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# **A Literary Feminist Phenomenology of Place in Early Twentieth Century Women's Writing**

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A Thesis presented for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy



Department of English Studies  
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England

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## Abstract

The following work develops a critical approach to women's experience by engaging with phenomenology and modernist poetics of place. It critiques the androcentricity of phenomenology and philosophical abstractions of gender and space, arguing that a feminist phenomenology with its focus on alternative modes of being in a diverse but socially and gender-stratified world can more aptly articulate experiential specificities that neither fortify nor fit into conventional paradigms of experience. This thesis discusses the imaginative and aesthetic rendering of women's experiences of rooms in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, and Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover," "Pink May," and "Hand in Glove."

Chapter 1 addresses the affinities between phenomenology and feminism, and trace the trajectory of the narrative of place in modernist women's writing. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 discuss the power of place, examining how women experience the environing world and come to perceive it in its givenness. The chapters show how naturalised understandings of identity and gender manifest in the experience of place, and argue that a "shaking" of place and the discovery of a room of one's own can expand the realm of experiential possibilities to configure a feminine kind of experience that may transform the normative world into something more hospitable and livable for those who fall short of the hegemonic ideal.

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### Introduction

If we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not as always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees and whatever it may be in themselves...

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

Virginia Woolf closes *A Room of One's Own* by inviting fellow women to experience the world and in doing so live for the dead poets of our sex. If “our relation is to the world of reality and not to the world of men and women,” then the women who came before our time “shall find it possible to live and write” (132). To have a room of her own, woman must first turn to her relation to the lived world, that brick and mortar world.

And it is the city of London to which Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway* turns her attention. The hubbub of modern life is a stimulus for her interior space: as she “plunges” into the heart of the city, the spatial boundary between inner and outer spaces collapses, and she is in the midst of “what she loved” (*MD* 4). Sasha Jenson in Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight*, too, fixates on the city; her wanderings and relentless search for a hotel room of her own are spatial manifestations of her lack of fixity and socio-geographical ambivalence. Contrary to Clarissa, Sasha is where she does not feel belonged. Still in both novels is an emphasis on women’s active engagement with the exterior world.

Beyond the city, the accent on space opens up narratives of inconspicuous, modest rooms wherein identities, subjectivities, the past and the present, action and thought are interrogated. In Elizabeth Bowen’s “The Demon Lover,” the room upstairs is where Kathleen Drover escapes the haunting of her former lover and re-

sees the past in light of the woman she has become. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the attic room in London somewhat merges with the room on the top of the house in Bourton where Clarissa was once with Sally Seton; the room expands just as Clarissa's aloneness gives way to female solidarity. In Bowen's "Hand in Glove," the attic room is also a threshold space, between reality and unreality where the oppressive culture takes the form of a murderous glove. The tight room allows for confrontations of rigid rules and boundaries, fixed norms and conventions, ironically making space for a deeper contemplation of the significance and representation of place in the study of women's experience.<sup>1</sup>

The experiential turn to places—be they streets or rooms—is a modern phenomenon. One explanation for this were the technological advances that emerged from about the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century which created new ways of experiencing space.<sup>2</sup> The motor car, for example, altered conceptions of speed and mobility: time taken to get from one place to another was shortened and distance was a lesser obstacle.<sup>3</sup> Such changes affected everyday experience, including that of the modern writer. Woolf wrote in her diary in July 1927: "All images are now tinged with driving a motor" (149). Modern experiences were influenced by new forms of mobility which inspired the freedom of imagination.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of rooms in general; Chapters 4 and 5 for a detailed discussion of small rooms in *Good Morning, Midnight* and "Hand in Glove."

<sup>2</sup> These include mainly innovations which changed the way distance and time was perceived: the safety bicycles in the 1880s, mass production and sale of the motor car in the 1900s, and the Wright brothers' flyers in 1900s which allowed cross-country flights over a sustained period of time.

<sup>3</sup> Concepts of time and space shifted in tandem with scientific discoveries of the time: Einstein's relativity theory destabilised the uniform space of Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry. For a more detailed discussion of the changing conception of space in the early 1900s, see the chapter "Space" in Stephen Kern's *The Modernist Novel*.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Parkins elaborates on the life of the modern writer and the relationship between writing and driving: "the ephemerality, spontaneity and unpredictability of car travel" challenged modern writers to "capture a moment in time" (152). For a detailed discussion of how the modern writer was influenced by transportation options like the motor car, see Parkins's *Mobility and Modernity in Women's Novels*



The rapidly modernising world and varying perceptions of space figure into the narrative of place in modern fiction. The experiential turn to one's relation with the world as suggested in *A Room of One's Own* is not only a material one but modernist as well.<sup>5</sup> The authors discussed in this thesis: Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, Djuna Barnes, and Elizabeth Bowen, are a coterie of modernists in the early twentieth century who “write of events in meaningful rooms and evocative exterior settings” (Kern, *The Modernist Novel* 77). More specifically, they write about women's experiences of places. Whilst the modern writer is conscious of new possibilities of freedom, she is also aware that heightened mobility accentuates the predicaments of women who are not afforded the luxury of movement or place of their own.

In the denouement of “The Demon Lover,” Kathleen is driven away by the ghost from her past into the hinterlands; the speed of the taxi contrasts with the passenger's inertia. The woman is unable to escape the expectations and roles thrust upon her. In *Nightwood*, Robin Vote shuffles from lover to lover, shelter to shelter. Key chapters set in the confidante's abode—Nora Flood's parlour, Jenny Petherbridge's inherited house, Matthew O'Connor's apartment—locate the narrative of the elusive protagonist. The seed of Robin's wanderlust is sexual ambivalence—the inability to be fixed and refusal to be pinned down. Not only are interior states of mind and inexpressive feelings mapped onto spaces, the invisible and marginal are also fleshed out in rooms. The works studied in this thesis pave the way for renewed explorations of quotidian and liminal spaces and present the experience of being a woman whose course of life is neither dominant nor neutral.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 1, “Place in Modernist Women's Writing.”

<sup>6</sup> Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* writes about dominant “lifelines” that we inherit and reproduce. She calls attention to “the social pressure to follow a certain course, to live a certain kind of life, and even to reproduce that life” (17). The female characters in the works studied in this thesis deviate from this dominant course of life, albeit in varying degrees. For example, the lesbian women in *Nightwood* and the lone wandering Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*.

The focus on women's experiences that runs through the selected works—*Mrs Dalloway*, *Nightwood*, *Good Morning, Midnight*, “The Demon Lover,” “Pink May,” and “Hand in Glove”—along with the insistence on exploring that which is outside the common sitting-room and one's relation to the environing world put focus on material geography and inquire into what it means for women to *be* in the lived world. This very *idée fixe* anticipates a critical study of modernist women's writing through a feminist phenomenological lens.

Phenomenology and feminism form the framework for thinking about the narrative of place in this thesis. Phenomenology, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “offers an account of space, time and the world as we ‘live’ them” and tries to give a “direct description” of the world which is “already there” (*Phenomenology of Perception* vii). In this regard, it echoes Woolf's entreaty to women to experience phenomena as they appear in the material world. Whilst phenomenology complements the analysis of modernist works given its commitment to the material world, it alone is inadequate to elucidate the narrative of place in the select literary texts. There are two reasons for this: first, its androcentricity neglects the peculiarities of women's experiences; second, it lacks the polemic force to urge women to escape from their sitting-rooms.

To begin with, the phenomenologist sees the world as a “universal horizon... of existing objects, each ‘I-the-man’ and all of us together” (Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy* 5). Historically, she who is “present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian,” whose public presence is “a general moral and political threat,” sees the paternal world differently from her male counterpart (Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City* 6). The world is not as “universal” as the phenomenologist conceives. This bleeds into the second reason, for

the focus on a universal experience of an androcentric subject does not require phenomenology to dig deeper into the politics of gender and identity.

The initiative to draw together phenomenological perspectives on the lived body in a material world and feminism, which tends to the particularity of experience and subjective being in the world, tackles the generality of experience in the world as well as illuminate the specifics of women's experiences. The feminist perspective serves a critical and corrective lens to the androcentric phenomenological framework used to read the fictions of Woolf, Barnes, Rhys, and Bowen. When Woolf said that Jane Austen and Emily Brontë "wrote as women write," she was asserting the need to attend to "the values of women" which differ from men (*A Room of One's Own* 85-87). This call is aligned with feminism which Patricia Waugh defines "seeks a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has hitherto been denied them by the dominant culture," (*Feminine Fictions* (9). Only when the focus is on women's experience and expression can there be the hope of relieving "the weight of the masculine canon," as Rachel Bowlby writes, of "recovering a female tradition," and of "establishing [women's writing] as a tradition with its own line of development" (*Feminist Destinations* 22-23).

Feminism with its emancipatory force and specific focus on women's experience, and phenomenology's interest in the general modality of experience in the lived world work together to expound on what it means for women to inhabit a world that is sedimented with patriarchal beliefs and gender-stratified. This interdisciplinary approach is necessary for the select women writers who are not only interested in the body, positionality, and emplacement which phenomenology too delves into; they are committed to presenting how women are physically and socially positioned and directed to see the world in a certain way.

This thesis sits at the intersection of its principal critical contexts: phenomenology, feminism, and modernist women's writing, which share a commitment to describe lived experience, to forge a narrative of the world that includes alternative modalities of experience and identity. With place at the core of its discussion, it brings together phenomenology's emphasis on bodily perception, feminism's focus on women's lives, and modern fiction's imaginative reification of interiority in an effort to answer the following question: what constitutes feminine experience and how does it relate to women's being in the material and masculine world? It is concerned with how women's naturalised understanding of their existence and womanhood manifests in their experiences of places, and how a "shaking" of those places and the discovery of a room of one's own can expand the realm of experiential possibilities to configure a kind of experience that can transform the normative world into something more hospitable and livable for those who are different and displaced.

The first chapter lays out the framework of feminist phenomenology by extrapolating from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and existing feminist revisions. It then shows how a feminist phenomenology may elucidate the representations of space in modern fiction: from the city in *Mrs Dalloway* which is an external projection of Clarissa's psychic life, the almost identical rooms in *Good Morning*, *Midnight* wherein Sasha habitually replays her trauma, to the world at night in *Nightwood* in which the emphasis falls on the sense of place and the paralysis when the view of the world becomes vague. The chapter will also situate the thesis within current debates of modernist studies and show how a phenomenological framework can better articulate feminine experience in relation to textured and dynamic spaces.

The second chapter aims to show how the phenomenological idea of situation can run parallel to the narrative of place in *Mrs Dalloway*. It argues that situations have a materiality which additionally binds women to socio-cultural milieus by examining the narrative of feminine places (the kitchen, for example) and showing how the experience of place is a kind of spatial practice that has developed from domesticity and the stratification of places. This chapter also posits a gendered reading of experience which moves away from the generic modality of experience.

The study of place extends to the *sens* of place in the third chapter.<sup>7</sup> For the women in *Nightwood* living in the world at night, to experience is to sense. This chapter discusses the notion of sense experience in relation to the experiences of those who are unable to see rightly and clearly because of certain disadvantages. It argues that having a disadvantage is not so much a disability as it is a different vantage point of the social and sexual deviant who chooses to see at a slant and remain bent. Here phenomenological ideas of the body and its position in the environing world are re-envisioned for the queer, lived body.

Having established that the experience of place is a spatial practice and a *sens-ing* one at that, the chapter on *Good Morning, Midnight* ventures to posit a spatial consciousness, which is described as the proclivity for structuring thought around spatiality. It heightens sensitivity towards place and creates experience that is reflecting and exploratory. The chapter details the workings of spatial consciousness—how it precipitates a new kind of seeing that is essential to comprehending women's situation, one that is always “already there” and so must be constantly seen anew.

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<sup>7</sup> The French *sens* translates to “sense,” but it also means direction.

The last chapter collates ideas of emplaced subjectivity, sense experience, and spatial consciousness in the study of the haunted house. It argues that the experience of haunted space is a dramatisation of being in the world, that the haunted house is a spatial embodiment of women's beliefs in longstanding domestic ideologies. This chapter shows how Bowen's stories unearth the pernicious effects of beliefs, relating perceptual beliefs to ingrained socio-cultural beliefs that domesticate and disempower women. It concludes with the return to the home and re-builds it with the feminist phenomenological perspective that has developed through the thesis.

This thesis, then, discusses the relations between place, modernist women's writing, and phenomenology. It ultimately wants to return to the originary experience of the world through material places, and in doing so uncover the structure of perception that underpins women's experiences and show how freedom and mobility are possible via a re-imagination and creation of perspectives of scenes in modernist narratives of space.

## 1. Phenomenology, Feminism, and Place in Modernist Women's Writing

The integration of feminist thought into phenomenology is an effort to develop a more specialised framework for articulating feminine experience rendered in the select women's writings. First, this chapter will develop the framework for a feminist phenomenology by drawing out the intersections between phenomenology and feminism. It focuses on Merleau-Ponty's ideas on lived experience: situation, positionality, the body and movements, and experiential perception. It will then discuss existing feminist perspectives on phenomenology and address the issues of androcentricity and universalism that need to be worked out before a project on phenomenology and feminism can happen.

As it lays the rubrics of feminist phenomenology, the chapter will also discuss the choice of primary texts and how the rendering of places in *Mrs Dalloway*, *Nightwood*, *Good Morning, Midnight*, and Bowen's short stories adds to or modifies certain phenomenological ideas that are abstract and androcentric. The later section will address how these literary texts are suited for a phenomenology of place—how they are in their own right modernist representations of female subjectivities in the twentieth century fin-de-siècle world, whether overtly so in *Mrs Dalloway* or implicitly in *Nightwood*.

### ***Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology and the Material World***

Phenomenology (or the *logos of phainomenon*) is a style of thought on experience and consciousness that became prominent in the early twentieth century. It is the study of occurrences, of things that appear: the Greek *logos* meaning word, to speak; *phainomenon* denoting any observable appearance. It offers up a lived world where

things are perceived as they appear, as opposed to the Cartesian thought world.<sup>8</sup> Phenomenology was founded by Edmund Husserl who advocated for “[an] originary experience of concrete physical things in external perception” that suspends natural beliefs in the objectivity of experience (*Ideas* 6). Husserl’s ontology disavows the claims of objective Truths as unquestionable pre-givens constituting the foundation of experience and puts focus on the originary contact with the world. Other thinkers like Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger have developed their own phenomenologies by inquiring into what it means to be in the material world.

For Scheler, the impulse (*Gefühlsdrang*) is key to understanding the primordial state of experience. “[Devoid] of consciousness, sensation and representation,” the impulse only involves motor reflexes (*Man’s Place in Nature* 9). Considering movement, Scheler presents “[a] primitive movement-space,” which affords us a “consciousness-of-being-around-and/or-surrounded” (45). The mindfulness of how the body moves and is positioned figures a spatial dimension to experience—one which Martin Heidegger too picked up on. Positing that phenomena must be approached at a participative level, Heidegger developed the concept of *Dasein* (the that-it-is-of a being), where to know an object is to encounter it as it “show[s] itself to itself on its own terms,” as an object of “*average everydayness*” (*Being and Time* 15). His is a “hands-on” phenomenology where one actively engages with the everyday world. Such practical involvement with the environment emphasises the working world.

Phenomenology has always been about lived experience. Philosophers like Scheler and Heidegger have illuminated important aspects of the material world, but

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Alcoff describes the Cartesian thought world: “Man organizes and shapes his world, conferring on it meaning and intelligibility, and thus man is constitutive for all knowledge” (“Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, and Feminist Theory” 40).



none so relevant to spatial experience as the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) whose ideas on the lived body precipitated my inquiry of what it means for women to inhabit—and one could say inherit—a world that is already there. His phenomenology enables discussions on orientation and position and helps us to think about how the female body may negotiate space. Amongst the phenomenologies that emerged in the late eighteenth and early twentieth century, Merleau-Ponty's work on perception and spatial dimension of experience is invoked as a primary reference to bridge ideas of the body, experience, perception, and place, for it emphasises the material (the body and world) and sheds light on the lived experience.

In his landmark treatise, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty writes that “experience is nothing or it must be total” (301). The study of experience is “gives us access to being”; to experience a structure, or to *be*, is “to live it, to take it up, assume it and discover its immanent significance” (300). According to Merleau-Ponty, experience is more accurately termed, “an experience of my-body-in-the-world” (164). Here is the idea of the body-world: the body is not only “a system of present positions” but also “an open system of an infinite number of equivalent positions directed to other ends” (164).<sup>9</sup> The body is situated in a world of other embodied beings and socio-cultural sediments and habits, interactions and activities, which altogether make up the lived bodily experience. Thus what (the spectacle) and how (the lens) one perceives are contingent on the situation itself.

By situation, Merleau-Ponty means “the object in its concrete context”: that is, the spatial and social dimensions of situation (*POP* 284). This takes into account how

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<sup>9</sup> “End” here refers to other existences who are also positions and systems in themselves. Existence is therefore always situated in a network of lived bodies experiencing the material world from multiple positions: “It follows that it is not only an experience of my body, but an experience of my body-in-the-world” (163-164).

one's view of the world is shaped by her social and physical milieu, its patterns of perception and habits.<sup>10</sup> The idea of situation is important when reading works like *Good Morning, Midnight* in which the narrative of place is less of a spectacle in that the rooms are alike. To briefly illustrate, the opening passage in the novella marks the layout of the hotel room and segues into a description of the streets. The smooth transition from inside to outside is trivial at first; but after several repetitions of similar descriptions, it is apparent that the impulse to blur boundaries is part of Sasha's situation, one derived from her habit of returning to the first room and subsuming all other rooms into that one room. The hotel room is the concrete space; the view of the room is influenced by context.

Situation also entails positionality. To be situated is to be positioned somewhere in a given locality. Emplacement involves direction: words like "left" and "right" are used to locate position; empirical designations decide what is *here* and *there*. In order to situate experience, phenomenology has to concede that the "constituting mind is eminently able to trace out all directions in space" (*POP* 288). In response, Merleau-Ponty states that the knowledge of position is not a mindful act as it is the body functioning as "a system of possible actions" (291). This is especially clear in circumstances where the scene is hard to make out. In an obscure space, where directions do not make sense, one would have to "live in it" in order to "identify" position (293). Thus, any given position is a result of the body's inhabitation of space; a bodily understanding of space rather than the mind's.

This would make sense when we consider the scene in "The Demon Lover" where young Kathleen tries to communicate with the soldier in the dark by putting out

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<sup>10</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, habit is the "formula" of "previously acquired movements" (165). The body acts because of prior experiences. Merleau-Ponty gives the example of dancing which is modelled on the "ideal outline" formed from walking and running (165).

her hand, as if to say “I am *here*.” By doing so, she has positioned herself in relation to him, establishing distance in the attempt to “verif[y] his presence” (“TDL” 83). The underlying assumption is that her idea of where she is assimilated into his idea of where she is, as proven when he takes her hand and presses it to his breast buttons. Because neither can see each other, cues like “left” and “right” do not make sense. Yet the reciprocated action implies that there is some unanimous agreement of direction. Even though directions are pre-learned, concepts of *here* and *there* are embodied. The location of one’s position in place is a bodily effort.

Also evident in the above example is the importance of experiential perception: Kathleen is able to perceive the soldier because she held out her hand. She has a *sense* of the soldier’s presence. This perception is not altogether attributed to visual sight, for she “[has] not ever completely seen his face” (“TDL” 83). Yet, his presence is fully verified. To perceive, in this case, is not only to see but also to touch and feel. Such perception is in line with Merleau-Ponty’s focus on the lived world that demands an understanding of a spatial, if not experiential perception. To perceive, he makes clear, is not to “think,” but to “live” (*POP* xviii). By extension, to perceive is to experience. Implied here is the active participation in the lived world, as opposed to active thinking.

Experiential perception encompasses spatiality and positionality—both of which requires inhabitation. One has to live in the given space, be situated, in order to get a *sense* of one’s position and place. The word “sense,” or *sens* in French, is spatial. *Sens*, which captures the English definition of sense (“perceive,” “feel,” “know”), also means “direction.” To have a *sens* of something is to be aware that experience involves relations because in the words of Merleau-Ponty, “two points are enough to establish a direction” (*POP* 287). *Sens* experience embodies the intuitive

experience and feeling towards something; it also ascribes direction that anticipates movements between points and interactions between the emplaced phenomena. To have a phenomenological sense of something is thus to have an experiential perception as well as relational understanding of the thing or person in question.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology situates bodily experience in the material world. His ideas on spatiality, positionality, the body and its movements, perception as experience are central to developing a feminist phenomenology in this thesis. They overlap with feminist ideas of corporeality, identity politics, gender, performance, and so on. These commonalities encourage collaborations between phenomenology and feminism, which already existed before the term *feminist phenomenology* came into prominence in the twenty-first century.

### ***Feminist Revision and Phenomenology***

At first glance, the ontological stance of phenomenology that revises and challenges localised truths is attractive to feminism in which gender is studied as a kind of fiction stemming from naturalistic and biological differences. Phenomenology, in its bid to unearth the sediments of acquired and imparted ideologies, incidentally echoes de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (*The Second Sex* 295). In this regard, the female body is lived because it practices and performs naturalised ideas of identity and gender. On practice, Edith Stein, one of the first feminist phenomenologist writing in the early 1900s, notes that women must venture outside their comfort zones of "receiving" pre-formed practices and begin to activate their "practical abilities" and start "acting" ("Women's Intrinsic Value in National Life" 111). Stein makes clear that vocation is the means to actual living and originary

experience. Vocation, as she meant it, entails practical and active engagement with the working world—a relation that recalls Scheler and Heidegger's works.

Even as Stein's phenomenology is specific to women's experience, the female lived body itself is not the main focus in phenomenology—which, is preoccupied with bodily interactions with phenomena, with emphasis on experience as *bodily* (used as an adjective), rather than the lived body. Phenomenology approaches the transcendence of the self with the assumption of a body that is gender and sex neutral. And, de Beauvoir explains, “man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings; whereas women represents only the negative” (15). Assuming an un-gendered body, phenomenology conflates women's experiences with men, and so into the general study of experience. It may have freed the subject from the self-sufficient Ego, but the woman remains the unvoiced and invisible half of the universal body.

If phenomenology is about the subjective lived experience, then it must address the different bodily make-up of men and women.<sup>11</sup> Feminist critics concerned with specificities of the body criticise phenomenology for precisely its neglect of existing gender relations and careless presumption of a generic body. As Linda Fisher notes, feminists have argued that phenomenology hinges on a universality that “erase[s] the unique specificities of women's experience” (“Phenomenology and Feminism” 26). Phenomenology's neglect of sexual and bodily differences can come across as a deliberate move to exclude women.<sup>12</sup> Such feminist interpretations come with a bias that precludes the appreciation of the phenomenological framework that can help articulate women's experiences in a lived world.

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<sup>11</sup> As de Beauvoir tells us, “Women, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something other than herself” (61).

