consonance of their positions in relation to the family and the bourgeois world, which

[43] Bakhtin 2008: 248.

[44] The quotation is from Ruskin's *Of Queen's Gardens*, one of the main works which contributed to fixing the Victorian *topos* of the house as a protective shell.

[45] My emphasis.

will be the basis of their rapprochement in the second volume.

The absence of economic limitations for Irene when she weds Young Jolyon marks the overcoming of the oppression of the previous marriage experience. The apartment in London and the income left to her by Old Jolyon in his will, in fact, represent for her the autonomy, "the room of one's own" and the liberation from the social norms that had governed her up to that moment. Irene earns a living through giving music lessons, and for the first time her artistic talent contributes to her liberation from economic dependence and from the conventions that once imprisoned her.

It is once again the 2002 adaptation that draws attention to this aspect by adding a sequence that depicts the first meetings between Irene and Soames, and remarking that for Irene's family her skills were «symbols of values reputed essential to the education of a *femme accomplie* and other "angels of the house"» (Frigerio 2006: 126), as observed also by Virginia Woolf: «It was with a view to marriage that her mind was taught. It was with a view to marriage that she tinkled on the piano, but was not allowed to join an orchestra […] How could it be otherwise? Marriage was the only profession open to her» (Woolf 2019: 159-160).

When Robin Hill finally becomes the haven for the new family founded by Irene and Young Jolyon, it fulfils its function as metonymic space for a future society, a space in which it is possible to overcome the Victorian ideal of the family as a place of domination and control. The values of freedom and self-determination – that make Irene and Jolyon centrifugal forces within the Forsyte family tradition – in Robin Hill replace the oppression of the patriarchal family.

In the case of Rebecca West's trilogy, it is the music room that becomes the incubation space for a new model of family community. The centrality of music and its connection with the role of individual members of the family are made clear from the first chapter of the trilogy («'Oh my little lamb [Richard Quin], I wonder what instrument you are going to play. It is irritating not to know' For of course we all played something», West 2011: 8). A confirmation of this correspondence is offered by the figure of Cordelia, the only daughter without artistic talent, and the only one to embody bourgeois values and conformism.

For Rose and Mary, the music room is first of all the driving force which generates alternatives to the uncertain destiny that lies before them, given their father's economic difficulties and debts:

> Oh, we could work, we could go into factories or shops or offices, or we could be servants, and between us we could make enough to

> keep Mamma and Richard Qin till he grows up […] Anyway it will be all right. […] You see, we would go on working at the piano in the evenings and someday we would switch to being pianists, and after that it is going to be all right. (*Ibid*.: 19-20)

The music room is also the symbolic place of the maternal legacy and redemption[46]. Offering a space for the conquest of independence through a musical career, it serves as "the room of one's own", an alternative to domestic duties, and an antithetical space to the patriarchal crypt, where women's access to formal education and to the professional world are limited.

The music room, instead, is an emblem of the matriarchal regime, of the moral values of justice, empathy, compassion, and altruism of which Clare is bearer also thanks to her artistic training[47]. As a vital force that does not bend in the face of limiting circumstance, Clare represents the ability to escape an ineluctable fate[48], and even during her marriage with Piers she becomes a protector for various women whom she welcomes under her roof: despite her own economic hardships, she prevents them from being excluded from society after they lose the protection that their family homes had been supposed to provide.

In this case, too, as in *The Forsyte Saga* and *Downton Abbey*, the questioning of the family institution and of the ideal of the home as a protective shell is precipitated by the irruption of the external world into the domestic habitat: the arrival in the Aubreys' house of Constance and her daughter Rosamund, of Lily and her niece Nancy – the former haunted by her husband's *poltergeist*, the latter left alone after the murder of Mr. Philips by Nancy's mother – demonstrates the failure of the traditional family, founded on blood ties and marriage, after which the only alternative for those who choose to escape it is social exclusion. The Aubreys' house, as well as Uncle Len's pub, become spaces for the redefinition of the family community on the basis of principles of sharing, horizontality, and freedom from those norms of continuity and belonging which the bourgeois family ideal has twisted into domination and oppression. It is especially after Piers' death that this new family community legitimises Clare's role as its

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[46] West 2011: 17: «She had nearly become a famous pianist and she thought it probable that with our talents we might succeed where only ill luck had given her failure».

[47] See Erickson – Blodgett 2009: 95.