<sup>12</sup> Fisher notes that phenomenology is sometimes read as an “instance of ‘male’ philosophizing” (23).

Feminist scepticism may appear self-aggrandising and and essentialist in its claim of feminine experience. The impulse to bifurcate experience into masculine and feminine plays into dualist traps. It is difficult, I think, for feminists, to criticise phenomenology for its universalism and argue for feminine existence without seeming essentialist. To discuss women's experiences is to posit that there is something feminine about our experiences. The challenge is to find a framework that addresses the specificities of women's experiences without excluding other modes of existence. Feminist thinkers have tried to resolve this tension: De Beauvoir discusses women's experiences via the processes of becoming; Iris Marion Young and Sandra Bartky draw on personal life experiences; feminist philosophers like Fisher re-envision the phenomenological study of experience for feminine existence.

Drawing on phenomenology and de Beauvoir's take on situation, Young attempts to read women's experience with the lens of phenomenology and mitigates essentialist charges with a re-definition of feminine experience:

[Femininity] is a set of situations and conditions which delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves.... This understanding of "feminine" existence makes it possible to say that some women escape or transcend the typical situation and definition of women in various degrees and respects.

("Throwing Like a Girl" 140-141)

This interpretation of femininity is a phenomenological one. It is a situation rather than something of essence. And, since it is a situation, it is not limited to a particular sex, although such circumstances more easily befall women than men.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Young believes “human existence is defined by its situation” (138). But, whereas Merleau-Ponty locates subjectivity in the body, where transcendence “moves out from the body in its immanence in an open and unbroken directedness upon the world in action,” she asserts that “feminine bodily existence” does not share this “liberatory transcendence” (145). Women remain confined to their situations, limited by their bodies. Compared to men, their movement is “circuitous” because of a “feminine hesitancy” and “tentativeness” (147), which stem from “a fear of getting hurt, which is greater in women than in men” (144). This fear has to do with how women regard their biological makeup.

The association between the female biological makeup and woman’s situation is evident in *Mrs Dalloway* when Clarissa retreats to the attic room. The main fixture is the narrow bed with “clean” sheets “tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side” (23). The neatness and cleanliness of the space reinforce Clarissa’s chastity as she thinks about girlhood. But the virginal purity evoked in the scene is not quite girlish; the image is tinted by the introductory clause, “Like a nun withdrawing” (23). Whilst “nun” connotes purity, it also conjures images of elderly women and the idea of sterility. The attic room is a space of escape, where Clarissa may hide from the busyness of life and reminisce about the purity of girlhood, but it is also a reminder of her sterility that comes with age. In contrast to Peter Walsh who at fifty-three is excited over a young woman in the park, as though full of sexual potential, Clarissa can be said to have experienced her body as “a fragile encumbrance,” to use Young’s words (144).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Young uses this phrase when she compares women who are naturally smaller in stature and frame (thus often experiencing the female body as “a fragile encumbrance”) to the male muscular form, (144).

This example illustrates the complexities of the perception of place that accompanies woman's consciousness of her body. It also exemplifies why a phenomenological discussion of women's experiences deviates from Merleau-Ponty's, for it takes into account details the female situation which differs vastly from the positive, neutral experience of the universal body. Whereas Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology focuses on the body as subject, a feminist phenomenological study of experience contends that "the woman lives her body as *object* as well as subject" (Young 153).

Young elaborates on women as subject and also the objectified:

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention. (154)

For women, there lies the task of not only exposing the seemingly subjective self as an object and then reclaiming subjectivity in the movement of the body, but also having to cope with the body being both subject and object. A complex relationship between object and subject, perceived and perceiver, the present situation and a series of past situations emerges. Her experience involves all of these, which has to do with being both subject and object.

By locating differences in propagated cultural rubrics of society, Young makes a point that states of existence are not determined by sex but are situational. Yet, as she remembers a certain hiking party, her argument on femininity seems to be specific to female existence. She confesses that she did not believe hiking was going to be easy for her, noting that the men "crossed with ease" (144). The experience of feeling



physically inadequate and mentally challenged is presented as typical of feminine existence. By separating herself, the slow hiker, and her feelings from the men, Young unintentionally slips into a heteronormative assessment of experience. Her subjective experience, thoughts, and emotions, come to stand for those of the female population: from “I” to “We.”<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, Young’s account of feminine experience as situation highlights the potential commonalities between phenomenology and feminism which Fisher goes on to develop in what she terms “the project of a *feminist phenomenology*” (37).<sup>15</sup> According to Fisher, phenomenology “frames” and “validates experiential claims”; its “subjective objectivity” serves as “a mode of expression” for feminism (34). The resultant feminist phenomenology integrates the specificities of feminism into the generality of phenomenology. Because feminism locates experience in a particularised setting of the female experience and phenomenology explores the generic lived body’s experience, the project of feminist phenomenology supports subjectivistic accounts of the female bodily experience.

To show how a feminist phenomenological framework might support the study of women’s experience, let us return to the attic room scene. Focusing on perception, Merleau-Ponty would pick up on the colour white and the sensations it evokes which reveals the relations between space and her feelings which are synthesised by Clarissa’s consciousness. Whilst this observation paves way for the politics of gender, the phenomenologist would attribute the associations to former

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<sup>14</sup> In her account of the hiking trip, Young shifts from talking about a general femininity, not limited to women, to her own experience as a female, then switches to using the collective pronoun, “we,” the last of which designates a shared bond amongst women: “We often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the media for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our body to make sure it is doing what we wish it to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies” (144).

<sup>15</sup> Unlike Young, Fisher formulates a framework for women’s experiences, i.e., feminist phenomenology, on how the failings of universalism are made up for by particularities, and vice versa. Her approach is methodical, whereas Young’s is anecdotal.

experiences and presuppositions of memory: Clarissa's memory of the "cold contact" between men and women and ensuing "cold spirit" is projected onto the ascetic room (23-24). The phenomenological impulse is to exfoliate the inhibitions to originary experience because "[to] perceive is not to experience a host of impressions accompanied by memories capable of clinching them" (*POP* 26). In context, Clarissa is said to be remembering rather than perceiving. Phenomenology's focus on the mechanics and sediments of perception does not work for a study of women's experience because gender whilst obstructive to originary experience is also constitutive of the female subject.

On the other hand, a phenomenological framework sympathetic to female existence would for instance consider how the memory of cold contact among women takes Clarissa out of the present room to the river at Clieveden; this is then supplanted by her memory of Sally which brings her back to the confines of a similar room. The analysis has focus on the spatial maneuverings which reflect Clarissa's relations with women. It does not attribute the experience of the attic room to memory, though it acknowledges the importance of the past. What is more important is the return to the room which can be read as an attempt to re-inscribe the "virgin" room and warm the "cold spirit" with female solidarity. Here Clarissa's personal experience is an opportunity to consider what it means to have a room of one's own if the requisite is the sense of female co-existence.

Feminist phenomenology is a coalescence of the general and specific. The eventual consummation of feminism and phenomenology is, according to Fisher, "The unique subject—generalized" (29). That which is "generalized," however, is not "equivalent to the absolutist sense of generic" which suppresses differences; rather its purpose is to "articulate the tension of generic and specific" (29). What this means is

the generality in fact sets up a common ground for the generic and specific to be examined in relation to one another, accommodating variants within dualisms that may have qualities from the opposing category, enabling the generic and specific to be explored beyond their restrictive boundaries and “articulated in broader categorical terms” (29). The generality, Fisher explains, is “a generalized account of the structures of subjectivity from the perspective of individual subjectivity and oneness” (29). The project of feminist phenomenology an open one, in which the generality does not universalise and the particularised is situated in larger contexts.

“The unique subject—generalized” is an ideal that balances out the general and particular. Yet, experience can be subjectivistic and biased, capricious and defying, too diverse and particularised to fit into the clear-cut intersection of the generic and specific. For this reason, the framework of feminist phenomenology—if its goal is to study women’s bodily experience—has to factor in emotional and personal accounts of experience. Sandra Bartky avers the need to address subjectivity:

I do not believe that we can have a feminist politics without some conception of what is good for women and what is not, and this, in turn implies a larger conception of what is good for persons generally and what is not. (*“Sympathy and Solidarity” and Other Essays* 1-2)

Even though the question of “what is good for women” can only be answered with certain subjectivity and varies from woman to woman, the answer cannot be one of universal objectivity. For people belonging to a particular group are more sensitive to the complexities and circumstances of the group than they who are outside.

Feminists like Young and Bartky are not so much interested in developing a framework for experience as they are with the female working body’s actual involvement in the lived world. Their works are expressions of women’s experience,

a prelude to a feminine mode of being in the world. On the other hand, there are feminists like Fisher who work towards developing a theoretical structure. Both approaches in feminist phenomenology give voice and bring attention to women's experiences. In this thesis I hope to incorporate both means of expression: anecdotal and theoretical, into a feminist phenomenological framework that can help to better articulate feminine experience.

Feminist phenomenology enquires into what makes women's experiences different from the generic, a difference which requires a framework specific to *feminine experience*. There is something about how women engage with places designed to keep and limit them that connects their experiences. These places may not be overtly constraining as the attic room; they could be like the mountain Young hikes that reminds her of her inaptitude. Big space or small space, when women actively participate and interact with their environments, they perceive with certain limitations that can be traced to their situations which in one way or another have to do with their being in the world as the non-positive subject.

With this I posit that feminine experience has to do with women's emplacement and limitation. Specifically, feminine experience emerges from delimited and disadvantageous situations and socio-political conditionings that compromise one's ability to experience the world in its givenness.<sup>16</sup> It can be described as an interpretation of the universal world which returns to one's physical encounter with places and is shaped by women being in gendered and socially stratified situations.<sup>17</sup> Feminine experience enables a more empathic perception of not only women but also others who occupy similar limited positions in society.

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<sup>16</sup> Givenness (*Gegebenheitsweise*) means the appearance of things as they are to the beholder; it is the way of the object in which one becomes conscious of it. Phenomenology examines how bodies are placed and positioned that in turn affects how objects of vision appear in their givenness.

<sup>17</sup> This is a working definition of feminine experience which will be further addressed in Chapter 2, the section "Towards Feminine Experience."

Described as such, it is not exclusive to female existence but is one that forms from a disadvantaged subject's interaction with the lived world.

The key to formulating feminine experience, I argue, lies in the study of place. Space experienced by the female protagonists is always open in that a room connects to other rooms, a memory of place connects with the present. The narratives of space reflect the women's ease of movement or the apparent lack thereof, describing their inhabitations and rehabilitations of a sense of belonging and identity in places outside the traditional, domestic home.

### ***The Phenomenon of Place in Modernist Women's Writing***

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the modernist period saw the destabilisation of existing concepts of space which anticipated a myriad of ways in which space can be read in modern fiction.<sup>18</sup> Andrew Thacker in *Moving Through Modernity*, for instance, surveys social space, metaphorical space, psychic space, and the boundaries between these spaces (5). For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus primarily on material space. Attention to women's engagement with rooms and places where movements are limited allows for the analysis of the material conditions of experience. Such spatialisation of experience reflects women's shifting and even conflicting perceptions of places (between interior and exterior landscapes, past and present ideas of space) that are especially prevalent in the early twentieth century.

This section will trace the trajectory of writing about place from *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), which centres on women's movements about the city, to *Nightwood* (1936), which focuses on stasis and marginalised existence, to the role of the room in relation to the emplaced past in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) and hauntings in

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<sup>18</sup> I understand that "modernist period" is not a term used by the writers of the early twentieth century; here it is used retrospectively and as it is traditionally conceived.

“The Demon Lover” (1941), “Pink May” (1942), and “Hand in Glove” (1952). There are other prominent modernist women writers who articulate the importance of spatiality such as Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield, and Gertrude Stein.

Whilst Mansfield’s stories are referenced in the discussion on *Good Morning, Midnight*, this thesis does not employ the works of Richardson and Stein. Although Stein’s use of syntax and poetic voids is useful in the development of the spatiality of the novel, this thesis is concerned with material spaces rather than textual.

As for Richardson, the devotion to material and lived spaces in *Pilgrimage*, especially of lodging rooms and cafés, seems to deem it a suitable text for the thesis. The rationale for analysing *Good Morning, Midnight* as opposed to *Pilgrimage* is personal and pragmatic.<sup>19</sup> Firstly, the length of the thesis does not allow a thorough discussion of the voluminous work,<sup>20</sup> and an analysis of one volume (such as *Pointed Roofs*) on its own would adequately document the trajectory of Richardson’s writing of space. Also, given the intent of Chapter 4, *Good Morning, Midnight* is packed with ambivalence and ideas that are more than sufficient for the discussion of the habit of rooms and spatial consciousness. Secondly—and this is also a matter of personal interest—the thesis is drawn to the predicament of the unemployed and wandering woman who has a tendency towards melancholic attachments. Rhys’s treatment of the lone woman and her situation is more suitable for a discussion of alternative modalities of experience.

In short, the texts chosen for this thesis reflect the changes in the cityscape, women’s movements about the city, and perception of the exterior world from the

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<sup>19</sup> For the chapter on liminal spaces and the small rooms, the choice of texts was between *Good Morning, Midnight* and *Pilgrimage* for they make similar points on the inhabitation of tight spaces that figuratively represent the claustrophobia and “impasse” state of characters.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the narrative of space in *Pilgrimage*, see Elizabeth Bronfen’s *Dorothy Richardson’s Art of Memory* which has painstakingly detailed Richardson’s use of material, metaphorical, and textual spaces, and spatial oscillations in the different volumes.

1920s to early 1950s. In the span of two decades, we will see how the woman leaves the home and explores the city, venturing into liminal rooms and plunging into the world at night, before returning again to the house. This section will highlight some ways in which a phenomenological framework can articulate in these texts what it is to experience the world as women, as disadvantageous subjects. This will also help to situate the thesis within existing scholarship on geographies of modernism, showing how a phenomenological study of experience with the idea of spatial consciousness as integral to feminine experience can offer another way of negotiating the hegemonic and gendered divide between interior and exterior worlds.

The discussion of space in modernism primarily revolves around “metropolitan cities and the cultural experiments and upheavals they generated” (Huysen, “Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World” 6).<sup>21</sup> Such upheavals and changes have different effects on men and women. Feminist scholarship on the representation of the city in modern writing often attribute women’s differing experience of the metropolis to “their different embodiment and social positioning” (Squier, “Virginia Woolf’s London and the Feminist Revision of Modernism” 101). The metropolitan culture is a gendered one, and whilst both men and women participate in it, Bonnie Kime Scott states that “women write about it more, perhaps because gender is more imposed upon them, more disqualifying, or more intriguing and stimulating to their creativity” (*The Gender of Modernism* 3). The illumination of gender differences and women’s experiences is not an attempt to replace the dominant

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<sup>21</sup> For Huysen, this focus poses a problem for it ignores the translation and mimicry of metropolitan cultures in other non-European countries and postcolonial cities. For a discussion of alternative and trans-national/cultural modernities, see “Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World.”

narrative but draws attention to how we may rethink and re-create representations of place.<sup>22</sup>

A study of how women experience and relate to places will consequently expose what Thacker describes elsewhere as “a complex intertwining of material spaces with a thematics of power” (“Woolf and Geography” 411-412). Places are geographical delineations of power that cause a subject to assume positions of superiority or subordination depending on where she visits. In other words, there is a spatial hierarchy among places that corresponds to the social hierarchy. It thus behooves this thesis to begin a phenomenological study of place with a literary work that encompasses a variety of places that reflects the power (im)balance in society. Such work, given its sensitivity to the politics of place, would help to illustrate the phenomenological idea of situation which has a spatial as well as socio-historical dimension. For these two reasons, the first text that will be studied is *Mrs Dalloway*.

When Woolf said that she wants to “criticise the social system, and show it at work, at its most intense” (*A Writer’s Diary* 56), one can interpret her approach in geographical terms in which London is parsed into sites mirroring the class and interior states of characters. In *Mrs Dalloway* is a range of places, from domestic rooms to social rooms, parks to high streets, which allows for the examination of situations wherein individuals are put in their “concrete contexts” which consist of both the social and spatial. Whilst Clarissa, wife of a member of Parliament, explores the Mayfair area, Rezia, a foreigner and wife of the shell-shock Septimus, hides in the park. One lives in Westminster, the other in Victoria Street.<sup>23</sup> Clarissa’s privileged

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<sup>22</sup> Susan M. Squier asserts that the focus on women’s writing “problematizes the very categories with which we have approached modern writers” and pushes for a “reassessment of the critical construction of the modern condition” (100).

<sup>23</sup> Thacker notes that the lodging of the Smiths though located in the Bloomsbury area was “at the start of the twentieth century... far from the affluent area it is now” (412). For more details about Septimus and Peter’s associated geographies with regards to power and empire, see “Woolf and Geography.”



standing and Rezia's marginality are reflected in the places they occupy. Yet, even as Clarissa has more spatial power, she is nonetheless limited to areas "associated with traditional forms of aristocratic prestige" (*Moving Through Modernity* 155). Privilege impedes her perception of the world—one compensated by Septimus: "the world [is] seen by the sane and the insane side by side" (*A Writer's Diary* 51). By focusing on how women dwell in places, Woolf stresses on the power of place as a physical as well as social force imposed upon the individual such that she perceives the world in ways that reinforce existing power relations and entrap her within the patriarchal system.

Just as the socio-political bleeds into the spatial, there is also a blurring of boundaries between exterior and interior lives. Critics like Gillian Beer and Alex Zwerdling have written about the relations between the mapping of the city and characters' interiority: "Woolf is deeply engaged by the question of how the individual is shaped (or deformed) by his social environment" ("*Mrs Dalloway and the Social System*" 69); "[the] accounts of walks and of districts register the characters' social space as well as their separations" (*Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* 53). The discussion on how the social environment shapes individual consciousness can be extended to the sense of the environment. Take, for example, how urban life, also the chaotic external world, impinges on interiority. Woolf addresses the blurring of interior and exterior spaces in "Chateau and Country Life" (1908):

But surely it is time that someone should sing the praises of express trains. Their comfort, to begin with, sets the mind free, and their speed is the speed of lyric poetry, inarticulate as yet, sweeping rhythm through the brain, regularly, like the wash of great waves. (222)

Like “Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car,” where she equates driving to writing, Woolf describes the correspondence between the fast paced urban life and the rhythm of the mind. Such relations between interiority and exteriority are reiterated in *Mrs Dalloway* often read as a quintessential modernist representation of a spectrum of female experiences of the metropolis: the privileged Elizabeth Dalloway rides the omnibus and thinks about career choices which are not available to her mother, whereas the age battered woman is singing an ancient song, confined temporally and physically to the park.

The focus on movement as the bind between the exterior and interior spaces in *Mrs Dalloway* also draws out the workings of positionality outside the realm of phenomenology. Shifts between supposedly disparate spaces challenge the notion of a fixed perspective or position. To cite briefly the scene in Regent’s park where Rezia, Septimus, Maisie Johnson, and Mrs Dempster each narrate their stories, the varying positions they occupy entitle them to a singular perspective of the park and of the passing crowd.<sup>24</sup> Yet these individual threads of narratives interact with one another, even enlightening the obscurity of the other, collectively building the scene of the park. This is the multi-perspectival situation of the park formed from a myriad of contexts, all of which are concrete and social at the same time. Here is also a glimpse of how situations as put forth in phenomenology can figure into the novel as a kind of narrative situation: the social and spatial character of place shapes the way the situation is envisioned and narrated.

Whilst *Mrs Dalloway* published in 1925 presents new mobilities and possibilities for women, the novels of the 1930s read in this thesis have accents on stasis and circumscribed spaces. *Nightwood* stands in stark contrast to the

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<sup>24</sup> See Chapter 2, “Situations in *Mrs Dalloway*.”

representations of space and movement in *Mrs Dalloway*, allowing for a different understanding of how experiences of place are rendered in modernist writing. For one, characters are often stuck in temporary lodgings and forced to perceive the world from still and awkward positions. Whilst the novel is “obsessed with feeling and movement,” the body which Barnes envisions is a “corpse” that does “nothing” (Taylor, *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism* 113). The presentation of movement differs from Woolf, for movement comes not from the subject’s bodily actions, but from the author who “circle[s] around [the corpse] like the murderess” (113).

*Nightwood* relies heavily on the manipulation of narrative perspectives so as to “move” scenes. Consider the episode where Nora sees Robin before she leaves with Jenny: she has to look away from her lover and unto her lover’s lover in order to see Robin in the world at night.

Such skewed perspective is translated to the reader via the novel’s formal techniques, including the use of abstract and poetic language, limited points of view, incompatible and surprising pairings of imageries, which offer an alternative way of interpreting space and the interactions within. The narrative situation offered in *Mrs Dalloway*, its multi and shifting perspectives, continues in *Nightwood*’s spatial form. By cloaking its world in darkness and ambiguity, *Nightwood* encourages a defamiliarisation of the world, compelling a re-seeing of things and events. The impulse to re-present and re-interpret the world is a modernist one to the extent that literary modernism is “a set of new ways of seeing and interpreting the world” (Kern 2). *Nightwood* demonstrates the “rehierarchization” of space that Kerns discusses in *The Modernist Novel* where the novel moves from writing about “privileged locations” that are “concrete” and arguably familiar to contemplating “the nature of space itself” (77). The focus on the *sens* of space causes dissonance which is

particularly interesting when read in light of phenomenology's notion of the "queer effect" wherein the body reorientates itself and adjusts to the anomaly and discontinuities as its reality, perceiving the world at night as the one by day. If *Mrs Dalloway* offers a myriad of modalities of existence, *Nightwood* goes one step further in unravelling the underbelly of society, presenting literally the world of darkness where characters are by default queers and pariahs.

In "Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic," Jane Marcus famously claims that "*Nightwood* makes a modernism of marginality" (147). Indeed, Barnesian characters are queer and their worlds shrouded. As Julie Abraham puts it, *Nightwood* presents the "circumscribed" social positions and "disqualification of her lesbian and gay characters" ("Women, Remember You': Djuna Barnes and History" 256). The limitation in social position manifests in the characters' physical immobility and stilted perspectives as noted earlier. Significantly, as they are "bent" as homosexuals,<sup>25</sup> they also bow down and perceive the world from bent positions.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, *Nightwood* opens up the possibility of a queer phenomenological reading of spatial experience, where the "inverted" and "bent" reality is the right of way in the novel, where shifts in perspectives signal the return to the primitive experience, where perception is reorientated and hence untainted by preexisting structures of knowledge.

The polemics and revisionist impulse of *Nightwood* evident in how it turns away from what is normative and deals with homosexual identity and how it re-envisions the world at night dissipate as the third decade of the century comes to a close with *Good Morning, Midnight* written in 1939. The reorientation of space and

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<sup>25</sup> For a full account of the term "bent," see Chapter 3, section "Bent On the Dark."

<sup>26</sup> Julie Taylor draws the connection between the act of bowing down and the characters' burden of shame that comes from their homosexuality. For more on shame and modernism, see *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism*.

compelling of the eye to see aslant are missing in Rhys's work. Rather what we have are repeated visits to similar rooms and Sasha Jenson recalling memories of rooms, reliving her experiences in them. In "'A Savage from the Cannibal islands': Jean Rhys and London," Anna Snaith notes Rhys's use of "repeated images of metropolitan uniformity" (76). Indeed, as Sasha admits, rooms are "all different, all exactly alike" (*GMM* 23). The room of one's own advocated by Woolf takes on a different meaning in Rhys's work. It neither provides stability nor empowers its inhabitant; in fact, the repetition attests to Sasha's entrapment within the room of her past. Her search for rooms seems to be aimless rather than exploratory, escapist rather than activist in nature.

Read through the lens of colonial identity, critics like Chris GoGwilt attribute the "doubling and repetition of interior space and interior monologues" to the Creole experience which is "an impossibility of recognized 'white' *female* racial identity" ("The Interior" 73). Such readings posit that it is the inability to fulfil the fantasy of a white racial identity that leaves Rhys's protagonist trapped in the search for a mythic stability. But if we adopt a phenomenological framework, the repetition of the room experience can be read as a way of producing material resemblances where rooms do not replace one another but collectively create a *mise en abyme* effect such that the narrative of experience is framed by a structure of rooms.<sup>27</sup> *Good Morning, Midnight* allows for the discussion of spatial consciousness wherein subjectivity is emplaced in rooms, recalibrating the phenomenological idea of the body in a lived world, for focus is now on the living world, on rooms that *speak*. Consequently, the emphasis on emplaced rather than embodied consciousness illuminates feminine experience, for

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<sup>27</sup> See Chapter 4, section "Feminine Re-Vision," for more discussion of this room-within-room effect.

what is feminine about experience seems to be the openness and ability to connect present and past engagements with places.

The “lived” quality of space that is dramatised in rooms that literally welcomes Sasha into the room also appears in Woolf’s essays, albeit more implicit. The rooms in the Chateau have “corners” that “sink into darkness,” as though imbibing the loneliness of its lady owner (“Chateau and Country Life” 223); whilst Sussex is “no longer young,” likened to an elderly woman whose beautiful face is veiled (“Evening over Sussex” 7). They are glimpses of spatial embodiment of subjectivity in which places are enlivened. Such inscriptions of subjectivity though not very evident in *Mrs Dalloway* are important to developing the idea of spatial consciousness which can be described as a heightened sensitivity to the material environment to the extent that the past, memories, events, things, and etc., are conceived in terms of a structure of spatiality.

Such re-envisioning of the room can be interpreted as an attempt to rediscover the significance of space in relation to women’s existence. The 1930s saw architectural changes that transformed modern cities: “Many of the familiar landmarks in London... were being pulled down... everything had to be pared down to a minimum” (Smart, *Modernism and After* 35).<sup>28</sup> In France, Le Corbusier called for “functional interiors” that abolished “the stuffy knickknacks of the bourgeois home” (Wilson 96). Minimalism and mechanical functions of space emphasised the practicalities of space rather than ideals.<sup>29</sup> This reevaluated the meaning and function of spaces, and by extension the social and gender stratifications. Space became

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<sup>28</sup> Smart also notes the rise of skyscrapers in major European cities, following their first appearance in America.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Wilson lays out the Swiss-French architect’s Le Corbusier’s modern city plans which included communal restaurants that sent food to homes and nurseries for childcare. Whilst these places were designed for practical reasons, such plans nonetheless “would diminish the level of domestic drudgery” (96).

“evacuable,” according to Andrzej Gasiorek in “Le Corbusier and Wyndham Lewis”: it could be “reconstructed,” enabling new visions of places (143). (This can be read in light of how Sasha keeps revisiting hotel rooms and trying to create a stable meaning out of them.) Yet the shift in the perspectives of space did not immediately freed women from the burdens of the domestic home. Just as the political and social improvements with regards to women’s rights in the 1920s did not really liberate the majority of women by the 1930s.<sup>30</sup> Women like Sasha find themselves dislocated, caught between the possibilities of freedom and entrenched patriarchal beliefs. She is itinerant and seems to be looking for a room of her own, i.e., a supposed independence, but what Sasha really wants is to be given a roof over her head.<sup>31</sup>

The woman is in transition. Her predicament is that of being caught between past memories and new experiences, traditions and new freedoms. This liminality is spatially mapped onto the hotel and temporary lodging rooms in *Good Morning*, *Midnight* which are both public and private spaces: “an intermediate amoral zone”; “a pseudo home” (Wilson 59). The “living” room is where Sasha is literally confronted by the ghost of her past and presented the opportunity to relive it with her present consciousness. Such enlivening of space is a result of the woman reflecting and exploring at the same time—which presents a new formula for experience, one that makes room for the past and memories and beliefs, rehabilitating them for the present, in the material form of the room.

The dramatisation of space in *Good Morning* *Midnight* is taken to the extreme in the final texts chosen for a phenomenological study of space in this thesis. In Bowen’s short stories, “Pink May,” “The Demon Lover,” and “Hand in Glove,” we

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<sup>30</sup> Key revisions in Britain’s law include the Matrimonial Causes Act (1923) and Equal Franchise Act (1928). Such improvements only lead to a slight increase in the number of women participating in the workforce by the late 1930s.

<sup>31</sup> See Molly Hite’s *The Other Side of the Story* for a discussion of the Rhysian women’s “defining” and “inherently unrespectable” dependency on man (23).

return to the domestic home. But the home is now a perverse inhabitation haunted by the past and the women's faith in traditions and beliefs. Spectrality around the house is a manifestation of the women's fragmented psyche. As Maud Ellmann puts it, Bowen's narrative of the house brings us "deep into the haunted chambers of the mind" ("Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen" 147). For Bowen, place comes first. Unlike Woolf who in "Literary Geography" (1905) states, "A writer's country is a territory within his own brain" (35), Bowen works the other way round, personifying places as if they are extensions of their inhabitants. In the selected stories, the place in question is the haunted house, which stands between reality and spectrality, present and past, pragmatism and possibility. It is a site of threshold in which the fantastic is housed in living space, embodying the ambivalence of women's experience towards the end of the mid-twentieth century.

Written in the inter and post war years, the short stories reflect an awareness that Stefania Porcelli describes as "simultaneously heightened and anesthetized" ("City of Ghosts" 15). This is also what allows for Bowen's "versatile ghost imagery" (15). Such ghastly spatial imageries are also what make these haunted house stories ideal for a phenomenological study which investigates how reason can be refigured as perception is challenged and queered. The haunted house is beyond reason; it comprises a fantasy world where ideas of place and women's perception of places do not confirm preexisting formulas of experience. In this regard, the ambivalence of haunted space mythologises the normative, eventually exposing the socio-political structure of perception which is often missed by the trained and rational eye.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology which became prominent in the 1940s, coinciding with the publication of the selected stories, is especially helpful when reading alternative renderings of spaces, for it is interested in experiential perception,



taking into consideration the conditions that shape the various ways in which individuals of different vantage points and positions see. In *Nightwood*, for example, we see the workings of a *sens-ing* type of perception, whereas *Good Morning, Midnight* evokes a habitual perception. Exemplified in Bowen's short stories is a perception linked to beliefs. And the haunted house, a perverse version of the ideal feminine space, reflects the dangers and shaking of the female protagonists' beliefs which are deep-seated and patriarchal. Kathleen seems to believe that the demon lover's return is retribution for her unfaithfulness; the unnamed protagonist of "Pink May" is haunted by her guilt; Ethel Trevor in "Hand in Glove" is obsessed with winning Lord Fred. They have believed in and internalised social norms that reinforce the status quo, which would otherwise not be shaken if not for the haunted house.

The notion of believing as a kind of seeing posed in Bowen's short stories helps us to rethink about how we view spaces and reevaluate perceptual beliefs about places that hark back to stock images and traditions. Perception is seeing; it is also a practice of inherited and ingrained values. There is conflation between what we see and think, what shapes experiences and the experience that has been shaped. This returns to the question of situatedness (women's positions and milieus) and the archetype of feminine space, i.e., the home. But this time around space is not bifurcated and stratified, but can be open and connecting. The haunted house, or mythical space, allows for this *mise en abyme* effect, as does the room in *Good Morning, Midnight*. *Mrs Dalloway* too does this by connecting the places of Clarissa's memory to the present, whilst *Nightwood* presents the potential of space by negating the very fixity of space. The texts selected for this thesis present women's experiences in varying ways but share the accent on the material world.

Having traced out the phenomenon of place in these modernist works, this thesis will in the ensuing chapters develop the idea of feminine experience through the examination of the female protagonists' experiences of the city and rooms, and how geographical renderings in the texts queer perception in a different way from the one considered in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, one that has to do with perceptual disabilities. With narrative situations, formal and poetic strategies to slant and shift perspectives, the texts experiment with how scenes can be re-presented and seen anew in times of spatial and social crises.

## 2. In Situ: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

Feminist phenomenology is an initiative by female philosophers and finds root in philosophy—it is still developing within the philosophical realm. From Stein to de Beauvoir, phenomenology with feminist insights has been tangentially applied to socio-cultural studies in the works of contemporary feminist theorists like Sandra Bartky, Iris Marion Young, and Sara Ahmed. Each feminist critic, in her respective way, worked women's experience into the phenomenological framework by weaving accounts, sometimes even personal stories, of women's situations in the lived world. The narrative of women's experiences that I will be focusing on is a literary one.

The fiction works selected for this thesis present women's experiences in and of the lived world. Modernist literature privileges ordinary experience. It speaks of life as it is, as “the mind receives a myriad of impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel” (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 160). Modern works, Woolf tells us, “express character,” even if it is banal and seems unreal (“Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” 31). Writers like Woolf are, according to Scott, “movers of modernism to its forgotten, gender-inflected territories,” for their works breathe life to the littlest things and neglected moments (*The Gender of Modernism* 3). They are committed to “describe beautifully, truthfully” character, which is really “the spirit we live by, life itself” (“Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” 39). *Mrs Dalloway*, in this regard, is about life and the situations it deals.

By analysing *Mrs Dalloway* and Woolf's stories of places, this chapter shows how literary texts bring the abstractions in phenomenology to a material and experiential level whilst elucidating hidden aspects of situations that cannot be properly described in the real world. Literature, interweaving the real and imagined, seated nicely between the two enclaves of experience, accounts for experiences

without being reductive or metaphysical. The narratives of places such as the park and kitchen in *Mrs Dalloway* are, I argue, descriptive situations of lived experiences of feminised places. They draw up a microcosm of the material world according to different subjective perspectives of the same place. Multi-perspectivism in *Mrs Dalloway* is key to understanding how experience is not one and unified but dispersed and dimensional. In trying to articulate subjectivity and sub-/consciousness, Woolf uses free indirect discourse and other narrative strategies to emulate multi-dimensional experience. This experience, I think, is the closest we can get to an originary, albeit fractured and sometimes incoherent, experience.

This chapter is about how narratives of places articulate the complexities and depth of phenomenological situation. It shows how the novel can be a means of re-envisioning phenomenological ideas and exercising them in more experiential ways. The chapter addresses how multi-perspectivism affords different perceptual accounts of places, wherein each account reflects a particular position and orientation towards the world, one person's subjectivity and socio-cultural standing. It is the richness of Woolf's narratives of places that gives texture and experiential plurality to the philosophical conception of situation. By examining phenomenological ideas through literary renderings of women's experiences of the lived world, this chapter lays out the groundwork for a nascent literary feminist phenomenology that will be continued in later chapters.

### ***Situations in Phenomenology and Literature***

Understanding how situations occur in literary texts and how they are imaginatively enacted in narratives helps to reveal the ways in which human beings experience places and the things and appearances within them. Particularly, the modes of

representing experience tell and describe experiences. Phenomenology is fundamentally about how phenomena are experienced in their givenness, where the process of perception and of givenness is the only way phenomena appear to the beholder.<sup>32</sup> The novel, in general, with its narrative of experience that represents some form of reality, offers a unique approach to the conveyance of phenomena as they appear to the perceiver. Dan Zahavi, a proponent of what some scholars call neo-phenomenology that studies Husserlian philosophy in light of cognitive sciences, comments on how experiences are represented:

Rather than saying that we experience *representations*, it would be better to say that our experiences are *presentational*, and that they *present* the world as having certain features. (“Intentionality and Phenomenality” 75)

In this regard, the literary text, in trying to communicate subjective and imaginative ways of experiencing the world, “presents” narratives of experiences where each description “presents” a feature of the world.

Understanding that narratives of experiences are *presentational* is useful for a literary phenomenology because the bifold quality of being presented and presenting illuminates how experiences are told and described. With the mastery of figurative language and diction, interior monologues, stream-of-consciousness, interweaving narratives, and a virtuoso flair for expressing subjective experience, *Mrs Dalloway* wonderfully presents a world that in spite of convolution and chaos connects its inhabitants. It proffers another kind of situatedness of place: that is, an artistic and literary milieu that interweaves distinct perceptual accounts of the same lived world.

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<sup>32</sup> Givenness (*Gegebenheitsweise*) is a term in phenomenology that means the appearing of things as they are to the beholder.

The situation of a place encompasses people and things that come together in a certain locality, and the happenings and interactions between them. Situations are not physical loci per se, phenomenologically speaking, but are possible through the places in which bodies (characters) appear and move, engaging with surrounding phenomena in a given place (setting). To be in a situation, *in situ*, is to undertake a position and be *situated*. From this position one experiences the things and events of the given situation. The exact location or “level” in place in which one takes up is, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, “a spatially particularized” setting that facilitates the perception of place according to where one is positioned and oriented towards (POP 295). Every spatial point comes with a unique view of place. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, each place Clarissa wanders into presents a particular scene of London viewed through her eyes. She carries with her biases, memories, and preconceptions that give her a certain visual clarity, or un-clarity. The sights of different sides of London such as the parks and streets from various vantage points piece together a situation of place. They illustrate the importance of processes, intricacies, social and personal biases that constitute the narrative of place. This approach to narrating place threads narratives: we move from one object to another, scene to scene, as opposed to a bird’s eye view narrative. It opens up the main narrative to several others. Characters occupy positions and their perspectives are communicated in different ways which still collectively contribute to a multi-layered sense of situated place.

Novels like *Mrs Dalloway* are made up of perspectives and sub-narratives, each told from different positions, directing the flow of the story in a particular course. The omniscient narrator is usually charged with delivering the outline of the story, whilst characters are directly central to the unfolding of the narrative, if not secondary to plot development. The positions characters occupy and their backstories

affect and form situations. As they walk into place, they, according to Merleau-Ponty, “inhabit” and “actively assume” place (*POP* 117). From inhabitation and activities emerge “a spatiality of situation” where the body meets place (115). Experiences that occur from this meeting describe not only “spatial sensations” that the individual feels, but also the place with which one comes into contact (115). The accounts of such experiences encapsulate both the interior and exterior, where one’s sensuous experience is manifested kinesthetically, where thought-processes are mapped onto places and the routes on which one embarks. Still more significant is the manner in which this is enacted and expressed in the text. Places are described and presented as characters’ experiences are narrated. This is not to say that presentations of places are wholly subjective. Rather, in order to comprehend the extent to which place influences experience, we must consider how its facticity—that is, the facts of the situation, of reality—are undertaken or thrown upon its inhabitants whose subjectivity and biases affect their perceptions.

A literary phenomenology faces the challenges of mediated experiences, particularly because of the modes of presentation that intervene with the perception of places. Yet again, the objective-subjective polarity resurges. Erich Auerbach, in his wide-ranging study of representation, *Mimesis*, expounds on the relation between subjectivity and objectivity in the novel: although “inner processes” (“movements within the consciousness of individual personages”) appear to be of primary significance in narrative prose, “exterior occurrences” are constantly “interspersed with [them]” (529).<sup>33</sup> Auerbach’s insight helps us rethink insipid details and ephemeral descriptions of places as extensions of insignificant occurrences that, despite arising from external circumstances, are just as important as inner workings.

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<sup>33</sup> The exterior occurrences mentioned in his analysis of *To the Lighthouse* are the trivialities of the scene that, on initial inspection, do not quite contribute to the workings of the mind.

From this perspective, characters' complaints and musings on inane details of their environment actually provide perceptive accounts of scenes of the same place. Not only are these "made to serve as the frame for what goes on," they are "worked in" (Auerbach 529). More importantly, because external occurrences are part of the narrative construction, even the supposedly objective world in which the narrative is situated bears marks of fiction. The situation of place breaks down the objective-subjective polarity and holds both in its givenness. For Merleau-Ponty, this translates to the idea of embodied subjectivity. For our discussion of a phenomenological perspective on place, subjectivity is not only embodied by the lived body, but also emplaced in the lived world.

The idea of an embodied and emplaced subjectivity in literary texts is not so much constrained by challenges posed by subjectivity and objectivity, interiority and exteriority, as it is concerned with presenting how they correlate in experience, where narratives of mental wanderings and physical wanderings are interwoven. This echoes Auerbach's claim that the body's actions in and about external occurrences reveal inner processes. Malcolm Bradbury and John Fletcher build on this, describing the novel to be an art that "hangs on the border between the mimetic and the autotelic species of literature" ("The Introverted Novel" 401). Accordingly, the novel sits comfortably between representing reality and allowing the described reality to speak for itself. It explores the powers of "perspective and form which lie in the spaces between the data and the creative object" (409). Here, data is inferred as the facticity of the situation into which the individual is thrown and has to take up. Although Bradbury and Fletcher underline the intrinsic relation between interiority and exteriority, stressing the tension that holds the modern novel, they see the novel as a work of "fine consciousness" (401), preferring an introversion that "desubstantiates



the material world and puts it in its place” (409). There is an underplaying of the significance of the external lived world in the study of experience.

Addressing the subscription to dualist models of reading that either favours the inward turn or simply represents the external world simpliciter, David Herman offers a way to interfuse polarities:

I seek to replace the internal-external scale with a continuum stretching between, at one pole, a tight coupling between an intelligent agent and that agent’s surrounding environment, and at the other pole, a looser coupling between agent and environment.... [Representing] consciousness can be seen as an attempt to highlight how minds are at once shape and are shaped by larger experiential environments, via the particular affordance or opportunities for action that those environments provide. (“Re-minding Modernism” 249-250)

Herman does not think about interiority and exteriority as opposites. He draws out two ends of a spectrum, where on both sides exist the agent (internal) and the environment (external). The difference between the poles is how tight the coupling is. Both are contingent on a mixing of the external and internal, hence diluting the distinction between them. So it is not about polarising or privileging any one, but rather understanding the relation between the two.

By highlighting the “modernist accent” that falls on “fictional-worlds-as-experienced,” Herman reconciles the environment with the agent (243). The curious phrase-word is made of words connected and separated by hyphens, their meanings conjoined but nonetheless distinct. This tension extends to and describes the paradoxical relation of poles: they are irresolutely separate yet intrinsically bounded together. It is the glue that coheres warring elements such as thought and action;

subjective construals and objective reality; the narrator and dramatis personae. The tension does not need resolving; it holds and connects seemingly irreconcilable opposites. Interiority, for example, does not have to be separated from exteriority. To quote Herman on this, “The mind does not reside within; instead, it emerges through humans’ dynamic interdependencies with the social and material environments they seek to navigate” (254). Whilst Herman’s intention is to explain the widespread workings of the mind (how it is embodied and emplaced to some extent), the subject in question is the “intelligent” agent. As with Fletcher and Bradbury’s “creative” object, the “intelligent” agent raises questions as to what constitutes intelligence or creativity. Although Herman’s ideas on fictional worlds have helped develop a literary phenomenological framework for looking at situations, the discussions in this thesis are not about the intelligent subject. Unlike Herman, I am more interested in how consciousness is embedded in the material, working world, not in the thinking mind per se.

### *Situations in Mrs Dalloway*

To invoke again Woolf’s last words in *A Room of One’s Own*, women must “have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think” (131). We have to see and experience for ourselves the landscapes, the sky, the horizon, the city and its streets. Woolf avows commitment to narrating experiences of a material world in her novels and essays, but none so as reifying as the much lauded *Mrs Dalloway*. Places like Regent’s Park, Piccadilly, the kitchen, and the attic are mirrors of characters’ situations, where attitudes and differences are sustained.

Squier, in *Virginia Woolf and London*, notes that Woolf chooses a “spatial rather than a conceptual form” to record her memories (8). She elaborates that Woolf adopts an

“angle” that helps create scenes in her writings: “Taking ‘angle’ not as a mental perspective on a subject but as an actual physical relationship between objects or places in space” (8). Again there is emphasis on the synergy between individuals, objects, and place in order to complete the scene. On this, Leena Schröder suggests, “there is an *interactive* relation between us and the world,” i.e., both place and the body are active agents (“Virginia Woolf’s Phenomenological Relations of Time and Space” 133). She states that the body and place are one: place should be seen as “an extension of the body itself that incorporates space and time into a self that every moment is created anew” (139). Woolfian scholarship on place often ruminates on the unity of body and place. Whilst the overlapping of body and place does haunt Woolf’s writing, the discussion here focuses on how interactions between bodies and places create situations.

In the novel situation is most effectively grasped in the setting. The place of choice in *Mrs Dalloway* is London. It is the mecca of interactions and activities where characters crisscross ordinary and landmark places. In presenting a myriad of interacting narratives of experiences of London, the novel captures a lively sense of space. Though different in approach, Woolf’s novel like Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology explicates the lived world. Louise Westling too catches on to the similarity: “Woolf’s dynamic, participatory vision of the real is very close to [Merleau-Ponty’s] thinking” (“Virginia Woolf and The Flesh of the World” 859). She is correct to point out that both Woolf and Merleau-Ponty write about a “lifeworld” which “captures human embeddedness within the flesh of the world” (858). This “lifeworld” and the “vision of the real” mean more than lifelike mimics of reality. Whilst *Mrs Dalloway* has been called an “encyclopedia of the city’s streets and landmarks,” it is not a compendium of places in post-war England (Snaith and Whitworth, “Introduction: Approaches to Space and Place in Woolf” 1). The novel is

a narrative of experiences of the material world. It does not try to represent but draws an alternative lived world through the subjective perception of characters.

*Mrs Dalloway* is about ordinary lived experiences of places. It follows Clarissa Dalloway as she physically wanders about more affluent parts of London, exploring the topography of a decadent polis during the post-war period. The opening pages draw us into a visual and auditory moment experienced by Clarissa in early twentieth century London:

In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (4)

Place is conceived in relation to phenomena contained within its parameters. London is lived and materialised in the sights and sounds, hustle and bustle of the scene. This presentation of place contrasts with Ford Madox Ford's description:

London, in fact, is so essentially a background, a matter so much more of masses than of individuals.... A human aggregation, it leaves discernible so very little of the human that it is almost as essentially a natural product as any great stretch of alluvial soil. (*The Soul of London* 6)

Ford's vision of London is generic. He downplays the materiality of place, describing the society of London, not its place. This broad view of place focuses on the masses, homogenising society and bypassing the material world. It fails to consider atomic details and scattered phenomena that exist within place. Ford may not have intended to commodify place, but his reference to place as a background, accommodating the

masses, elucidates the general attitude towards place in discourses on space. That is, place preexists because things and people that exist have to occupy some place. This precept of place is troubling. Like Newtonian and Euclidian precepts of space, this misconception has in mind a particular modality of place before an experience of place even begins.