[48] See West 1925: 67; 207.

moral centre[49], making the Aubrey home the metonymy of a new social ideal. The domestic space thus becomes a place in which it is possible to overcome the boundaries of blood – at the base of every endogamic barrier and hierarchical rigidity – and which embraces a family community understood as a more inclusive form of sociality.

The last stage, the moment of synthesis, follows Clare's death and shows Rose's and Mary's professional affirmation. The subject of this third phase is the effort, particularly recognisable in Rose's choices, to avoid a return to a condition of confinement, to a new form of burial, within a new domestic and family reality. The image of living entombment is evoked by Rose herself at the beginning of the third volume of the trilogy, after leaving their house in Lovegrove:

> But we had to leave Lovegrove. Our house could have seduced us into the practice of magic; we might have re-created the past and *inhumed ourselves in it*. So we let Alexandra Lodge to a composer and his violinist wife, who were glad of the music-rooms […] The house Mr Morpurgo had found for us was a union of two houses of the same period as our Lovegrove cottage, with the two coach-houses on each side enlarged into music-rooms. (West 1988: 1-2)[50]

The music room once again becomes a microcosm, a metaphor for the redefinition of the values on which familial and domestic life is based: in fact, it is the relationship with music and with the room that reproduces the same dichotomy between exclusion and confinement, allowing the reader to interpret the different fates chosen by Rose and Mary at the end of the trilogy. Mary, in fact, conceives of music as a form of removal from everyday reality and human relationships[51]:

> She derived no encouragement from the contacts with people which her art involved, and the fact that some of her audience took pleasure in her beauty annoyed her. She felt that she was obliged to appear physically in public in order to play, but that they had no right to take advantage of that necessity to pass a judgement on her for which she had not asked. It did not matter that the judgement was favourable, she still felt it a violation of her privacy. (West 1988: 7)

[49] See Erickson – Blodgett 2009: 94.
[50] My emphasis.
[51] See Erickson 2009: 97.

She derives gratification neither from public performances nor from the audience's appreciation or even from the effect that her music can have on the others. Her gradual isolation, the end of public performances in favour of a completely private enjoyment of music, as a form of escape from reality, ultimately lead her to abandon the house she had shared with Rose. Mary's return to exclusively private performances constitutes a return to the past, a new form of burial in that uterine space, the maternal protective shell, which the music room had represented before she had entered the public and professional sphere.

Mary's choice to self-isolate becomes fully understandable in light of the crisis that Rose went through in parallel. Although the latter had always represented the «ability [...] to connect with others outside herself» (Erickson – Blodgett 2009: 96), now she seems to conform to Mary's model, with her temporary repudiation of the outside world: her inability to relate to someone outside the family circle created by her mother now prevents her from connecting with others during musical performances:

> […] I hate my work. I want to give up. […] These horrible people come and listen to me […] they give me nothing […]. I want them to give me something. I feel empty without it. I never get it from anybody but the people here, and Kate, and Miss Beevor. […] But what I would hate most of all would be if these people I play to, these people I work with, started to try and give me what I get here. […] I could not bear the thought of these people laying hold of me, feeling they have rights over me. (West 1988: 210-211)

The resolution of her crisis leads to a synthesis between the two alternative destinies that, until this moment, had seemed mutually exclusive: Rose's engagement and consequent marriage with Oliver represent a deviation from her sister's fate, as well as a new form of openness to a more inclusive family ideal, since marriage for Rose has always meant «to cast off one's true name, to desert one's family» (West 1987: 123).

Oliver's declaration of his love for Rose is wordless, and it recalls the same horizontality that had characterised Clare's expanded family: it is expressed through the notes of the piano he is playing to adopt Rose's language and, consequently, the language of her mother. It is no coincidence that the scene takes place in the same music room in which Rose, like Mary before her, had intended to take refuge from the outside world («I could hear someone playing in my music-room», West 1988: 231).

The contiguous chronotopes of the staircase and the threshold, too,

maintain a symbolic value as turning points that can lead to a moment of renewal[52]. The expansion of narrative time, the lingering on Rose's descent of every single step of the staircase leading to the room, amplifies the moment of overcoming its threshold. In this case, the renewal is twofold, since it implies that Oliver and Rose's union will redefine marriage as something other than a burial – and also not require Rose to sacrifice her public and musical life, as her mother had done – while at the same time it suggests the acquisition of the maternal inheritance, affirming Rose's new role as the moral centre of the new family community.