Woolf's vision of place in *Mrs Dalloway* is not centripetal. Place is painted from the ground up, gradually formed from piecing together bits and pieces of phenomena in place. Rather than teleologically building a narrative of place, there is emphasis on the many spatial vocabularies and perspectives that eventually coalesce into several focal points. In the well-known scene where a motor car driving an unknown member of the royal family parks on Bond Street, for example, everyone stops and looks at the motor car: Clarissa, Miss Pym, Edgar J. Watkiss, Septimus and Rezia Smith, and passers-by from many walks of life are "inclined the same way" (*MD* 13). Attention is first drawn to the pavement, Atkinson's scent shop, Mulberry's shop, then seamlessly digresses to the sounds of the motor engines, slowly piecing together an entourage of Londoners. The "gradual drawing together of everything to one centre" begins from ground level, from interacting with phenomena of place and subsequently moving towards describing a more all-rounded, though not necessarily unified, place (*MD* 12). As the narrative of place follows Clarissa's experience and perception, one assumes her directedness towards various sights and sounds. Place is not amorphous and mere background, but is detailed and personalised. Clarissa's participation in the lived world shared with others creates personal but also multi-perspectival places.

The pattern of space opening other spaces adds perspectives to otherwise absolute spaces. It also contributes to a structure of spatiality that maps out how

characters connect events of the past and present. This is exemplified when Clarissa asks Peter if he remembers “how the blinds used to flap at Bourton” (*MD* 31). She associates Bourton with objects. Her impression of place is tied to a piece of furniture whilst Peter slithers into a memory of having breakfast with her father. Peter thinks of the scene of having breakfast which then brings to mind a dining area. They envision place differently: Clarissa’s fancy for the physicality of place and the minute details of scenes reflects how place is conceived by its phenomena, whereas Peter’s grudge against Clarissa leads him to associate Bourton with unpleasant memories of rejection. She wants to walk through the grass; he does not care for it. To Clarissa, the blinds are an extension of Bourton; to Peter, the encounter with old Parry is a large part of Bourton. Her association of place is a physical one whereas his is symbolic. Or, to draw from the vocabulary of David Lodge, her relation to place is metaphoric and his metonymic.

In “The Language of Modernist Fiction,” Lodge posits that all fiction contains metonymic and metaphoric elements; some are more inclined towards one of the two, and others are suffused with both. Modern fiction, he writes, “belongs to the metaphoric mode” (492), and is also “perfectly compatible with the retention and exploitation of metonymic writing” (493). Clarissa’s view of the blinds as Bourton is, in his terms, synecdochic: the blinds are a “part standing for whole” (483). This means that her thoughts “proceed by associating items that are contiguous” (485). Peter, on the other hand, selects a particular memory instead. Each perception shows an idiosyncratic way of viewing place, also revealing the subjective lenses through which place is viewed.

On Clarissa’s perception, Vicki Tromanhauser notes how she makes sure to address the people and things in the places she walks. Clarissa personalises the

metropolis by greeting her neighbours, old friends, and shopkeepers as she walks the streets: “Clarissa’s pedestrian course marks out a particularized, personal London within the greater metropolis” (“Virginia Woolf’s London and the Archaeology of Character” 39). This is also apparent as Clarissa magnifies her presence by attaching a sense of herself to the places she visits. A description of St James’s Park is really a recollection of Clarissa’s time in Bourton; a description of Mulberry’s is Clarissa’s self-aggrandising account of her importance to Miss Pym. Every place she enters is suffused with her presence and bears her mark as she communicates her perspective in and of place. She possesses places by stamping part of herself onto them. Place, in this sense, becomes part of her. She is not only situated in place but is engulfed in a spatiality that admits and sustains intricacies, impressions and scenes, celebrating the diversity materialised in place.

Situations in the novel arise from points of view from which characters experience. Multi-perspectivism is at work as characters—gendered, biased, broken, idealistic, flawed, and essentially human—gather to experience places. We see this in the scene where Rezia, Septimus, Maisie Johnson, and Mrs Dempster congregate in Regent’s Park. The episode is framed by three main accounts of place, each told from a point of view reflecting the character’s state of mind and place in life. Merleau-Ponty explains how positions can reveal the depth of place:

I should see [depth] if I were in the position of a spectator looking on from the side, who can take in at a glance the series of objects spread out in front of me, whereas for me they conceal each other.... What

makes depth invisible for me is precisely what makes it visible for the spectator as breadth. (*POP* 297)<sup>34</sup>

The depth that “I” fails to see is equivalent to the breadth that the spectator perceives. The perception of depth is taken to be that of breadth when the two are actually completely different experiences. Remarkably, *Mrs Dalloway* interweaves the positions in a manner that forbids one from subsuming the other.

In the Regent’s Park episode, positions enabling the experience of depth and breadth are embodied by different characters but embedded in the same locus. They are separate but one at the same time. Later in the scene when Septimus’s distorted vision makes it difficult to identify place, the park melts into blotches of random colours of “white things,” “green stuff,” “blue and pink smoke,” and “dun-coloured animals” (*MD* 18-19). His experience seems purely imaginative and senseless. Yet, this perverse account suddenly becomes sensible if read alongside Maisie Johnson’s viewpoint. Maisie observes that there are “dogs busy with the railings, busy with themselves” (20), which reminds of Septimus’s “dun-coloured animals” that peered “over the Zoo palings, barking, howling” (19). What is imperceptible to Septimus is perceivable for Maisie. They are both spectators and participants at the same time. As characters assume various positions in place and their narratives intermingle, “the juxtaposition of points,” as Merleau-Ponty calls it, occurs and the depth of place manifests itself (*POP* 297). Multi-perspectivism makes it possible to trace the originary contact of place which is consistent and connects disparate perspectives. It is the perceptual interpretations of the park from the characters’ respective positions, and not the object of the park as a static monument per se, that make depth visible.

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<sup>34</sup> The point on depth develops from traditional ideas of perception and is one that Merleau-Ponty challenges. Here, the brief discussion of depth enables the consideration of positionality, which is the main focus of this section. Depth—whether conceived traditionally or phenomenologically—is indubitably created by points and positions. For a detailed analysis of depth, refer to chapter 4.



We have seen how Septimus's delirium affects perception. Characters take up positions according to their circumstances and experience the world. To Rezia, the park is "everything terrible" (*MD* 17). Her perception is affected by her predicament: "Her wedding ring slipped—she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered" (17). She compares her experience of park to the Milan gardens, the cheerful Italian crowd with the "half alive" Londoners (18). Whilst Rezia's thoughts hinge on her subjective expectations of the park which she has internalised from her previous experiences, they are nonetheless intrinsic to her being. Analysing the same scene, Werner Deiman identifies Rezia as the embodiment of historical continuity, connecting her with "Roman forbears" and "their response to new terrain and geography" ("History, Pattern, and Continuity in Virginia Woolf" 53). The same can be said of Septimus who carries the trauma of war with him. Deiman claims that "Woolf's deeply rooted historical consciousness became the springboard for belief and her orientation to the future" (66). With a historicist lens, he identifies in Woolf's works "a pattern of history," which "offered redemption from time and affirmed finally a continuum into the future" (66). Deiman's approach is not phenomenological; he shows how human beings are entrenched in forms of intentionality (directedness is synchronously backward and forward). A literary feminist phenomenology, however, is not as keen on one's rootedness in the past or how it impinges on present perception. Rather it works with how narratives of experience sustain the tension between past and present, and what this says about the workings of underlying categorical ideologies that structure perception and experience.

The situatedness of place gathers together multiple descriptions of place and allows different positions from which place is experienced. Rezia's perspective, although shares the "darkness" of her Roman ancestors, adds to and confirms the

facticity of the park, which is the state of the park that precedes the characters' entrances (*MD* 18). As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the facticity of the world is "always 'already there' before reflection begins—an inalienable presence" (*POP* vii). This "already there" quality is not the same as Deiman's idea of a preexistent historical consciousness. It is not a predetermined fact wanting to explain itself, but a feature of the world waiting to be undertaken and described. For instance, Rezia's complaint of the park as a "terrible" place of "sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down" unveils snippets of the quotidian occurrences in Regent's Park (17): "people here, huddled up in Bath chairs, looking at a few ugly flowers stuck in pots" (18). The descriptions, though brimmed with displeasure, rather effectively illustrate the park. Rezia may apprehend the darkness as her forefathers saw but the park which is already there does not present itself as preexistent, impacted by factors apart from the way it appears to her. In fact it gradually forms only as she describes it. Thinking of greener pastures in Italy, along with the references to history, Rezia's sense of place is brimming with nostalgia, yet her biased and subjective experience of the park is still very much rooted in its spatial objects. This is juxtaposed with her recollection of the Milan gardens where she uses plurals and general descriptions that are not as specific as the biting but concrete words she uses to criticise the park.

The intertwining of Rezia's past and present, her experiences in Milan and in Regent's, shows how boundaries are blurred in place. Other places can coalesce in a single locality; stories of places come together to form a grand narrative of place. There is plurality when she fully inhabits place and gets carried away in place, so to speak. The blurring of memories and experience, history and present, subjective feelings and objective sensing, is achieved through free indirect discourse where

Rezia's perspective and the narrator's supposedly more objective commentary interweave, purveying a layered perspectivism for the narrative. Free indirect discourse is a narrative interplay of interior/exterior, public/private, past/present, and the list goes on, that presents reality as perceived and as presented for the perceiver.

Anna Snaith gives an account of what she calls "indirect interior monologue":

[It] occurs when a character's thoughts are presented in the third person by the narrator. The narrator enters the mind of the character and reports his or her thoughts verbatim, but the first- and second- person pronouns of direct interior monologue are absent.... Indirect interior monologue can be signalled by the narrator with, for example, the usage 'she thought,' or the move into the character's mind can be left to the reader to locate.... Often the line between reporting and showing what a character is thinking is difficult to discern. ("Virginia Woolf's Narrative Strategies" 134)

This narrative manoeuvre shifts between "public and private voices," and characters' voices are "internal" whilst "the narrator's is external" (134). Snaith elaborates that the narrators in Woolf's writings have "the omniscience to move the narrative while their own private realm remains untouched" (134). Likewise, characters often disclose their private thoughts without any means of controlling the narrative beyond their own. Snaith opines, rather than "relinquishing either authority or subjectivity, indirect interior monologue allows Woolf to combine and move between the two" (134). There is a tight coupling between the internal and external that presents place from a distance, as well as intimately.

Free indirect discourse is at work when Rezia first reminisces about Italy:

Far was Italy and the white houses and the room where her sisters sat making hats, and the streets crowded every evening with people walking, laughing out loud, not half alive like people here, huddled up in Bath chairs, looking at a few ugly flowers stuck in pots! (*MD* 17-18)

The omniscient narrator conveys the short section, but it is Rezia's sentiments that are expressed. The narrative slips in and out of her thoughts of missing Italy and resenting London. The phrases, "half-alive like people here" and "ugly flowers," bear Rezia's prejudices against London and her dissatisfaction (18). "Here" refers to her proximity to the crowd and blurs the distinction between her consciousness and the external narrative. Even punctuating the sentence with an exclamation mark suggests a personal emotion that traces back to Rezia's previous laments about her predicament. This culminates when she bursts out, "For you should see the Milan gardens," ascertaining that the previous section is an extension of Rezia's thought-processes (18). This method of narrative telling, instead of having Rezia personally lament her unhappiness or a third-person narrator communicating an observation outside subjective opinions, is disinclined to offer an absolute perspective. It continues when Maisie Johnson enters the park, further showing how character and narrator's perceptions and voices are intertwined.

Compared to the crestfallen and resigned Rezia, Maisie, a nineteen year old exploring London for the first time, occupies another position in the situation of the park. Maisie provides a mundane picture of the general crowd in Regent's Park, expressing her little interest for the people and their activities. Her impression of the park forms when she is greeted by Rezia and Septimus in a far from hospitable manner. Maisie is immediately uncomfortable and feels out of place. The narrative is peppered with the words, "odd" and "queer," pronouncing her displacement. In

addition, the adjectives, “stone” and “prim,” add to the hostile atmosphere. With a third-person narrator reporting her actions and feelings, free indirect discourse expresses Maisie’s state of mind without having her directly voicing her experience. Unlike Rezia’s section, Maisie’s account lacks quotation marks and uses bracketed commentaries to direct the narrative and explain Maisie’s actions. They function as brief interjectory backstories that insert back the presence of a third-person narrator who has been seemingly ousted from the narrative. Although Maisie does not directly speak—she is somehow distant from the narrative—the extent of her alienation is fully expressed. It is as though the narrator and Maisie are one in the same narratorial voice and yet remain distinct. Free indirect narrative enables different perspectives to simultaneously manifest. The narrator gains more access to the characters’ thoughts; characters dwell on their feelings whilst still keeping an aesthetic distance.

In this instance free indirect discourse distances the characters from self-aggrandising monologues and draws the external narrator closer to the happenings of the novel. It is freed from the conventional third person and from the syntax of direct speech. On free indirect discourse, Roy Pascal writes, “the value of the term ‘indirect’ is that it indicates that both a narrator and character are involved” (*The Dual Voice* 32). He also points out that this “does not suggest the mingling, even fusion, of two voices in a dual voice, neither simple narrator nor character” (32). Duality enables the co-existence of interiority and exteriority; they are distinct correlates conjoined as a couple. The duality is not a fusion of two positions but a position from which two perspectives are working alongside one another towards presenting a more knowable world. Duality is apparent as place is experienced from a dual position: Regent’s Park is seemingly experienced at a distance through the voice of the omniscient narrator, and also intimately through Rezia and Maisie’s thoughts and emotions. The park is

represented by the narrator's reporting voice and also by their consciousnesses. Here, both accounts are tightly linked, demonstrating a multi-layered perspectivism that preserves both direct descriptions and mediated explanations of experiences.

As more perceptual experiences of the park are admitted into the narrative, a multi-perspectival narrative of place emerges. In the same example of Regent's Park, as Septimus desires to run away from people, the paragraph is narrated in free indirect discourse where the narrator speaks with the characteristics of the involved character. The third-person narrator likens the slope of the park to "a length of green stuff with a ceiling cloth of blue and pink smoke" and describes the "dun-coloured animals" with elongated necks (19). The scene is dramatised by "howling" and "barking" noises, made more chaotic by jarring images of "irregular houses... hazed in smoke" (19). The cacophonous scene parallels the disturbed state of mind of Septimus; it follows that, because of his illness, he sees the park distorted. It is not a sound representation of reality, as compared to that of Rezia or Maisie's. Yet, in his brief description of the park, the chairs are referred to twice—the first occurs when Septimus wants to run away "where there were chairs beneath a tree," and the second is when the narrator concludes, "There they sat down under a tree" (19). In the first instance, the narrator is speaking for Septimus and the narrative is locked in free indirect discourse. In the second, however, the dramatic description of the scene has ended, and the previous lengthy and convoluted sentence is succeeded by a simple observation of the couple sitting under a tree. It seems, for that concluding remark, the narrative has slipped out of Septimus's consciousness and returned to the narrator, who ascertains that the chairs are indeed under the tree. Either way, in or out of Septimus's consciousness, or between that and the narrator's commentary, the facticity of the park remains constant. The chairs are banal but they are the meeting point where subjectivities

intersect. One character's narrative of the park, mentioning the chairs, immediately brings into the scene another character's narrative. In this way, the chairs constitute the facticity of the park that connects the disparate experiences of characters.

In *Solid Objects*, Douglas Mao interrogates Septimus's perception of trees in the same scene and makes a claim about objects as the facticity necessary for "intersubjective mediations" (54).<sup>35</sup> Adopting philosophical readings of production and commodification in modernism, he writes about banal objects, or "natural phenomena," as "referents" that lead back and point towards signifiers (46).<sup>36</sup> Mao elucidates how they tug at the crisis between "appearance and contingency" (43). He compares Septimus's and Rezia's perceptions of the trees in the park:

Rezia addresses the pattern [of the trees] as the limited signifier of something specific, her manner of reading conspicuously literalized by the fact that in this case the signified lurks physically right behind. But for Septimus, the pattern suggests something about "everything." (47)

Perceptions of the same object inspire different responses: Rezia sees the image but Septimus "transforms signification into sensuousness" (47). Plagued by the "horror of the possible meaninglessness of everything," Septimus does not see what idealism or reality exhibits but "make[s] something out of the possibility that meaning might proceed from the object without reference to some ordered system" (48). Septimus and Rezia show two ways of seeing objects but neither is privileged. The disparity appears to inhibit communication between them but a closer analysis conveys that both ways are equally crucial to expand on experience.

Rezia does not know what Septimus is seeing but keeps imploring him to look away, as if sensing his wayward vision. The directive, "Look," is repeated six times;

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<sup>35</sup> For Mao, the tree stands between the "nonlinguistic" and "nonsentient," and is a "product of nature rather than humanity" (48).

<sup>36</sup> Mao uses the terms "object" and "phenomenon" interchangeably.

the seventh is a wave for his attention. The dogged attempts to get her husband to turn away from what he sees hint of Rezia's awareness of something awry about his vision. Septimus, at the receiving end, does not hear her but hears another: "Look the unseen bade him, the voice which now communicated with him" (19). The narrative depersonalises Rezia, reinforcing Septimus's inability to make sense of her. Mired in their positions, they are incognisant of the other's vision and fail to get through to each other. Still, they are somehow connected. Rezia persists to distract her husband whilst Septimus mistakes his wife's voice for the Lord's. The fine details are suggestive of intersubjective experiences that do not have to be completely knowable before exchanges occur. This subtle way of interlinking experiences is telling of the modernist novel, or as Mao puts it, of "modernism's extraordinarily generative fascination with the object understood as neither commodity (Goods) nor as symbol (Gods), but *as* 'object,' where any or all of the resonances of this complexly polysemous word might apply" (4). In this Mao explains how the modernist novel endeavours to present experiences of objects through multi-perspectivism where perspectives are not transparent to perceivers. The interrelation of experiences in spite of ignorance confirms something affective hovers over experience.

It is easy for us to discount disturbed perceptions of place. But the extremities of subjectivity as presented in *Mrs Dalloway* show that affected, biased perceptions do not always impede experience. At first glance, Septimus's illness clouds his judgement; Rezia's sufferings hamper a carefree experience; Maisie's displacement prevents an appreciation of Regent's Park. Yet, despite dissonance and confusion, the characters, along with the external narrator, reinforce the brute matter of the park—that is, the Bath chairs. They experience the park differently: Rezia watches the crowd; Maisie zeroes in and identifies them as the elderly and invalids; Septimus sees



smudges of colours. Their visual fields are completely different, but the intricacies embedded within their experiences are related. Phenomenologically speaking, situation is dependent on facticity and the modes of givenness through which phenomena is presented. Each character occupies a point in the spatiality of the park and presents a givenness of place—the way in which the park appears to them, each giving different details of the park that complement another's. The characters put together a narrative of the park: Septimus lays the colours of the park; Rezia informs of the atmosphere and general attitude of the park-goers; and Maisie highlights the demographics. Together, their experiences provide a more perceptive description of the park. The park is a lived world, its narrative enlivened by motile, affective, and sensuous individuals. Multi-perspectivism does not present the park as complete because as mentioned earlier the perceptual accounts are not interfused. Rather, it makes a situation out of the park. The park becomes more knowable as phenomena are understood in terms of how they appear to the characters.

Septimus, Rezia, and Maisie are subjects who occupy positions enabling them to draw out different narratives of the same place. Separate perceptual experiences of phenomena intersect because the facticity of the place is constant, i.e., the state of an environment into which one is thrown, where she has no ability to change the pre-existing variables in a situation. Whilst facticity is determinate, orientation and position Kern tells us are relative and in motion, each one responsible for a “part of the environment that a particular [individual] can actually experience” (137). A single experience of place, however myopic, is part of the montage of various positions and orientations that together create a circumstance, the “plurality of spaces,” as opposed to the “universality of a single space” (135). Massey writes in *For Space* that space can be understood through “tales of crossing and conquering space” (4). It is a

“collection” of stories brought about by the “specificity of place” that brings together the “non-meetings-up, the disconnections and the relations not established, the exclusions” that are usually left out (130). In *Mrs Dalloway*, the park collects the interspersed experiences of characters, even though characters themselves may not be aware of each other. To emphasise the lived world means to regard each experience of place as a piece of the discourse of place that develops as each scene unfolds.

### ***Connecting Places***

As place opens up other spaces, its inhabitant reaches out to other inhabitants. There is a streak of anxiety and longingness for something outside the present that runs through characters sharing the same place. Rezia is anxious to hide Septimus and yearns for Italy; Maisie is distressed and regrets leaving Edinburgh; Septimus wants to get away from people. Even Mrs Dempster, who has the least contact with the rest, contemplates her life choices and longs to visit foreign lands as she once did. A collective pensiveness evoking nostalgia, insecurity, and regret emanates from their separate experiences in the park. Most evidently, Maisie’s distress reminds of Rezia and Septimus, particularly because they are the causes of her uneasiness. She cries “Horror! Horror!” when she sees Septimus, presumably frightened by him (20). She does not give Septimus much thought, perceiving him as she would with the chairs and trees in the park. In “Narrativizing Characters in *Mrs Dalloway*,” Annalee Edmondson writes that “though she does not theorize about his interiority,” Maisie is “deeply affected” and “will continue to be haunted by Septimus” (27). It seems Septimus’s trauma is infectious, rubbing off Maisie even though she only caught a glimpse of him. There is an inarticulate, affective quality of experience that is outside preconceived knowledge and beyond the appearances of phenomena.

When one perceives another, something affective connects their experiences. Edmondson tells us that characters are “intersubjective” due to “the ways in which their consciousnesses register the other consciousnesses they encounter in the metropolis” (19). The intersubjectivity, as well as connecting experiences, is mentioned en passant in *Phenomenology of Perception* where Merleau-Ponty writes on the lived body in a world of other selves:

Not only have I a physical world, not only do I live in the midst of earth, air and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, implements, a bell, a spoon, a pipe.... I feel the close presence of others beneath a veil of anonymity. *Someone* uses the pipe for smoking, the spoon for eating, the bell for summoning.... (405)

The lived body as the subject perceiving objects senses that being in a living world means having to deal with constant changes and degenerations of its surroundings and also needing to come into contact with other visible bodies. We are in a lived world as well as in an intersubjective macrocosm:

Someone is making use of my familiar objects. But who can it be? I say that it is another, a second self, and this I know in the first place because this living body has the same structure as mine. I experience my own body as the power of adopting certain forms of behaviour and a certain world, and I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world; now, it is precisely my body which perceives in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. (412)

It seems it is when we thoroughly recognise how the body experiences the world that we can identify our intentionality in the behaviour of another.

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of plural bodies and consciousnesses is as always somatic and analytical. He uses many *ifs*, examples of a baby and child who are not aware of an intersubjective world, lovers and chess players who are conscious of it. Yet, in the last pages of his discussion, he uncharacteristically and rather abruptly invokes God: "In God I can be conscious of others as of myself, and love others as myself. But the subjectivity that we run up against does not admit of being called God" (*POP* 418). Omniscient and omnipresent, "conscious of others as of [himself]," and "love others as [himself]," God is the answer to the philosophical question of "how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them" (423). Resorting to a transcendental Being for resolve accentuates the difficulty of reconciling "solitude" and "communication" (418). Merleau-Ponty urges his readers to think of them as "two moments of one phenomenon" (418). On the phenomenon, he elaborates:

The central phenomenon, at the root of both my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others, consists in my being given to myself. *I am given*, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world—*I am given to myself*... (419)

To say *I am given* is to acknowledge that one is part of a social world and that being social is part of one's existence. Yet, to be able to say *I am given* is also indicative of one's knowledge of one's social situation. It is also to say,

*I am given to myself*, which means that this situation is never hidden from me, it is never round about me as an alien necessity, and I am never in effect enclosed in it like an object in a box. (419)

Contrary to popular belief, the social world is not a threat to individual solitude.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the task of phenomenology, once we are done with the

natural world, is to “rediscover” the social world as “a permanent field or dimension of existence” (421). In this world we become “a dual being”: “we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity,” where “I am free from myself, for the other person’s thoughts are certainly not mine” (413). Because the lived world involves other selves and subjectivities, the rediscovery impoverishes philosophical rhetoric. We get hints of philosophy’s inadequacy from the invocation of divinity in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Structurally, the exposition on other selves is slightly odd, lacking the clarity and references to physiology and natural sciences from which Merleau-Ponty is wont to draw. Phenomenology stutters when describing the material experience of the self in the social world.

This is one aspect in which the literary text can bring something particular to phenomenology. In *Mrs Dalloway*, intersubjectivity and interconnectivity are part of characters’ interiority. The privacy and openness of experiences are held in tension. *Mrs Dalloway* distinguishes and interpolates subjectivities, showing how experiences outside the first person can be constituted and shared without effacing the self. One’s unique existence is not compromised even though she experiences other bodies and shares their experiences. The affect and sociality of human beings are unexplainable but they connect people and places, spreading out humanity in that way.

Apart from character-to-character narratives, situation also emerges from intra-character experiences. We have seen how several characters build a narrative of place. Place may also be built from different narratives of places threaded together by a single character. The novel with interspersing spatial narratives helps envision a place made up of separate situations and dialogues moving between places. Samuel Mallin notes how “situations are mastered (though never finally) through a process of articulation” where “aspects of a situation... interweave and are dialectically

interconnected” (*Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy* 14). It is important to register the various “sides” of situation because “these sides point beyond themselves in the opposite direction as well to something more or other than what is made available in the particular situation” (16). It is as if processes of telling and revealing perspectives of place plot a grand map of the situation. In *Mrs Dalloway* the map is of the city. Michel De Certeau avows the importance of spatial narratives and explicates how each is a description that functions as a tour, “conditioning a map” (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 119): “Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice” (115). The idea of stories as practices accentuates the intentionality that resides in the body. The body is a working and lived entity that preserves subjectivity, connecting, organising, and compressing various spaces as it experiences. This opens up the discussion of place to the possibilities of other extended situations which are outside the current locality.

The connectivity between separate physical places is exemplified in an early scene of St James’s Park. As Clarissa enjoys her walk in the park, her thoughts lead from the physical visuals of St James’s to memories of Peter and herself in a similar park. Her memories culminate as she remembers the “scene in the little garden fountain” where “she had to break with him” (6). In that moment, St James’s Park extends beyond the existing park in Piccadilly to include the remembered park in Bourton that she was in with Peter. The significance of the park also extends beyond the temporal reality and merges with the personalised park that Clarissa remembers. As she recollects and concurrently experiences, the park is not quite the past or present St James’s Park.

Place is not a static site on the map but becomes a situation of place that expands the parameters of its circumstances to include the possibilities of various anchorages. Woolf animates inert place through the slipping in and out of spatial

narratives and a continuity that juggles between an indulgence for interiority and an attachment to material objects. Clarissa does not announce that she is emotionally present in the park in Bourton but sees herself bickering with Peter and thereafter slowly pieces together parts of the place (the fountain and the little garden). Her perception of place forms through her storytelling. To use de Certeau's words, she does not present a map but gives a "circuit" or "tour" of place (119). "Tour" connotes movement and directions that point to and describe places without categorically identifying them. The tour-type description shuttles between *seeing*, which is "the knowledge of an order of places," and *going*, also known as "spatializing actions" (119). Woolf's description of place, however, advances a relentless intermixing of movement and perception. Stepping into St James's Park, Clarissa immediately also enters the park of her past.

Her description joins together the processes of going and seeing, ratifying Massey's theory of place as "a constellation of processes" (*For Space* 141). Massey and de Certeau recognise that place constantly wafts in processes. It is in the making and exists as various "sides" or "tours" which are described and articulated in relation to one another. This aspect of place is manifested in two separate episodes where Clarissa and Richard are on their way home. In the opening pages, Clarissa enters "the Park" and does not say which park this is; later it is revealed to be St James's Park. Hugh corroborates this: "I met Clarissa in the Park this morning" (78). As she walks, she remembers passing by Devonshire House and the Bath House, ultimately "driving home across the Park" (7). Later in the novel, Richard ponders getting flowers as he "walk[s] across the Park to tell his wife that he loved her" (85). Because they both have to cross the Park to get home, and since Clarissa walks through St James's Park, it is assumed that Richard is in St James's as well. Moreover, nowhere

else in the novel is Park capitalised. Whenever nondescript or specific parks are mentioned, the word, “park,” is set in lower case. So, in this case, we assume the Park is St James’s.

However, despite the inferences and much suspense, Richard is said to be “crossing the Green Park” (85). Green Park is towards the west of St James’s; they are not the same. Woolf’s meticulous drawing up of London, tracing routes through the city and naming specific streets and buildings, compels us to rethink the deliberate ambivalence of the Park. The couple needs to traverse the same park to get home yet, interestingly enough, Clarissa is never said to be in Green Park and Richard is never in St James’s. This detail, seemingly slight, is an example of how the novel draws connection between places, where the divide between spatial stories dissipates and they collectively make up the different sides of place. Richard and Clarissa’s narratives in and of the Park—whether it is St James’s or Green—give us a tour of the setting of the novel and also a map of the interior lives of the characters. They are disconnected but tied together. Their accounts in and of the park are articulations that condition and extend the map in *Mrs Dalloway*. Though married, Richard and Clarissa have a dispassionate love reflected in the different tours they take. Yet, the ambivalence of the parks brings them together. Being in different parks physically separates them, but the narrative of place connects the estranged couple. Ultimately, the inclusive and unnamed Park is the place around which their narratives surround, drawing them to the same spatiality that eludes the unsuspecting reader.

There is something affective, something that connects people, in places. For Woolf, this is what makes place exciting. “It is always an adventure to enter a new room,” she muses in “Street Haunting,” “for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it” (33). This is also why places are lived and



animated, not just part of the experience equation in which the environment is an incidental external occurrence. The spaces examined thus far are mostly social and communal spaces like the parks and streets; they are designed to bring people together. Connectivity, in some way and form, is expected. Compared to public spaces, private and delimited places are connecting in a different way.

### *Confining Places*

In the iconic attic scene where Clarissa retreats to rest after returning from shopping, the narrative is confined to a fairly small place. There is no touring, though movement in other ways still continues. The constraints of the attic limit Clarissa's movements; she is emplaced. In the attic, place and milieu are blurred as her memory of Sally commingles with the memories of places. Some scholars have interpreted the attic as a place where Clarissa's being and true sexuality are asserted. Shalom Rachman writes, "It is here that her consciousness opens into depth and she has a moment of vision, a moment she is her true self" ("Clarissa's Attic" 10). In another analysis, Jesse Wolfe suggests that the scene "reveals the range of her curiosity about herself" ("The Sane Woman in the Attic" 52). The attic is commonly regarded as a means to Clarissa's psyche. Veering from psychoanalytical and queer readings, this section focuses on the phenomenological experience of small, delimited spaces and how subjectivity is emplaced in such rooms.

In the attic, the highest room of the house, Clarissa tries to remember her initial impression of Sally. Instead of attributing personal traits to Sally, she immediately pictures her sitting on the floor. She thinks of the place they first met. Her question ("Who is that?"), asked when she first saw Sally, is replaced with "Where could it have been?" (24). It is as if the answer to one of the questions

satisfies the other. There is a correlation between person and place here. Marcel Proust relates to this connectivity when he tries to recall and write about a certain reading experience. At the end of the recollection, nothing about the book—its author and content—is said, but the things surrounding Proust whilst he reads saturate the narrative. Just as he does not remember the book but only remembers the interruptions, one does not need to know the story because the narrative of his situation suffices. It is as though place, its atmosphere and objects, tells a story that surpasses the one that is expected. Proust shares his thoughts:

I feel myself live and think only in rooms where everything is the creation, the language, of lives profoundly different from my own, of a taste opposed to mine, where I can find nothing of my own conscious thoughts, where my imagination is excited by feeling itself driven into the heart of not-me.... (“On Reading” 12)

Situations have creative powers that form narratives. Through the language and style in which they are delivered, situations delimited in place narrate experiences that are comparatively ordinary because according to Proust there is “nothing of [one’s] own conscious thoughts” (12). Proust’s experience can be read phenomenologically. What began as an explanation of the book ends up being a description of the situation around him. Likewise, as Clarissa tries to remember Sally, she recollects the situation of their first meeting, which reveals more about Sally and their relationship than the direct characterisation of her.

Clarissa’s substitution of Sally’s presence with the place she occupies erases boundaries between place and body. Her wondering about Sally proceeds by way of association and adjunction. According to Lodge, Clarissa remembering Sally presents the metaphoric and metonymic modes that are characteristic of modern fiction. Whilst

her perception is metonymic, associating Sally with the place in which she sat, the superimposition of the upper room in Bourton onto the London attic room is by means of metaphoric similarity. In order to remember Sally, Clarissa has to situate her. She sees her in a particular position—"She sat on the floor"—and that is her first impression of her (24). In metonymic contiguity, Clarissa puts together an image of Sally by visualising the place of encounter. As she continues to think of Sally, she is transported to Bourton, back to the night where they "sat, hour after hour, talking" in a room "at the top of the house" (24).

It is no coincidence that Clarissa confined to her attic room remembers an experience she once had in a similar attic-like place. In that moment, the actual place of the attic room in London intermingles with the remembered bedroom at the top of the house in Bourton. Somehow the rooms become almost synonymous. The similarity between them, pronounced by metaphoric perception, proffers a narrative of the room—the situation of place that goes beyond the temporal and extends the spatial dimensions of the transfixed place of the attic. Exchanges between characters and places not only accentuate the knitted relation between body and place, they also bring to the fore how perception and the narrative method in which it is delivered—metonymic or metaphoric—can blur the "clear distinction between what is actually 'there' and what is merely illustrative" (Lodge 494). According to Lodge, it is characteristic of modern fiction to challenge "positivist distinctions" (494), for "nothing is simply one thing" (495). This tendency sits well with phenomenology's idea of situation as a set of possibilities of positions. The recollection of Sally leads to the recollection of the room in Bourton, in turn offering a lens through which the present room in London can be viewed.

The exchange between the experience in the attic and recollection of the other room is symbolic of emplaced subjectivity. This is not the same as place being a vessel that fleshes out invisible psychological processes. Place is not incidental; it is intentional. It positions the individual in a way that elicits certain responses to the environment. For instance, there is a connection between the attic room barely furnished with a narrow bed and the “emptiness about the heart of life” (*MD* 23). In the spartan room, Clarissa adapts to place and takes off her feathered yellow hat. Gaston Bachelard describes the attic, or the upper room, as a place that “gives mankind shelter from the rain and sun he fears” (*The Poetics of Space* 18). It is a safe haven where encumbrances are stripped off, where women “must put off their rich apparel” (*MD* 23). To Rachman, Clarissa’s disrobing in the attic is a symbolic ritual:

Only in her attic can she let herself truly be, truly be Clarissa that is, or in other words, eliminate momentarily the censor that keeps the real Clarissa repressed and for a moment feel whole before assembling and composing herself for the world, even the world that is her own house.

(11)

Somewhere in her analysis finds the paradox of the room. The space anchors Clarissa, enabling her to be herself: she is safe in the attic, shielded from the outside world. Yet, the peace seems temporal (“momentarily” and “for a moment”). The transitory nature of the room could be attributed to the short span of time Clarissa spends there. But it is more notably a result of the room alternating between a place where Clarissa rests from the world and one where she prepares for the world.

There is something ascetic about the attic. Lying in the monastic room, Clarissa “could not dispel a virginity preserved through childhood which clung to her like a sheet” (23). Words like “clean sheets” and “virginity” connote innocence. The

layout of the room (object, place) and the chaste body (subject) are mutually dependent. They co-create an atmosphere impervious to the corruption of the world. It is in this place and state that Clarissa remembers the “purity” and “integrity” of her feelings for Sally (25). As Bachelard affirms, “Up near the roof all our thoughts are clear” (18). The attic provides Clarissa with a conducive environment that she may, in a stripped down room, recollect an experience pure and genuine.

It is rather interesting that Clarissa compares her feelings for Sally with those for men: “It was not like one’s feeling for a man... it had a quality which could only exist between women” (*MD* 25). To scholars, this admission reveals “Clarissa’s true nature is Lesbian” (Rachman 10). It is not her sexual orientation, I argue, but the dialectic of who Clarissa was and who she has become that sits at the centre of this scene. Before going into the attic, Clarissa is Mrs Dalloway shopping for flowers and preparing for her party. She is a wife, a hostess. Upon entering the attic, she removes her rich apparel, leaving those identities behind. She is “[I]ovely in girlhood,” visited by a “virginity preserved” (23). She is the young Clarissa back in Bourton, who “knew nothing about sex—nothing about social problems” (25). In the attic, she is the Clarissa she was before marriage who “could not take her eyes off Sally” (24), who “spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe” (25). In the attic, Clarissa is safe, curious as a girl, chaste as a nun.

The room provides solace and clarity where she rests from the rest of the world. But the stability is for a moment. Even Clarissa is suspicious of the goodness: “‘Oh this horror!’ she said to herself, as if she had known all along that something would interrupt, would embitter her moment of happiness” (27). True enough, within moments and without warning, the atmosphere changes and she starts thinking about her illness and reaching fifty-two. The fear of death creeps in. Anxiety is exacerbated

as the place of Bourton, feelings of joy, youthfulness, and camaraderie fade away. The scene is filled with brittle objects (glass and bottles) on the dressing-table, with her green evening dress hanging in the cupboard, reminding her of the present, she as a hostess, as a wife and mother, as Mrs Dalloway. It seems as if stillness is temporal, shifts are imminent, because space resists stagnancy. In the attic, spatial objects disrupt stasis.

The fragile and sharp objects lying on the table threaten the peace in the attic. Accentuated by the diction (“icy claws,” “broken,” “untouched”), which adds a touch of coldness and detachment, they generate uneasiness and fear (27). The change in tone and atmosphere can be explained by tracing Clarissa’s movements and what she sees. She moves to the dressing-table, presumably from the bed, and sees herself in the mirror and the dress she is supposed to wear. This side of the room and furniture confront Clarissa with the reality of the party and of who she has become. In the mirror she sees faces of “the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself” (27). The selves she strips off when she first enters the attic come back to her as she remembers her party and gets ready for it. Finally she exits the room pondering over what she has to do for the party. As the atmosphere shifts and Clarissa is once again preoccupied with the preparation for her party, the attic is no longer where she seeks rest from the world. Along with the changes, the attic becomes the place that prepares and reminds her of her roles in the world.

Such is the multiformity of places, however small and confining they are. In fact, smaller places more effectively draw out plurality. Despite the circumscribed space of the attic, multiple places are explored and even the functions of the room vary within itself. Its function is not one of utility, or of materiality per se; rather, it is how the subject perceives its materiality that determines what function of place it is to

her. As discussed earlier, whether the attic is a place of rest or reminder of unrest hinges on how its facticity is taken up by Clarissa. Place is never incidental or solely contingent on consciousness. Its function may be arbitrary but its materiality is intentional. Intentional space situates and directs its inhabitant. In the attic-room Clarissa is emplaced in a way that recalls memories of Sally and Bourton. But, in many other ways, places are intentional in ways that disadvantage female inhabitants.

Small places are also places that control and limit women. Figuratively, they reflect women's situations. This does not mean that men are not imprisoned by their circumstances, but their situations are largely affirming. If we follow up on Young's argument and see situations as cultural and socio-economical, then majority of women's places are veritably smaller and narrower than men's. The kitchen and the fitting room, for example, are small places associated with women. We think of the kitchen and picture women cooking; we think of the changing room and see them shopping. What underpin these associations are ideals of women as domestic and vain. Women are physically limited in small spaces, also figuratively confined to socio-cultural norms. To dismantle stereotypical ideas of domesticity and femininity, we have to start from within the walls of delimited spaces.

In *Mrs Dalloway* is a narrative of the kitchen. It is an intentional, small place where Mrs Walker works within domestic space to figure a way around the walls of entrapment without leaving the kitchen. The kitchen is traditionally associated with women and domesticity. De Beauvoir caustically describes how women fatuously make meaning of household chores:

With her fire going, woman becomes a sorceress; by a simple movement, as in beating eggs, or though the magic of fire, she effects the transmutation of substances: matter becomes food. There is

enchantment in these alchemies, there is poetry in making preserves; the housewife has caught duration in the snare of sugar, she has enclosed life in jars. Cooking is revelation and creation; and a woman can find special satisfaction in a successful cake or a flaky pastry, for not everyone can do it: one must have the gift. (472)

“Cooking is a revelation and creation” is the myth of domesticity. Deprived of the chance to write poetry and practice alchemy, women busy themselves with chores to mimic the works of men. But the “magic” dissipates as soon as “repetition” sets in (472). Mrs Walker goes through the motion; she seems apathetic and lacks interest. But, in spite of this, she is not desensitised. Rather, I think her composure—the grace and clockwork precision of her actions in the kitchen—is born out of the very conditions to which her class and gender subject her. This will become clear in the next few paragraphs.

As the Dalloway household entertains its distinguished guests, the scene is hectic: the servants, Lucy and Agnes, are running up and down; the ladies are going upstairs to change; the gentlemen are pacing, waiting, in the hall. Mrs Walker, amidst the chaos, is detached from the conviviality. Even the Prime Minister’s entrance does not faze her. Here the Prime Minister represents two powers: the male patriarch and the highest authority in society. Despite his prominence, she remains indifferent: “Did it matter, did it matter in the least, one Prime Minister more or less? It made no difference at this hour of the night to Mrs Walker” (120). Her nonchalance is not a passive acceptance of her lot but is proof of the unspoken power held by a woman who has mastered her situation after years of inhabiting a disadvantageous position. In the kitchen Mrs Walker makes slight of the Prime Minister and the power with which he is associated. Her “saucepans, cullenders, frying-pans, chicken in aspic, ice-cream freezers, pared crusts of bread”—and



the list goes on—override his entrance: “one Prime Minister more or less made not a scrap of difference” (120). In the banality and routineness of her chores, she has somehow acquired power in the place of the kitchen which affords her the power to ignore and act, quietly but surely, against the status quo.

De Certeau states that “without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live,” one can still “establish within it a degree of plurality and creativity” (30). He speaks of a strategy that makes the most out of circumstances. The kitchen, gendered and “bewitched by the invisible powers,” domesticates women, but as soon as Mrs Walker “delimits” her own place from the “environment,” she acquires power (De Certeau 30). She carves her space as she works in the kitchen. Cooking salmon and spinning plates are her ways of experiencing and working in the kitchen. They are practices that she has acquired as she adapts to the stereotyped feminine place. In “Negotiating Space in the Family Home,” Moira Munro and Ruth Madigan affirm that “women often create social space... by using their role as ‘housewife’ or ‘carer’ to distance themselves” (115). By deliberately busying herself, Mrs Walker carves a space for herself where she is able to control the forces of society by interpreting them in the language of her own space. She sees the Prime Minister as nothing more than her pots and pans in the kitchen, bringing him down to her level of perception. She is more concerned with the doneness of the salmon than his arrival. One could say, as de Certeau would, that Mrs Walker has “mastered” places, possessing the ability to “transform foreign forces into objects that can be observed and measured” on her own terms (36).

It can be argued that, despite creating a space of her own, Mrs Walker is after all a servant excluded from the party and on-goings in the hall. But as Alison Light notes in *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants*,

[Servants] were witnesses and eavesdroppers, allies and sometimes friends, whose emotional and sexual lives were entangled with those who gave them orders. Ruled by the cash-nexus, service was a relationship of trust which involved a mutual dependence. (4)

Whilst the servant is subordinate, dependent on the employer for food and money, she is privy to household secrets. She is also “amphibious,” shifting between spaces and allegiances, gaining insights into different situations and worlds (2). With such knowledge, it is true: “The servant, however vulnerable, wield[s] a precarious power” (4). It is not a stretch to say that Mrs Walker in possessing such secrets is a ‘master’ of the house in her own way, especially also because she has in the de Certeauian sense mastered her practice, that is, being exemplary in her role as the cook.

An analysis of Mrs Walker, the fictional Georgian cook, cannot be divorced from Woolf’s writing of the servants and her experiences with her own cook Nellie Boxall.<sup>37</sup> Woolf was often frustrated with Nellie’s complaints and agitations, and as Light describes, the employer and servant were in a “cat-and-mouse game” in which Nellie threatened to leave and Woolf searched for replacements (172). The fact that the employer could easily have dismissed the servant but she would not suggests an inexplicable hold the servant had over her. Talking about her mother in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf ruminates on how “invisible presences” have “influence” on our lives, whether or not they “attract or “repel” us (80).<sup>38</sup> It is this “influence” that diminishes the absolute dominance of the employer and highlights the servant’s “precarious power.” The influence over Woolf was reinforced by Nellie’s almost “first-class” culinary skills (174), equivalent to Mrs Walker’s mastery of the kitchen as aforementioned, “old loyalties”

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<sup>37</sup> Nellie Boxall had lived with Woolf for eighteen years, and for ten years she was her only live-in servant. The duration and intensity of the relationship “testified to their intimacy” (Light 165).