In *Downton Abbey*, it is possible to recognise the chronotope of the car as the symbolic space of Edith's initial in-betweenness, an emblem of modernity and of the rapidity of changes underway in the early twentieth century. Zinato (2012) notes that the car can be interpreted as «an unlimited promise of individual and autonomous mobility» (*ibid*.: 16); this meaning becomes even more clear in contrast with the setting of Grantham, described as an «oasis, [...], refuge, [...] atemporal hermitage», almost «immune from mechanical actuality» (*ibid*.: 36)[53]. Compared to her sisters, whose destinies are to some extent linked to the car and its symbolic value, Edith is the only one to make private use of it, albeit for pleasure rather than necessity. The act of driving therefore metaphorises Edith's simultaneous adhesion to and autonomy from both the family norm and the conventions of class and gender. The episode in which Edith drives the estate's truck (s2. ep2), substituting for an employee who has gone to war, in addition to confirming the upheavals and the removal of social barriers brought about by the war, anticipates the temporary social levelling that will occur during her brief liaison with the tenant: in this way the episode remarks upon the potential mobility that Edith's in-betweenness entails. The car and the act of driving, in fact, from the moment that Strallan begins to instruct her in it, is symbolically linked to phallic power and serves as a prelude to her gradual taking possession of formerly masculine spaces, which comes to fruition in the last season of the series.

During the second season, the centrifugal forces that distance Edith from the familial norm accelerate. The turning point occurs when she renounces competition with Mary and the imitation of the feminine model she embodies. Edith's betrothal to Strallan, whom her older sister had rejected, as well as her failed attempt to marry him, represent the most

52 Bakhtin 2008: 248.

53 On the function of the car in *Downton Abbey* see Polidoro 2016: 21-22.

extreme point of this competition; her failure, then, seems to doom her to the fate of reclusion experienced by many young spinsters of her time, who remained unmarried because of the decimation of the male population during the war. The only possibilities left for Edith, by the middle of the series, seem 'to be locked out' of the marriage market to which the other two sisters retain access, while she is also consequently 'locked in' behind the walls of Downton Abbey («I'm a *useless* spinster, good at helping out, that is my role », s3.ep3.).

The vector of her most radical transgression of the paternal law, and the driving force of the set of centrifugal forces that from this moment will pull her further away from Downton Abbey, is her writing. The series associates this medium of communication with male power; Edith becomes not only the only woman to enter the columnist profession, but also to reach the top of *Sketch* magazine when she is promoted to director: the assignment of a weekly column in the *Sketch* is a further step towards the appropriation of spaces hitherto precluded from the female sphere. The London spaces associated with her new job and love affair with Gregson do not fall within her family's sphere of influence, so Edith consequently acquires greater autonomy within the London metropolitan environment.

Edith's escape to Switzerland and her subsequent move with her illegitimate daughter to Gregson's old house in London express in spatial terms those centrifugal forces that led her to the detachment from her family.

However, unlike the stories of Irene and Rose, Edith's achievement of financial independence as a publishing entrepreneur and her conquest of a "room of one's own" in London cannot represent a happy ending in the narrative economy of Fellowes' series, since they also infer Edith's downgrading and exclusion from her family. In fact, her achievements undermine her world's moral values and above all its model of society, implying a defeat for the aristocratic system that the Crawleys represent. The synthesis between the two phases of Edith's path can only take place, therefore, in the symbolic space of conservatism in which *Downton Abbey* is based[54]. Edith's marriage with Bertie Pelham, who has just become Marquis, bestows a social promotion and a happy ending not only upon Edith, but upon her family – which achieves that economic, social, and political consolidation and advancement expected from the younger daughter from the beginning[55]. In narrative terms, the marriage enhances her axiological

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[54] See Byrne 2014; Baena – Byker 2015; Esposito – Ruggiero 2021.

[55] See Stone 1977: 270-272.

function in the redefinition of the family community as a more inclusive social space. The admission of Edith, single mother and entrepreneur, to the Pelhams' castle and the marriage with the Marquis do not take on the features of a sacrificial rite: the conquest of the place becomes possible for her not through a path of redemption from her past transgressions, but after a change in the judgement of Bertie and his mother, who embody the norm in the new domestic reality. It is therefore significant that the space of synthesis between Edith's birth family and the one she marries into is a castle, a place «saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word» (Bakhtin 2008: 245-246), a chronotope which symbolises immobility and immutability, as if to affirm that the revision of the family community and of the female roles within it has finally reached the heart of a bastion of aristocracy and tradition.

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