<sup>38</sup> Light adds “women who were meant to be invisible but whose presence disturbed her much” to Woolf’s “invisible presences,” including the servants (xx).

(207), and the basal desire of masters which Light rightly points out, “she wanted her servant to love her” (208). Thus, whilst Mrs Walker is the cook from a lower social class, subservient to the status quo as represented by the Dalloways and their distinguished guests and the Prime Minister, she is nonetheless a force, an “invisible presence” so to speak, who can from within the domestic realm express her difference and question, even threaten, the fixed power structure.

It should also be emphasised that the servant’s precarious power does not catapult her from a low social position to a higher one. In the case of Woolf and Nellie, the crux of the relationship was need: in Nellie’s “neediness” was also “Virginia’s need of her” (Light 221). It is a symbiotic relationship, one almost harmonious despite differences and struggles. An example of this plays out in a scene from *Between the Acts* where the cook Mrs Sands and Mrs Swithin are in the kitchen: “Mrs. Sands fetched bread; Mrs. Swithin fetched ham. One cut the bread; the other the ham. It was soothing, it was consolidating, this handwork together” (34). The co-relation is evident. Their thoughts are digressing, but they work in tandem. The mirroring effect may be less obvious in *Mrs Dalloway* but it nonetheless puts the power relation between the classes and gender in conversation. The chaos in the hall mirrors the busy scene in the kitchen. The Prime Minister is the patriarch, head of power, in the upper room; Mrs Walker has sole reign in the kitchen. It is not the case of pitting one power against the other; rather the illustration highlights the changing power relations and new freedom that modernity affords. Possibilities of “recreation,” Light observes, alongside the desire for “self-respect” fed into “the idea of more equal relations” (183-184). New ideas of the self, the increasingly aware modern individual regardless of class promise mobility, visibility, and the hope of new relationships and solidarity between women from different backgrounds and contexts.

To go further, especially given the period in which Woolf was writing, we can see Mrs Walker as the cook who is emerging from the Victorian basement and cluttered kitchen, destabilising traditions and reflecting a society on the cusp of socio-political changes. She is one of the “unrecorded” lives mentioned in *A Room of One’s Own* that must be written, whose life must be lived with curiosity and dignity (89). “All that you will have to explore,” urges Woolf (89). Herein is the call for the modern woman to explore physically, emotionally, and mentally the myriad of possibilities that are within her, that are not governed by the phallographic order and her father, brother, teacher, etc.. She does not leave the house per se—the early 1900s was not the time, yet—but she abandons the Victorian domesticity and feminine ideal in search for a room of her own and masters it. Such mastery of position and place affords her a way of negotiating power and relating to the larger forces at play in the social order that can only happen given her particular constraints. To be emplaced is not necessarily disempowering. The very predicament of being confined to small places enables women to create new means of experiencing limiting circumstances.

### ***Towards Feminine Experience***

We have seen how Clarissa and Mrs Walker in small spaces experience and cope with limitations, and also how Rezia and Maisie Johnson experience social spaces. The question haunting the discussions centred on women’s experience is what makes women’s experience, or what constitutes feminine experience. There is no one female perspective—to say so is to essentialise experience. But there is something about how women interact with places designed to keep and limit them that connects their experiences. From what has been discussed so far of women’s situations and how the female characters experience places, feminine experience has to do with women’s

emplacement and limitation. The conditioning of women's experience and the relegation to socially engineered and gendered spaces do not necessarily work against them, but place them in situations where they can experience differently. Understood as such, this experience is one that forms from a disadvantaged subject's interaction with the world.

The kind of experience I am expounding on is not singularly female-centric. Whilst ideally understood through women's interaction with place, given the policing of the female body and the normative behaviours and ideas of femininity entrusted to women, feminine experience emerges from delimited and disadvantageous situations and political conditionings that compromise the ability to experience the world in its givenness. A critique of gender opens up larger identity politics that are not exclusive to female existence. The gender-stratified world with its social norms and hierarchies predisposes its inhabitants to internalise certain beliefs which inhibit experience. Mrs Walker is a woman of the lower class; Rezia is a woman of foreign nationality. Other non-gender related issues affect them. Amongst the pariahs, most curious is Septimus who stands at the crossroads of historical, social, and gender inscriptions.

By Woolf's admission, Septimus reflects "the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side" (*A Writer's Diary* 51). On *Mrs Dalloway*, she writes: "I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticize the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense" (56). Septimus embodies the dichotomies that structure the social system and its debilitating effects on those who do not fit in and try to break away. He is a man who falls short of the expectations of Man, hence subjected to scrutiny and brutality of the upholders of Proportion and Conversion. The first is standards that define a person (say, if "a doctor loses" his sense of proportion, as a doctor he fails); the second is the sister of Proportion: "she feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the

face of the populace” (*MD* 73-74). Personifying the two fulcrums of the system as male and female reveals men and women’s complicity in oppression and division.

Hermione Lee writes on this:

But the social arena of the Dalloways... reflects Virginia Woolf’s fascinated dislike of the world of society hostesses, eminent politicians, distinguished doctors and lawyers, and grand old dowager ladies, in which powerful men talk a great deal of nonsense and the woman’s place is decorative, entertaining and subservient. (*The Novels of Virginia Woolf* 94)

There is awareness of the performance of experience orchestrated by myths, gender and social norms. In presenting how characters perceive and act in situations, *Mrs Dalloway* reveals the workings of these inscriptions and how the individual forges a different personal experience. In this regard, the novel, although primarily revolves around Clarissa, is not about a female protagonist’s experience of her enviroing physical and social milieus. What this implies, in terms of our discussion here, is that the modality of feminine experience is framed by human beings who are subjected to similar conditioning processes imposed on women. Just as not all women are feminine and men masculine, feminine experience is non-exhaustive. Neither is it tied to, as Young puts it, “distinctive structures and behavior typical of the situation of women” (140). To do so is heteronormative and essentialist. Feminine experience is an alternative narrative of experience that voices the silenced and makes visible what is neither-here-nor-there and in between.

An analysis of the scene with Septimus and Rezia in the sitting-room reveals more about how feminine experience embraces the ambivalent. Resting on the sofa in the sitting-room, knitting hats and bantering, Rezia and Septimus are “perfectly

happy” (*MD* 106). Behind the blissful front, Septimus struggles to be sane, looking cautiously to make sure things are “still” and “real” (103). The room from his point of view shuffles between the real and his vision: “Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting-room; watching the watery gold glow and fade with the astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wall-paper” (101). It is a liminal space between sanity and insanity. Comparing the scene to Regent’s Park where he refuses to sit down and is paranoid about Evans, in this room he is composed: “He was not afraid” (102). In this episode, fluency and eloquence of the language play a big part in mitigating the disorientation and blending well jarring images. When Septimus is first seen in the sitting-room, he has his hand on the back of the sofa and looking at it, it is like “he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, whilst far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away” (101). The narrative eloquently develops a far from logical perceptual experience. It first describes his hand lying as it would when he bathes which, although departs from present reality, is reasonable. The leap from bathing to floating is more difficult, but the water imagery holds them together. Finally, waves evoke scenes of shores, so together they make sense. The interior and exterior, real and imagination, are brought together.

Unity is intensified in an intimate moment shared between Septimus and Rezia:

He would look over the edge of the sofa down into the sea.... But ‘Lovely!’ he used to cry, and the tears would run down his cheeks, which was to her the most dreadful thing of all, to see a man like Septimus, who had fought, who was brave, crying. And he would lie listening until suddenly he would cry that he was falling down, down into the flames! Actually she would look for the flames, it was so

vivid. (102)

The first sentence brings together the conflicting images of the inside and outside envisioned by Septimus. Its conciseness and simplicity normalise the otherwise jarring images (the waves and flames). There is nothing overtly confusing in the description, as compared to the references to the carnival and clashing colours in Regent's Park. Furthermore, given how Rezia could not reach out to Septimus in the park, this scene is a stark contrast, accentuating the connection between the couple. Here we see Rezia searching for the flames that exist only in Septimus's mind. Although it is a hallucination, it is so perceptible that Rezia believes it. The affect between them is intensified by free indirect discourse; we slip from Septimus's mind to Rezia's. Woolf's formal technique, as Lee describes, demonstrates "a fluid transference of recurrent images from one character to another" (93). It allows Rezia, also the reader, to perceive from Septimus's point of view, which up until this point in the novel has been inaccessible. The example begins with Septimus's perspective of the room but as tears stream down it switches over to Rezia who sees the tears as the "most dreadful thing of all" (*MD* 102). To her, it is most excruciating to watch her husband cry. Here is a rare moment of empathy and connection that erodes the distinction between sanity and insanity. This moment she participates in his experience. In spite of the chaos, the narrative reconciles the real and unreal in that moment of connection. For once we see the Smiths happy and intimate. The scene is disjointed, as mad as its characters, but it shows an alternative means to understanding the couple's experience. Along with Rezia, we are drawn into Septimus's world and share his pain.

The intimacy between Septimus and Rezia is short-lived. The looming arrival of Holmes interrupts the moment and drives Septimus to head for the window. It is



significant that Septimus “would wait till the very last moment,” as if savouring every last chance he has in the room (108). He has acquired a way experiencing with his sane and insane mind that enables him to reconnect with Rezia and reignite lost affection. He is finally happy. “He did not want to die. Life was good” (108). But, at the last moment, just as Holmes stands outside the door ready to burst in, Septimus throws himself out. Many interpretations of the poignant scene concentrate on the evanescent moment of Septimus’s death that simultaneously connects and separates Clarissa and Septimus who are, according to John Roberts, “opposite phases of an idea of life itself” (“‘Vision and Design’ in Virginia Woolf” 837) Critics like Roberts see the “Clarissa-Septimus combination” fully realised in Septimus’s suicide (837). Such analyses hark back to ideas of “accessible minds” and collective interest,” which are related to affect studies (Edmondson 28).

These interpretations aside, I read Septimus’s suicide as an attempt to preserve his experience and safeguard his space. He stays by the window, taking in all of his last moment in the room, and just before Holmes intrudes into the realm that he has created for himself, he jumps. Something about the experience in that space is worth protecting. Lee interprets Septimus’s suicide as a result of his inability to “distinguish between his personal response and the indifferent, universal nature of external reality” (109). Whilst the outside world is external, emplaced subjectivity already interweaves physical and interior spaces. From a phenomenological perspective, Septimus’s suicide can be read as a valiant act of preserving an experience unique to his social position and mental state. Just as Mrs Walker buries herself in work, cooking the salmon and washing dishes, Septimus’s choice of safeguarding his space (though destructive and extreme) is, in some sense, a strategy towards mastering place.

Following her husband’s death, Rezia experiences a series of conflicting spatial

images reminiscent of Septimus's visions:

... on to some hill, somewhere near the sea, for there were ships, gulls, butterflies; they sat on a cliff. In London, too, there they sat, and, half dreaming, came to her through the bedroom door, rain falling, whispering, stirrings among dry corn, the caress of the sea, as it seemed to her, hollowing them in its arched shell and murmuring to her laid on shore, strewn she felt, like flying flowers over some tomb.  
(109)

Like Septimus, she experiences the crisscrossing of nature and London, interior and exterior, continuing his way of experience. The long sentence is intermittently punctuated, as if pausing to ruminate on each detail as Rezia stops to behold the scene before her. The commas slow down the narrative; the clauses pronounce each detail; they mimic the flow of Rezia's perception. This carefulness is deliberate and recalls Septimus's perception of the room: "He began, very cautiously, to open his eyes.... First he looked at the fashion papers on the lower shelf, then gradually at the gramophone with the green trumpet" (103). Rezia now sees in the way that Septimus would have seen. This is captured in her final moment of revelation: "She saw the large outline of his body dark against the window. So that was Dr Holmes" (109). It seems strange to announce her recognition of Holmes when this is not the first time they meet. It is as if Rezia takes on Septimus's point of view and for the first time sees the horrifying figure of Holmes that her husband always sees. In spite of death, there is continuity, connection between the couple, as Rezia inherits Septimus's way of seeing.

The experience of Rezia and Septimus is a shared one. Each experiences the tragic scene from their own perspective, but their experiences are nonetheless

interwoven. Woolf suggests in *Mrs Dalloway* that experience is connecting and also continuous. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology too agrees with the notion of shared experience for it is about the lived world where "perceiving subjects are *within*" (Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* 53). He describes this world:

Not only have I a physical world, not only do I live in the midst of earth, air and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, churches, implements, a bell, a spoon, a pipe. Each of these objects is moulded to the human action which it serves. Each one spreads round it an atmosphere of humanity.... *Someone* uses the pipe for smoking, the spoon for eating, the bell for summoning, and it is through the perception of a human act and another person that the perception of a cultural world could be verified. (*POP* 405)

This is what a shared world looks like. Merleau-Ponty tries to break down and clarify what exactly is an "atmosphere of humanity" only to conclude that the cultural world is "ambiguous" (405). What he does not manage to explain, which Woolf's literary text unreservedly expresses, is the emotive aspect of experience that connects people who feel similar emotions.

The idea of emotive experience seems to counteract the effort to "understand how vision can be brought into being from somewhere without being enclosed in its perspective" (*POP* 78). Emotions can be predicative: that is, having a particular emotion towards something influences the way in which another is perceived. To borrow the proverbial saying, emotions *put things into perspective* instead of allowing them to be experienced by the body. Still, Merleau-Ponty discusses the workings of emotions. In one of his radio lectures broadcast in France, he relocates feelings from interiority to exteriority, inverting the traditional modality of experience. Arguing

against Descartes's pure spirit where emotions are immanent, Merleau-Ponty posits that the "location" of any emotion evoked between two individuals "is in the space [they] both share" (*The World of Perception* 84). He reflects that in the moment of an emotion like anger, "it does not strike me that this anger was in my mind or among my thoughts but rather, that it lay entirely between me" and the other party in the brawl (84). He draws attention to the originary experience that occurs in shared space. Express differently, emotions must be situated and embedded in place, if not they can be consuming and result in parochial visions.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, place is the constant in which emotions of characters are situated, tempering the effects of experiencing phenomena in "antepredicative knowledge, in the inner communion that [one has] with them" (*POP* 82). We witness such situated, emotive experience when Peter first visits Clarissa in her house after spending five years in India. As they reunite and think of their shared past, the narrative segues into a scene set in a terrace presumably in Bourton.

[Peter] was overcome with his own grief, which rose like a moon looked from a terrace, ghastly beautiful with light from the sunken day. I was more unhappy than I've ever been since, he thought. And as if in truth he were sitting there on the terrace he edged a little towards Clarissa; put his hand out; raised it; let it fall. There above them it hung, that moon. She too seemed to be sitting with him on the terrace, in the moonlight. (31)

The scene follows Peter's emotional state as he remembers proposing to Clarissa. Grief, rising like the moon, is deflected to the environment. His feelings are narrated at a distance in the imagery of the moon and diverted to his actions ("edged a little towards Clarissa" and "put his hand out; raised it; let it fall") (31). Free indirect

discourse further detaches him from the despair. In addition, the moon is described as “ghastly beautiful,” neutralising the element of grief in the imagery (31). Rather than indulging in sadness, the reference to an external occurrence begins to build a scene around the terrace.

As the passage continues, the terrace that initially serves as a platform to view the hanging moon takes form as the characters occupy space and sit on it. The brief scene is almost anticlimactic when Clarissa does not take Peter’s hand, leaving it to fall. The once lovers rue the loss of love. Tension and estrangement between Clarissa and Peter, they who have moved on but are still attached and long for each other, are captured in the poignant picture of their back views: their bodies separated but united by a common fixation on the moon above them. The moon is mentioned again; but instead of being the centrepiece of the narrative (representing Peter’s grief), of being “looked at from a terrace,” it now hovers above them. It may have symbolised Peter’s grief, but it is now a phenomenon of the scene. The switch between articles, from “a terrace” to “the terrace,” “a moon” to “that moon,” concretises place. The sense of the terrace is grounded at last when Clarissa “too seemed to be sitting with him on the terrace” (31). She, too, is complicit in making the scene.

Seeing Clarissa and Peter sitting on the terrace, apart, we are transported from the room upstairs in London, on a clear morning, to a particular terrace in Bourton where they once sat under the moonlight. Free indirect discourse makes it difficult to identify whether Clarissa shares the recollection, or if it is Peter who is imagining, or if it is the narrator who observes the connection between them. Either way, we catch on the possibility that Clarissa is too afflicted by grief as the place of the terrace completely materialises with both characters in the picture. Emotions are mapped onto the scene; it is the terrace that consummates the emotive experience. According

to Auerbach, such deflections in the text are “excursuses” that try to “fathom a more genuine, a deeper, and indeed a more real reality” (540). Place may be an incidental excursus but it more effectively communicates their shared grief and Peter’s despair than him whining, “I was more unhappy that I’ve ever been since” (31). Peter’s affliction is not expressed through an inward reflection of his emotions; rather it is affectively embedded in space of the terrace and how it is described as a situation where a common experience is forged in relation to the enviroing place.

The experiences of Clarissa and Peter, also that of Septimus and Rezia, not forgetting Mrs Walker, are spatial. Human beings are separate but we share a lived world. It is spatiality that characterises feminine experience. To emphasise again, this experience is not female. It includes the disadvantaged and marginalised, though women are more susceptible to discrimination. We have established that it is fluid and has a penchant to shuffle between separates like sanity and insanity, interior and exterior, past and present. In addition, feminine experience is affective, transferrable to some extent. *Mrs Dalloway* gives us a sense of a potential feminine experience. It has also helped elucidate phenomenological ideas and build a spatial vocabulary which will be used in subsequent chapters. The next chapter on Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* discusses in detail disadvantageous situations and what it means to be positioned and orientated.

### 3. Bent on the Dark: Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

*Nightwood* is a novel set in darkness. Its world at night puts characters in precarious positions where visibility is low and obscured. Whilst the women in *Mrs Dalloway* are usually in motion, Barnes's women are still and kept in the dark. They are caught up in vicious cycles and trapped in rooms, seated or standing. Inertia offers a different perspective on experience where to participate and be involved in situations is to be still and remain in excruciatingly painful positions. Emplacement is often by choice in *Nightwood*. And, the women have to face the consequences of their choice to be at a disadvantage. Robin Vote is mostly inactive; Jenny Petherbridge is a thief; Nora Flood is mired in sorrow. They experience in the dark, offering blurred glimpses of the dismal places that reify their abjection. Still the sense of place is not lost but becomes more visceral as darkness falls.

The world at night is the same world as we know it by day and yet is estranged as the veil of darkness spreads over us. Merleau-Ponty reflects on the strange quality of the night:

Night is not an object before me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses, stifling my recollections and almost destroying my personal identity. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance. Night has no outlines; it is itself in contact with me and its unity is the mystical unity of the *mana*.<sup>39</sup> (POP 330)

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<sup>39</sup> The word, *mana*, of Polynesian origins, connotes the unexplainable. It has an abstract quality to do with the supernatural, luck, and magical practices. Its larger significance is, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, one that "occur[s] to represent an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all" (*Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* 55). The *mana* is a "floating signifier which is the disability of all finite thought (but also the surety of all art, all poetry, every mythic and aesthetic invention)" (63).

The enveloping darkness is numbing. It destroys “the world of clear and articulate objects” and subsequently any clear space for reflection (330). In the world at night, thinking, which “relates its parts to each other... starts from nowhere” (330). Whilst unity through rational thought and clarity is suspended in the night, there is a different kind of unity at work. This other unity is propelled by the mysterious desire—“an uncaused and tireless impulse”—for anchorage (331). Merleau-Ponty believes “it is from the heart of nocturnal space that I become united with it” (330).

The allure of the night, for Merleau-Ponty, is *mana* and the phantasmagorical world experienced by the sleeper. There is an “unreality” to the night that reveals how events, “which have a place in objective space, are drawn away from it in the dream state, and settle in a different theatre” (331). Whilst the night is a space of unity and revelations, viewing it as a theatrical stage that informs of or contrasts with the workings of actions and gestures, thought-processes and desires that are off-stage is counterproductive for the study of women’s experience of place. For Barnes’s women, nocturnal place is not an alternative unreality. It is their only reality. There is no daytime that serves as a gauge for what is clear-headed and rational experience. The women do not begin from a place of outlines and move into one of none. Neither are they conscious of how their bodies behave and emote in broad daylight.

The narrative of place in the dark tells the experiences of subjects who are unable to see rightly and clearly because of certain disadvantages. Because the night is a natural occurring phenomenon, seeing at night does not seem unique to women’s experience of place. Yet Barnes’s method of placing and arranging characters in these dark scenarios—they are postured—compels a re-reading of what it means to experience with difficulty. The extent to which characters go to experience things in the dark demands an examination of what the night stands for. *Nightwood* shows that



being at a disadvantage and experiencing place like that is not so much a disability as it is a different view of the scene at night, a view that motivates other ways of adjusting perception for the dark. Significantly, the different perception of place belongs to the social and gender nonconforming individual who chooses to see *at a slant* and remain *bent*. Her experience of the dark runs parallel to her non-normative existence.

From the outset of the thesis, the subject with whom I am concerned is the woman who lives in a world that naturally and purposefully disadvantages her. Human beings are naturally disadvantaged in the living world, facing circumstances like nightfall or blurry vision, but woman is additionally challenged as she lives in a socially engineered and politically ordered world that works to the advantage of her male counterpart. There is yet an added marginalisation to the situation of Barnes's women: they are queer. They reject straightness, refusing to move. Immobility is their resistance. The women are willing to stay put and keep their positions even if they are disadvantageous to experience.

Though dormant and put at a disadvantage, the women of *Nightwood* are not powerless. To clarify, to be at a disadvantage is not the same as being powerless. As Black feminist bell hooks tells us, "Women, even the most oppressed among us, do exercise some form of power" (*Feminist Theory* 90). Power exists, but it is often "suppressed" or "exploited" (93). To be disadvantaged is to be deprived of opportunities because of social, racial, gender, and class differences. The word "advantage" from the Old French *avantage*, means superiority and advancement. To be *dis-avantaged* is to move backward from the position of superiority and thus to be in an inferior position. Thinking of disadvantage as being diminished of power adds a new significance to the idea of dormancy and also brings into view the invisible

oppressor, i.e., the one who has the *advantage* and is superior. The prefix “dis-” also means “away” and “apart.” We can interpret “dis-advantage” as a situation set apart from one of advantage. Dormancy, or to be unmoving in a particular place, can mean passivity but also resistance, the unwillingness to move and thus remain in the position of the disadvantage. Put differently, to remain apart from *advantage*, from superiority, from the dominant. This might seem counterintuitive but dormancy in *Nightwood* as we shall see is not an end to experience but a means to exploring the potentiality of the body—what is it capable of?—precisely because it is placed in disadvantageous situations.

To remain in the dark, as *Nightwood* advocates, is not a bad thing. I venture to say that to be disadvantaged is advantageous to configuring a non-normative modality of experience. In *Nightwood*, being at a disadvantage is a result of conscious decisions of characters to deviate from dominant ideologies of the world, to be *off the course* of heteronormativity, and to trespass the boundaries of what is deemed permissible in the social world whilst remaining within its physical premise. On a literal level, left in the dark and fixed in position, characters experience the things they see and also what they cannot see. Symbolically, seeing in the dark and left in the margins of a socially stratified world bring to light the possibilities of alternative modes of experiencing. Characters do not see *straight* but *at a slant*. This slanted perception tries to grasp the world whose standards they have fallen short of. Unable to see straight and think rationally, the women’s experiences of the world at night are particularly *sens-ing* in that they are directed towards a slanted world in which their views are affected by their sexual orientation and twice marginalised position.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Although I focus on women’s experience, it should be noted that Felix and the Doctor (one is a Jew obsessed with masking his identity and the other, a transvestite) do not fit into hetero-/normative roles. Like the women in *Nightwood*, they too are disadvantaged.

The narrative of experience in *Nightwood* is *sensing*, as in feeling, and *sensing*, as in directed. The visual impairment inflicted by the night forces characters to *sense experience* what is before them (the term will be explained later), whilst their sexuality and social position direct them to experience the upright world in their own terms. It is as if the odds are against the queer. *Nightwood* keeps thrusting onto its characters obstacles that compromise vision, keeping them in stilted positions with their bodies bent and bowed down, with a bad and slanted view of the world.

The novel presents a complementary take on what Merleau-Ponty calls “sense experience” (*POP* 60). *Le sentir* in the French (*sentir* meaning to feel with the senses), sense experience is “that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life” (61). It connects the perceiver to the object of perception. It is how we know the world. Sense experience is not privileged over common experience, for with this connection also comes the problem of a priori forms of knowledge about the world. The difference is sense experience fleshes out how we perceive the world somatically through “affinity,” to use Merleau-Ponty’s word, instead of association (61).<sup>41</sup> Sense experience always relates back to the body. It is how the body connects and makes sense of its environment. The focus is on the body—its position and place in the world.

The phenomenologist believes in “the physical world” because he has before him “a perceptual field, a surface in contact with the world, a permanent rootedness in it” (*POP* 240). Somewhere in Merleau-Ponty’s idea of place accounts for why phenomenology fails to differentiate the female experience from the male, or the lesbian experience from the straight for that matter. He does not consider the nature of

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<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty uses “affinity” in the Kantian sense in which appearances share something in common that makes them sensible to the perceiver. It differs from association which organises appearances.

place, which, as Ahmed reminds us, has power to police behaviour and influence experience: “the somewhere (say, the house, the room, or the skin) shapes the surface of ‘what’ it ‘is’ that is brought forth” (40). So whilst sense experience puts attention on the body, it overlooks possible ideologies of place and underplays the influence of the environment. Here is where *Nightwood* adds to and re-envisions *le sentir* and puts significance back into place.

This chapter explores the narrative of sense experience. It first unpacks what sense experience means phenomenologically and then shows how it develops and changes in the novel as characters experience the world at night. Phenomenology contends that one sense experiences because of disability or disorientation. One has to, usually not by choice, sacrifice normality for an organic experience. In *Nightwood*, sense experience occurs because the character chooses to dwell in positions of disadvantage and resistance. Her body is bent and bowed. The posture is not one of compromise or coercion, but of choice.

The feminine body in *Nightwood* is postured, bent, and emplaced. Still and posed, the body speaks to a particular kind of women’s static situation. The bent body resists straight forms of experience. By bent I mean queer. Historically, the term “bent” has been used synonymously with “crooked” and is often derogatory, especially in the United Kingdom and European countries. In the early 1900s, “bent” was a criminal argot, referring to “thieves” (Dynes, *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* 313). Since the fifties, “bent” has been used to refer to the homosexual, mingling criminality with sexuality, i.e., to be gay is to be criminal.<sup>42</sup> Indeed “bent” like “pervert” is a term borrowed “from the cant of the criminal underworld” (Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual* 112). Apart from its criminal association, “bent” is

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<sup>42</sup> Dynes notes how the term, “straight,” has also come to mean “not using drugs” in the 1960s.

also gestural, derived from the “limp wrist posture” which implies “sissihood and affection” (Dynes 475).

Its derivations emphasise deviance from the “straight” tradition which colloquially translates to “honest, honorable, frank” as recorded in *The Oxford English Dictionary* in 1864.<sup>43</sup> It is interesting that terms like “bent” and “straight” have borrowings from orientation and direction. Rictor Norton highlights how they are “directional metaphors” drawn from “navigation” (45). To navigate is to find one’s way, or to find the right way, to follow along society’s straight path and do the “honorable” thing. To be bent, or to bend, is then to move away from the straight and normative course.<sup>44</sup> There is something rebellious in this move: to bend is to resist the straight. The recuperation of the derogatory and criminal “bent” begins by using the term itself, not shying away from it. In fact, terms like “crooked” and “invert” are “camp talk,” coded words used by queers in queer context without the presence of heterosexuals (Norton 112). The now embraced and politically correct term “queer” was, as Norton explains, “basically the criminal underworld’s antonym for ‘straight, respectable’” and used “sometimes in the sense of ‘queasy’” (123). Its recuperation into everyday language is recent, only in the last few decades have we witnessed the prevalent use of “homosexual” and “queer” in critical scholarship and thus normalising what used to be disparaging slurs.<sup>45</sup>

Often derogatory terms are used by queers themselves: “The free and unself-conscious use of obscenity and slang is characteristic of working-class men and prostitute, and the queer subculture” (Norton 112). They comprise the queer language, which is not to say the queer is “employing a language imposed upon him by

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<sup>43</sup> As quoted in Dynes’s *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, p313.

<sup>44</sup> See more on the employment of “bent” in the directional sense in the section “Bent Bodies”.

<sup>45</sup> In Confucius countries like Singapore and Hong Kong, African countries, the Middle East, and many conservative states, these terms are still pejoratives.

heterosexuals” (112). The point is the use of seemingly outrageous and obscene terms in an unself-conscious manner; hence reclaiming what is deemed unacceptable and taboo. Possibly the most offensive word directed at homosexuals in our current time is “faggot,” yet as a matter of fact it is a queer-term created by queers and then appropriated by homophobes. As such, Norton argues that these terms are “not words of social control,” as “bent” is used in the criminal sense to refer to the sexual deviant; such words “are indigenous to an ethnic culture” and should not be avoided just because it has been adopted by the heterosexual language (123). It is thus important for this chapter on *Nightwood* which discusses queer existence and bodies and lesbian love to use and make common “bent.” For if queers do not use queer-terms, and critical works on queer do not use them, then the general public will continue to misread the words as derogatory and claim queer-terms as negations of heteronormativity.<sup>46</sup>

The discussion on bent bodies adds a queer slant to my reading of phenomenology that classical phenomenology does not write about. In *Nightwood* queer bodies are entangled and in a deadlock position which unites them in its impossibility. The experience of the queer, lived body begins from its position in place and how it sees the straight world tilted. This anticipates a discussion of emplaced bodies where experience is somatic and spatial. Place is constitutive of the spatiality of a situation; it is also the spatiality of one’s experience. It encapsulates feelings, actions, and thought-processes evoked by the world in the dark.

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<sup>46</sup> Writing on Djuna Barnes who was queer and dedicated the novel to Thelma, and being queer myself, it is a personal as much as a political choice to reclaim “bent” and words like “invert,” “crooked,” and “perverse.”

### *Sense Experience*

*Nightwood*, the pinnacle of Barnes's literary success, is elusive and difficult, neither-here-nor-there. Jeanette Winterson, in her introduction to the novel, likens *Nightwood* to the "shifting, slipping, relative world of Einstein" (x). Tyrus Miller ascribes a "positionless" quality to Barnes's writing: her "runaway figural language... hinting at the radical loss of boundaries, the promiscuous blurring of categories" (*Late Modernism* 124-125). Whilst Winterson and Miller make good observations about *Nightwood*'s elusiveness, they prize the novel for its proclivity for flight. Other critics see this flight as a means to something less fixed. Mary Wilson claims that Barnes reaches "towards some much more inchoate space... and situates fiction in new territory" ("No Place Like Home" 430). Along the same lines, Joseph Frank writes that the novel "lacks a narrative structure" and "cannot be reduced to any sequence of action for purpose of explanation" (*The Idea of Spatial Form* 33).

Whilst it is tempting to read the novel as positionless, fluidity between positions must not be confused with the state of being boundary-less. I do not think the novel is a "runaway" or "escape-text" (Miller 125; Winterson xvi), neither is it formless and without anchorages. It is true that the novel refuses to be pigeonholed into categories, but this is not to say that it does not experiment with positions. To read *Nightwood* as positionless is problematic, as Daniela Caselli points out, because this would mean it is evasive in its confrontation of ideologies, "therefore difficult to either recuperate under an inclusive agenda or to condemn as hiding dubious ideological affiliations" (*Improper Modernism* 169). To make sense of *Nightwood*'s lack of fixity without interpreting it as an "escape-text," I propose to rethink its quality of being positionless as a result of its constant play and obsession with boundaries and positions. The novel carefully delineates the lines between distinct

identities under the cover of darkness and low visibility—a crafty gambit that whilst making the novel seem non-categorical and boundary-blurring exposes a scrutiny and mastery of positions and warring elements such as the invisible and visible, positive and negative, here and there. This section plunges into the world at night, showing how darkness as a disadvantage enables sense experience and attunes one to perceive phenomena reflexively in the dark.<sup>47</sup>

The night, its darkness, is *Nightwood's* *raison d'être*. Figuratively speaking, seeing in the dark stands for situations that obscure vision. The trope of the night is crucial to understanding how bodies in the novel sense experience the mutable world. In a letter to her editor Emily Coleman, Barnes wrote that the title was a toss between *Nightwood* and *Anatomy of the Night*.<sup>48</sup> Earlier considerations include *Through the Night* and *Night Without Sleep*. Her idea of night was inspired by William Blake's "The Tyger," from *Songs of Experience*, where the night paves way for an other world, promising a different experience. The night changes the atmosphere of the same environment in which experience in the day occurs. It is disorientating and keeps one in a state of not knowing. On the night, Merleau-Ponty writes, "it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses, stifling my recollections and almost destroying my personal identity" (*POP* 330). Such is the effect of the night: its ability to bracket natural beliefs of the self and reconnect the individual with the world without prejudice. One cannot reflect nor rely on knowledge to make out the bleary things of the world. To navigate the darkness, one has to sense experience. According to Merleau-Ponty, the night world is a "nocturnal space" that "infiltrates" our senses,

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<sup>47</sup> The term, "reflexively," used in this thesis, does not imply self-reflexivity. As used by Merleau-Ponty, it is associated with involuntary responses (for example, a knee jerk reaction or a reflex action).

<sup>48</sup> The correspondence between Barnes and Coleman is documented in Cheryl J. Plumb's Introduction to *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts* (viii).



“without surfaces and without any distance separating it from me” (330). We become completely at one with place.

Before expounding on sense experience, it is worth pointing out that early in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty rejects sensation as purely sensible. Such sensation, he opines, “corresponds to nothing in our experience” (1-2). In fact, it detracts from experience. For example, when I say I am in pain and someone replies, “I am in pain too,” we as sentient beings think we understand each other’s pain and explication seems unnecessary since the sensation of pain is incommunicable. We withhold communicating experience because we presume that there is between us a tacit understanding of pain. “We make perception out of things,” says Merleau-Ponty (3). Sensation becomes a kind of common sensibility which suppresses experience as well as expression. Taylor Carman explains how it can also turn perception into an inward process “from which the mind somehow extracts or constructs an experience of something” (“Sensation, Judgment, and the Phenomenal Field” 52). Interpreted this way, sensation as sensible, in shifting the focus from body to mind, is detrimental to experience.

The sensation that Merleau-Ponty is interested in is different. Sensation, he defines in the later chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception*, is “communion” or “coexistence,” which means “it does not rest in itself as does a thing, but that it is directed and has significance beyond itself” (248). It reminds the sensor that meaning does not merely lie in the thing perceived, in one’s mind, or even in the visual data extracted by the five senses. Sensation is intentional, Merleau-Ponty reasons, because “I am brought into relation with an external being, whether it be in order to open myself to it or to shut myself off from it” (248). With this understanding of sensation, we gather that sense experience is not so much about acquiring objective knowledge

as it is about being in a world of other existences. Sense experience sets forth “a certain rhythm of existence” where the sentient subject does not posit [other beings] as objects, but enters into a sympathetic relation with them” (248). Experience is not straightforward; neither is existence self-standing. The discussion of sense experience and sensation from this point forward leans towards Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of sensation which as I will show is an inexpressible excitation uncovering our bodily embeddedness and interaction with the material world.

Sense experience, or *le sentir*, is “that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life” (*POP* 61). To explain this experience, Merleau-Ponty turns to the effects of colours on human beings. For instance, green makes one restful and yellow has a stinging effect. In both cases, “the colour, before being seen, gives itself away through the experience of a certain bodily attitude appropriate to only that colour and precisely indicative of it” (244). Colours evoke sensations in those who see them, but for the colour-blind, “real colour produces in the subject a ‘concentration of colour experience’ which enables him to ‘draw together the colours in his eyes’” (245).<sup>49</sup> This indicates that the quality of any phenomenon is “revealed by a type of behaviour which is directed towards it in its essence” (245). It is not about why “red signifies effort or violence, green restfulness and peace,” but “we must rediscover how to live these colours as our body does” (245). Theoretically, Merleau-Ponty makes a point about how sensations from the experience of an object reveal the quality of the object in itself and not in relation to what one already knows about it. Practically speaking, however, it is difficult to discern sense experience, especially in the moment of perception. His example of colour-blind subjects, whilst proves his theory, is questionable. Drawing on disabled

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<sup>49</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s analysis relies much on Heinz Werner’s inductive psychology to explain sense experience. Here, he quotes from Werner’s *Studies of Sensation and Perception Volume 1* (160).

bodies to prove blindness of the trained eye overlooks the fact that disability can extend outside physical limitations and assumes that these subjects have a clearer vantage point suited for sense experience.

In what follows I turn to *Nightwood* for a more inclusive exposition of sense experience. Using darkness as a modifier that shifts bodies from states of advantage to disadvantage, the novel does not describe blindness, or compromised visibility, in terms of disability, but treats it as a starting point to rediscover the *straightened-out* world from blurred and shrouded perspectives. *Nightwood* re-envision familiar scenarios from prosaic reality from the viewpoint of the disadvantaged perceiver, illuminating darkness and blurriness with an unparalleled narrative style which lays out vague and jarring images in place of traditional representations of reality. As Frank quite accurately describes the novel,

We are asked only to accept [the characters'] world as we accept an abstract painting... as an autonomous pattern giving us an individual vision of reality, rather than what we might consider its exact reflection. ("Spatial Form in Modern Literature" 435)

The world may be dim and vague but it is the presented view. *Nightwood* is full of surprising depictions of reality, forcing its reader to see the world from varying points of view, in darkness and quietude.

Barnes's evocative and brilliantly constructed narrative of the world at night mitigates problems of seeing properly and mindfully as the trained eye does, enabling a more immediate and sensory grasp of the world. The novel presents alternative ways of seeing that do not conform to the straight, dominant mode of perception. We can say that *Nightwood* is a critique of normativity, breaking down the binary of abled and disabled experiences. It is its own collection of non-normative experiences. It

exposes the inhibitions of experience, which are not limited to historically and socially fortified obstacles, or cognitive issues of consciousness-directed experience, but include gendered strongholds as well.

*Nightwood* interrogates what it is to be *in* the lived world, to be invariably affected by external changes and happenings. Seeing in the dark and having things hidden from view are very real obstacles to vision, especially when one cannot move and adjust one's body. These situations are described at length in *Nightwood* where characters are compelled to view situations in their givenness, to focus on what is visible, and to make out what is barely visible. Blurrings, disorientation, and dimness make explanation and prediction immensely difficult. Characters must only describe what they sense, in spite of distance and disruption.

The first time Nora meets Robin captures the sense experience that pervades *Nightwood*. The section begins with specific details: "The Denckman circus... came into New York in the fall of 1923. Nora went alone. She came into the circus of the ring, taking her place in the front row" (59). The circus acts are described through Nora's viewpoint and appear in the order they enter the scene: first the clowns; the black horse; the tiny dogs; the elephants; and the girl sitting beside her. In the description of the animals, the narrative does not directly refer to Nora, though it is implicit that it proceeds from her point of view. This changes with Robin's entrance into the scene: "A girl sitting beside Nora took out a cigarette and lit it; her hands shook and Nora turned to look at her" (59). At first glance, following the sequence of actions, it seems Nora is merely reacting to the girl's movements. Yet, the act of taking out a cigarette and lighting it with shaking hands occurs outside Nora's visual field which as mentioned is captivated by the menagerie. This is more compelling when the narrative immediately follows up with an explanation that refutes the first

convenient logic of perception, i.e., Nora turns because she senses the girl's actions: "she looked at her suddenly because the animals, going around and around the ring, all but climbed over at that point" (59). It is now clear that Nora turns to look at Robin because of the sensation of the light, her eyes following the motion of the animals. As the animals climb over, their light dawns on the girl. At that moment Nora turns.

Barnes organises Robin's entrance into Nora's view in a fashion that initially fits nicely with structures of intellectualism and logic. We assume that Nora is acting in response to stimuli beyond her vision without examining the explained experience. The illusion of perception is quickly punctured as the narrative attributes sight to sensation. Experience is not an accumulation of actions and does not have to involve a sequence of events, one frame succeeding another. Rather, sense experience hinges on sensations that occur within a moment of concentration. Moments may entail ample events but they do not have to unfold sequentially. Things can occur in tandem and coexist simultaneously. In *Nightwood*, it is at that moment, when the animals have all climbed over and the light shines on Robin, that Nora turns and sees her. The focus on light accentuates the dimness of the surroundings, a peculiarity that recurs every time Robin appears to Nora. Although light is the sole sensation that draws Nora to Robin, the sensation is not an independent existence. It exists *in itself* only because to the perceiver it is *for itself*. The first is a phenomenal existence that is self-contained; the second indicates a self-reflexive existence that considers the relationships with other existences. This is the "dilemma of *for itself* and *in itself*" that Merleau-Ponty writes in his phenomenology: the conflicting but complementing relation between reflection and the unreflective view (*POP* 247).

The sensation Nora gets when she sees the light on Robin is, to use Merleau-Ponty's words, "intentional, which means that it does not rest in itself as does a thing,

but that it is directed and has significance beyond itself” (*POP* 248). In this respect, sense experience as intentional renders the object of experience to be *for itself*. Here significance is directed. Intentional sensation brings the body “into relation with an external being” and this challenges the object *in itself* (248). Moving back and forth between *in itself* and *for itself*, Merleau-Ponty clarifies that although the sensation is being directed to something, “what it aims at is recognized only blindly,” leaving the object of experience “with its opacity and thisness” (248). This resolves the dilemma for the moment. Sense experience is independent of prestructured experience of the world—it exists in itself. It is also coextensive with the world—it exists for itself.

This is apparent in the few moments following Nora and Robin’s first encounter:

The great cage for the lions had been set up.... Then as one powerful lioness came to the turn of the bars, exactly opposite the girl, she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and, as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface. At that the girl rose straight up. Nora took her hand. ‘Let’s get out of here!’ the girl said, and still holding her hand Nora took her out. (60)

Whilst there is no explicit reference to Nora’s feelings or perception, the use of the feminine pronoun is ambiguous. In the sentence, “Nora took her hand” (60), Barnes uses the personal pronoun over “Robin.” This is worth noting considering the many “she” and “her” that have been used prior to this sentence to refer to the lioness.

Instead of jumping on the opportunity to clarify who “she” is, Barnes draws attention to the female hand reaching out for Nora’s grip, which has an uncanny resemblance to the lioness’s paws that reach past the bars. There is a strong parallelism between the

girl and the lioness, intensifying the ambivalence of the scene. It is also unclear as to who the narrator is at this point. The choice of “her” indicates Nora’s unawareness of the girl’s name; it could also be a narrative decision to perpetuate uncertainty. The animation of the lioness and the motion to take Robin’s hand at the precise moment when the connection between beast and human strikes suggest that the narrative is either told from Nora’s viewpoint, or that she shares a similar perspective of the happening. Her decision to hold Robin’s hand can then be read as a result of evaluating the scene in front of her, after sensing anxiety and fear in her neighbour. Yet, whilst Nora’s presence is bound up in this exchange, the omission of her sensations makes it unclear as to whether she is in fact reflecting on what she observes or merely acting instinctively. Her sense experience is coextensive with the scene unfolding before her and is, at the same time, distanced from the intensity of the exchange.

As *Nightwood* demonstrates, sense experience is both experience in and for itself. The attitude towards a quality of something may be conditioned—that is, a reflection of some sort precedes experience—but rather than meditating on the significance or origin of the quality that deviates from the moment of experience, any reflection on the quality “must elucidate the unreflective view which it supersedes, and show the possibility of this latter” (*POP* 247). The attitude of sense experience is not so much a meditative reflection as it is a reaction to sensations. Merleau-Ponty describes sense experience as “a certain bodily attitude appropriate only to that [phenomenon] and precisely indicative of it” (244). Attitude is a semantic conflation: the term denotes ways of thinking or feeling about something; it also means physical postures or behaviours indicating state of mind. Bringing sensations and attitudes into the discussion, sense experience straddles the reflective and unreflective in order to

elicit what is real and not “syntheses represented by judgements, acts or predications” (*POP* xi).

The scene where Nora sees Robin before she leaves with Jenny unveils the tension between the reflective and unreflective. In the following passage, Nora has just woken up from a dream and roams the dark corridors in a somnambulistic state. From her window, she sees the shadowy figures of Jenny and Robin embracing by the statue in her garden:

Waking, she began to walk again, and looking out into the garden in the faint light of dawn, she saw a double shadow falling from the statue, as if it were multiplying, and thinking perhaps this was Robin, she called and was not answered. Standing motionless, straining her eyes, she saw emerge from the darkness the light of Robin’s eyes, the fear in them developing their luminosity until, by the intensity of the double regard, Robin’s eyes and hers met. So they gazed at each other. As if that light had power to bring what was dreaded into the zone of their catastrophe, Nora saw the body of another woman swim up into the statue’s obscurity, with head hung down, that the added eyes might not augment the illumination; her arms about Robin’s neck, her body pressed to Robin’s, her legs slackened in the hang of the embrace. (69-70)

Nora can barely see Robin who is concealed from view. The paragraph begins with Nora’s apprehension; she does not know if it is Robin in the garden. Then, as the light in the figure’s eyes intensifies, the narrative ascertains that it is she: “Robin’s eyes and hers met” (69). Once again the sensation of light resurfaces. Arguably, as this luminosity develops in Robin’s eyes, Nora’s vision becomes less vague as well, hence



the moment of connection they both recognise. This gradual adjustment of vision that enables them to see in the dark emulates the physiological workings of the visual purple, a photosensitive pigment in the human eye responsible for perception in poorly lit conditions. As it picks up on any available source of light, the eye adjusts to the dimness and begins to see as the light or lack of light allows—a process known as dark adaptation.<sup>50</sup> In Nora's case, she fixates on the "light of Robin's eyes" and as she does so, she recovers more visuality (69). It is a reflex that requires time to manifest. The body is physically incapable of viewing reflexively and has to adapt to whatever is perceptible.

Read from a different perspective, Nora's sense experience of Robin seems as imaginary as it is originary. The language brings out the uncertainty. Is the figure Robin or a conjuring of the mind? The phrase, "thinking perhaps this was Robin," suggests that Nora may have imagined her. After all she has just awoken from a dream about Robin. The language is also tentative. Words such as "faint light," "double shadow," "multiplying," and "perhaps" add to the ambivalence of the scene, whilst phrases like "straining her eyes" and "developing their intensity until..." speak to the extent to which the body would go in order to see Robin (69). These signs suggest that vision is possibly a product of reflection.

But this is precisely the effect of sense experience. According to Merleau-Ponty, it presents possibilities of reflection whilst retaining the integrity of experience by "leaving it with its opacity and thisness" (*POP* 248). The body adopts an attitude, physiologically and mentally. The mental state is deep contemplation, but a way of feeling that pertains only to a particular phenomenon—in this case, it is Robin's

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<sup>50</sup> Riggs, Lorrin A., and Charles E. Sternheim. "Vision." *AccessScience*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2014. Web. 30 Apr. 2014.

luminous eyes that stimulate Nora's visual clarity. Sense experience is *for itself*. To explain in phenomenological terms, Robin, who is the object of vision, "is made determinate as an identifiable being only through a whole open series of possible experiences" and she is accessible and "exists only for a subject [Nora] who carries out this identification" (*POP* 246). On the other hand, the perceived is also *in itself*, for it is uncertain that the senses of the half-awake Nora "retain any cognitive power" (247). Incapable of reflection, she describes Robin as her body lives the scene and takes up the situation in the dark.

### ***Position and Power***

In addition to the night, the women of *Nightwood* are unable to see straight and clear because of their stilted positioning in place. Awkward positions and postured bodies rattle the narrative of experience. Positionality is not an unfamiliar trope in Barnesian scholarship. Many readers have looked into the novel's shifts from positions, its compulsion to be here and there and nowhere. Douglas Messerli states that Barnes's earlier characters are dispersed within "the metaphysical structure that bears resemblance to the Great Chain of Being," whereas others are "positioned along a spectrum of their relationship to these two extremes [between the angels and the beasts]" ("The Newspaper Tales" xvii). Positionality in this regard is related to movement between categories and within hierarchies. Approaching positionality from a different angle, Kenneth Burke argues that *Nightwood's* concern is not a here-there issue but an upward-downward tension. Downward positions, he writes, symbolically embodied in the chapter "Bow Down" and "Go Down" return to the "'primal' story of all mankind" (*Language as Symbolic Action* 244-245). In moving downwards, the novel transcends upwards. The tendency to associate positionality with movement, I

believe, comes from an eagerness to draw characters together in relation to one another, to make sense of one character's absence with the presence of another. This approach, however, does not examine characters *in situ*.

Given the lack of movements in *Nightwood*, the still and stilted bodies demand extra careful examination. Returning to the same scene where Nora sees Robin in the dark, it is notable that Nora is extremely still and does not re-position herself to obtain a clearer view. She is "motionless" throughout the scene and is "[unable] to turn her eyes away" (NW 70). She is trapped in her body, forced to make out the scene with poor visibility, from a fixed position. Having established that compromised visibility is a condition for sense experience, this section shows how postured bodies hamper reliance on sedimented experience and enact the female bodily existence in a lived world. Posturing abled bodies in seemingly disadvantageous positions may inhibit experience, but it figuratively reflects how many women are still trapped in socially and politically determined roles, if not patronised and coddled by their more assertive counterparts into playing well their allocated roles as mothers, wives, and muse, to name a few. These postures are propagated by the phallocratic order and operative myths.<sup>51</sup> As Luce Irigaray states, such ideologies have "no possible place for the 'feminine'" and describe women "in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value" (*The Sex Which is Not One* 68-69). Being physically postured in fixed and awkward positions puts on view what it means for women to be in the world.

Generally speaking, to be in the world, as in *Mrs Dalloway*, is to be actively involved with the world. *Nightwood* lacks activity in that sense. Characters are often

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<sup>51</sup> In the chapter, "Dreams, Fears, Idols," from *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir writes: "[men's] codes of law have been set up against [the woman]; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other. This arrangement suited the economic interests of the males; but it conformed also to their ontological and moral pretensions" (171).

standing, lying down, and seated in awkward positions, confined to tight spaces. Instead of following the footsteps of characters about places in a videographic-like fashion, Barnes lays bare a tableau of still shots of characters. Or, as Frank describes in *The Widening Gyre*, the novel hinges on “a static situation” seen “from different angles” (31). *Nightwood* approaches movement differently, where being in the world does not equate mobility. Characters do not shuffle back and forth but are positioned such that they seem incapacitated. In *Nightwood*, being posed is tantamount to being dormant—a recurring motif that is especially associated with Robin. To Felix, Robin is an “old statue” rooted to the ground (45); to the Doctor, she resembles “the paralysed man in Coney Island” (155); to Nora, she is “like something dormant... moved out of death’s way by the successive arms of women” (70).

Towards the end of the chapter, “Night Watch,” in the scene where Nora sees Jenny and Robin together, it is literally Jenny’s arms and Nora’s eyes that keep Robin’s lifeless body in position. It is not just Robin who is immovable. In the scene all three women are motionless, caught in a freeze frame of their actions. Robin’s dormancy and invisibility force her perceivers (Jenny and Nora) to move in spite of physical immobility. Postured, they do not move in the traditional sense. The women advance forward or withdraw by either concentrating or blurring images, according to what they can and cannot make of the scene. Focalisation and de-focalisation help compose, frame, and make sense of the visual field; they are ways of movement for the motionless women.

To explain how dormancy provokes movements, let us return to the scene in *Nightwood*. Deprived of a clear view of Robin and unable to move, Nora focuses on Jenny. Compared to the shadowy figure of Robin, who is only recognised by her eyes, Jenny appears in full form, her limbs and body tactile and imposing. Nora turns her

eyes to what is perceptible: that is, Jenny, in order to see Robin. The references to actions done unto Robin can be read as Nora reiterating her lover's presence, compensating for the absence and lack of mention of the physical body: "her arms about Robin's neck, her body pressed to Robin's, her legs slackened in the hang of the embrace" (70). The emphasis may also be interpreted from Jenny's point of view: as the descriptions of the posture unfold in the sentence, each phrase begins with a part of Jenny leeching onto something of Robin, forcefully making connections with the dormant body to bring it into existence. Jenny may be motionless and trapped in the embrace, but the way the postured bodies are described shows her actively taking possession of Robin.

Being positioned imposes restraints on movement, literally and figuratively mirroring the entrapment of women. On another level, the concomitant dormancy functions as a jarring contrast to the inward restlessness and anxiety that propel the body to move in any way it can. In the case of Nora, perceiving Robin through Jenny indicates the extent to which she has tailored her vision to focus on Jenny and de-focus on the obscured Robin. Her devotion to Robin enables her to tolerate the sight of her lover with another. She can only see Robin through the body of her mistress:

Unable to turn her eyes away, incapable of speech, experiencing a sensation of evil, complete and dismembering, Nora fell to her knees, so that her eyes were not withdrawn by her volition, but dropped from their orbit by the falling of her body. Her chin on the sill she knelt, thinking, "Now they will not hold together," feeling that if she turned away from what Robin was doing, the design would break and melt back into Robin alone. She closed her eyes, and at that moment she knew an awful happiness. (70)

Nora's refusal to "turn away" from the "design" finds and preserves Robin (70). She chooses to stay in position. It is a perverse stillness, but one that gives her an "awful happiness" (70). Being motionless locks the body in position and brings attention to the body. Because Nora is unable to turn away, the focus is on how she fully experiences the objects before her. Since her experience is contingent on her strong feelings for Robin, it is impossible to eschew an analysis of embodied feelings. The dormant, postured body compels an interrogation of the relation between the body and feelings, extending our discussion to feeling bodies.

Julie Taylor in *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism* writes extensively on embodied feelings. She points out the intimate relation between feelings and body: "Memory and emotion... reside in—as opposed to moving out from—the body" (16). Embodied feeling may recall Merleau-Ponty's embodied subjectivity, but the feeling body is performative and has little room for "depth psychology and interiority" (13). It reveals "Barnes's emphasis on surface and performance" (13). Taylor's exposition of the lived body shows how the body can be manipulated to pose in certain ways and that it is intentional and directed. Taylor is keener on the affective interaction between bodies than their interactions with the working world. Also, what is ironic is the focus on surface and performativity, which should implicate some form of external agency, directs attention away from environing phenomena and places. Whilst feelings and the body are intertwined, the focus on the performing body commands attention to the performer, her performance, and her audience. For the purpose of a phenomenology of place, the discourse of the body has to consider both the feeling body, and also the *postured* feeling body. This consideration factors into account positionality—what it means for the feeling body to be fixed in a position in place.

Position is always spatial. To be positioned is to be placed. Space is inherent in the discussion of positionality and posture. What I mean to say in relation to the performing body is the body-as-staged is important only if we consider the how and where of the performance. Positionality steers the discourse back to place that is neither slight nor incidental in the expression of feelings through the staging of the body. *Nightwood* feeds my project of place by presenting space as perceptible and potentially transgressive when emotions, affect, subjectivity, thoughts, and other forms of interiority are bound up with the body, specifically the feeling body as it is postured in the lived world.

The postured, feeling body is displayed in the scene where Robin and Nora's bodies are intertwined. The scene of them embracing one another in their house describes their love and the nature of their bond. It begins with, "Yet sometimes, going about the house, in passing each other, they would fall into an agonized embrace" (63). The image of them walking casually about the house, then suddenly embracing each other is dramatic, almost camp. This is juxtaposed with the intensity of the coupling where their bodies are "so strained together that the space that divided them seemed to be thrusting them apart" (63). The sentence is encumbered with conflicting expressions which when threaded together masterfully describes the anguish of their embrace. Their bodies are so strained from entwining that their efforts to cling onto each other amplify their separateness. The strain is physical and emotional. They are two bodies interlocked in one posture, trying, but failing, to thoroughly merge as one. An embrace is often gentle, but the diction ("strained," "thrust," "two heads in their four hands") points to violence (63). The language roughens the bodies and sculpts them into one agonised posture. There is something stiff and mechanical in the symmetry of the posture that makes the embrace painful

and unbearable to watch. Although the posture apparently unifies the women, the tension between the bodies created by the narrative is dismembering and breaks the human body down into its parts.

There is tension in the way they are positioned: two bodies tightly yoked yet undeniably independent of one another. The image reflects their grave desire for one another and the impossibility of fulfillment. The posture is a visual illustration of their feelings and depicts on their behalf the “insurmountable grief” of their sapphic love; Robin’s “tragic longing to be kept” in spite of “knowing herself astray” (63); and Nora’s endless wait for the one who “has forgotten [her]” (165). For Nora, it confirms that “there [is] no way but death”; for only “in death Robin would belong to her” (63). As one entity, their posed bodies reflect and fortify their strained union such that Robin’s attempt to leave the position is equivalent to a “betrayal,” a “return” to where she belongs (63). Herein is an indelible connection between positionality and place. To stay in position is to remain in the world they both built. Conversely, to fall out of it is to abandon their place and one another.

The posture, sustained by passion and anguish, repulse and attraction, is contrasted with Jenny and Robin’s impassive one-sided embrace. Returning to the scene at the end of “Night Watch,” Nora first sees the body of Jenny “swim up into the statue’s obscurity” and then proceeds to describe her clinging onto Robin (69). From where she stands, Nora sees Jenny forcing herself upon a shadowy figure “falling from the statue” (69). The association between Robin and statues once again surfaces (Felix envisions her as a statue as well). She continually needs to be pinned down to place. Unfortunately for Jenny, her affectionate moves towards Robin are unreciprocated and Robin is detached from the embrace. Concealed by the statue, she is doubly removed. Here the narrative follows Nora’s point of view as she awakes



from her dream and roams the corridor. The use of present continuous tense makes it seem as if the scene is happening right at the moment. We go along with Nora on her walk; like her, we see Robin as the shadow of the statue, whereas Jenny is vividly perceived. The position of their coupling presents a different strain from the embrace between Robin and Nora, because this time Robin is still and dispassionate, whilst a brazen Jenny places “her arms about Robin’s neck, her body press[es] to Robin’s, her legs slacken in the hang of the embrace” (70).

Jenny’s enthusiasm translates to the force and intensity in the way her body is posed—her hands wrapped around Robin’s neck, supporting the weight of her body. It is as if she is strangling her lover—her love gone rogue. The violence is contrasted with the nonresponse of the dormant lover. On the other side of the embrace, comprising the other half of the posture, is a fading and almost non-existent Robin. The difference in affection and engagement affects how the bodies are positioned. In the agonised posture of Robin and Nora, the bodies are almost symmetrical, with “their two heads in their four arms” (63). With Jenny, however, there is imbalance, mirroring the power dynamics of the relationship. In both embraces, the postured bodies reflect the women’s feelings, or lack of feelings, towards the other.

The position of one body in relation to another reveals power relations. It also shows the intensity of feelings and desire. In the above examples, the women are caught up in various unmoving postures because of their feelings for one another. Their desire to possess keeps them still. They stick to the positions they are in, positions of pain and of disadvantage that prevent them from normative ways of seeing. There is an emotional attachment and commitment to a common disadvantage. It keeps them together and underpins the sense of fixity they forge for themselves. This fixity is an alternative version of settling down that they, as “inverts,” have to

invent (*NW* 145).<sup>52</sup> In keeping their positions, they also maintain their orientation towards objects, which results in blurred and incomplete visions. Still, this is the givenness of the world they present for others alike and also the reader. In this sense, the women's refusal to move holds the narrative and presents the scene from their stilted positions. The idea of orientation then becomes key. It is a spatial cue, a material manifestation of the characters' sexual orientations and inclinations, which in turn directs them to see at a slant.

### ***Bent Bodies***

Queer permeates *Nightwood's* dark and inverted world. Characters are queer and live queerly. Ahmed affirms that sexual orientation is “a matter of residence”: it affects “how we inhabit spaces, and who or what we inhabit spaces with” (“Orientations” 543). Queer suffuses their beings and comes through their positions in place. To restate, Nora, Jenny, and Robin are relentless in keeping positions, almost comfortable in their awkwardness. Bent bodies speak of queerness and also the reluctance to budge, refusing to be *straight* and *see right* as explained in the introductory section of the chapter. The queer women resist heteronormativity, turning away from the right and accepted way of living, choosing to put themselves at a disadvantage. This “turning away” is captured in the bent posture of bodies that refuse to be straight.

The word, “bent,” suggests deflection and describes orientations that are not straight. The idea of bent bodies helps us to think of the women's awkward physical positions in relation to sexual orientation. In *Nightwood* the women who refuse to see *straightly* take up a queer orientation that veers off the course of the normal visual

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<sup>52</sup> In *Nightwood* the Doctor uses the word, “invert,” to mean the homosexual: “what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl?” (145).

route. Ahmed examines in *Queer Phenomenology* how orientation is lived out in space, and how being queer and off-course “redirect us and open up new worlds” (19). Her refreshing take on lived space and orientations of alterity (homosexuality and race) is enlightening for the study of women’s experience of place. An understanding of queer prevents the universalising of women’s experience, lest a feminist phenomenology project should assume a dominant women experience.

Since the advent of queer theory in the early 1990s, studies surrounding lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and intersex people and culture have acquired their own field, albeit born out of gender and women’s studies. No more contented with categories like gay and lesbian, queer is more inclusive. According to Eve Sedgwick, queer refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (*or can’t be made*) to signify monolithically” (*Tendencies* 8). Sedgwick investigates the etymological roots of *queer*: “it comes from the Indo-European root—*twerkw*, which also yields to the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist)” (xii). Put another way, queer embraces different “across formulations” (xii). It is a way of thinking about how lines and boundaries are crossed with regards to sexuality. This is also its greatest departure from feminist theory which concerns itself with gender and sex.<sup>53</sup>

Sedgwick is correct to point out that exploitation from gender and sexuality-related differences are “*differently* structured,” “each oppression is likely to be in a uniquely indicative relation to certain distinctive nodes of cultural organization” (*Epistemology of the Closet* 33). Whilst feminism is commonly associated with the

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<sup>53</sup> Sedgwick defines sex as “chromosomal sex,” which has “the meaning of a certain group of irreducible, biological differentiations between members of the species *Homo sapiens* who have XX and those who have XY chromosomes”; gender builds on this and is “the far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors—of male and female persons—in a cultural system” (*Epistemology of the Closet* 27).

conception of gender, queer largely responds to perversions of categories concerning sex and sexuality. Following this distinction, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Good Morning, Midnight* (which is read later) are concerned with how women's conceived roles in the public or private affect their experiences as they walk the streets or stay in rooms. *Nightwood*, on the other hand, is rendering of queer experience. How and what exactly is it to experience the world as we know it without seeing it through the lenses of heteronormativity and normality? How does the world look like to a queer who is not granted the privilege of the reigning majority? To address queer existence, the novel first tears apart heteronormative experience and straight seeing.

Before examining the overt queerness of *Nightwood*, let us look at Merleau-Ponty's address of queer experience. His application of the queer relates to being inverted, which uncannily recalls the Doctor's use of the word, "invert," to describe homosexuals. Merleau-Ponty refers to something called the "queer" effect which occurs when objects appear "slantwise" and images are "oblique (or inverted)" (*POP* 289). Queer is mentioned twice in *Phenomenology of Perception*, always in inverted commas, perhaps aware of its social implications but careful to not to allude to the same meaning for the given context.<sup>54</sup> When queer moments occur, they are discussed as a kind of inversion where the top and bottom are reversed and the body is forced to re-orientate itself.

Merleau-Ponty cites the example of a subject whose world is inverted as a result of wearing corrective glasses. At first, the view is "unreal and upside down," but with time "normal perception begins to reassert itself"; the subject "has the feeling that his own body is upside down" (285). With more time, "the landscape is no longer

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<sup>54</sup> It should be pointed out that Merleau-Ponty does consider sexual orientation in the chapter, "The Body in its Sexual Being," and would have been aware of non-heteronormative orientations. Ahmed, however, thinks differently: "when Merleau-Ponty discusses queer effects he is not considering 'queer' as a sexual orientation" (67).

inverted” and the body “progressively rights itself, and finally seems to occupy a normal position” (285). When the glasses are removed, “objects appear not inverted” but “motor reactions are reversed” (285). The experiment shows that the “conflict of images can end only if one of the two contestants withdraws” (286). Gradually, “the normal situation is restored” and the “new image of the world and one’s own body” begins to “displace” the world before (286). This re-orientation seems like a natural transition: the subject gets used to the new normal after the initial uneasiness. Ahmed explains reorientation as “the ‘becoming vertical’ of perspective,” where “the ‘queer’ effect is overcome and objects in the world no longer appear as if they are ‘off center’ or ‘slantwise’” (65). This newly acquired “normative dimension” is “redescribed in terms of the straight body” (66). The problem with this line of argument is it presupposes that normal is necessary and desired. But *Nightwood* writes differently on the queer experience and problematises the attempt to overcome the queer effect. Firstly, queer experience in *Nightwood* is not straightened out or reversed. It exists alongside the normative but reveals the incongruities between the worlds. The world at night is as real and ordinary as the world by day. Secondly, characters are acutely cognisant of the pains of remaining in their positions, and even as they try to experience as fully and immediately as possible, they never correct themselves.

To bend is an out and loud gesture that protests against being straight. It insistently makes slant one’s perception of the world. Bending deviates from a neutral position; the body moves away from what is considered normal since it stands straight in order to have a clear and optimal view. The practice of straightness, Ahmed writes, is like following a line that is created “by being followed and [is] followed by being created” (16). Straight are the lines that direct how one should live: “they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken” (16). Accordingly,

to stand straight is the first step to walking the line of normativity. Conversely, to bend is to sidetrack. In *Nightwood* the queer people are bent.

In *Feminism is Queer*, Mimi Marinucci argues that queer theory's "critique of binary and hierarchical reasoning recognizes and addresses all forms of oppression as part of a logic of domination" (106). Queer criticises "the logic of domination"; it rethinks the hierarchical manner in which people interact with the world: "a manner that justifies the systematic subordination of those who lack power by those who possess it" (106-107). This is important in *Nightwood* where sexuality, gender, and power intersect. The novel twists lines and oversteps boundaries. It is about the queer lived experience, in all senses of the word. Queer frustrates preconceived structures of experience and compels a re-examination of our straightforward views of the world.

To see as bent bodies do goes against the logic of seeing straight. To see straight, or to have a straightforward view of the world, does not necessarily cognate with heterosexual attitudes. But it is consistent with the natural attitude, or to be more precise, the natural straightforward attitude.<sup>55</sup> According to Husserl, this attitude is formed from "straightforward living" which is the "naturally normal [manner]" in which "we are awake to the world and to the objects in the world" (*The Crisis of European Sciences* 144). Living in a "pregiven world," which is "the world as world for us," "we function together, in the manifold ways of considering, together, objects pre-given to us in common, thinking together, valuing, planning, acting together" (109). There is solidarity and structure in the straightforward life that help us agree on what is natural and normal, acceptable and right. Yet, this way of life is also incredibly limiting. Husserl puts it this way: "We, the subjects, in our normal,

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<sup>55</sup> The natural attitude is unquestioning and accepts things as they have been presented and made available to us. It stands in contrast to the phenomenological attitude where the natural beliefs about the world are bracketed and every sense of the things occurring around us is rediscovered in their givenness.

unbroken, coherent life, know no goals which extend beyond [the pregiven world]" (144). So when something swerves from the dominant course, we cannot comprehend difference and deem the odd one out unnatural and abominable. The majority may even try to "straighten" the oddity or extricate her from the dominant narrative.

Louise Levesque-Lopman elaborates on the natural straightforward attitude:

In our natural attitude we take it for granted that others exist and that they will act in ways typically similar to ours, will be motivated by typically similar motives, and will interpret our actions in substantially the same way as we meant them. (*Claiming Reality* 81)

This attitude is a "taken-for-granted" schema of the world (81). It prefers familiarity to diversity, denying "the oppressed" of the freedom to "create an alternative" (82). Appropriating this for *Nightwood*, to be straight is more than assuming a heterosexual orientation; it is to subscribe to the natural attitude that "accept[s] and reproduce[s] a predefined malestream notion of human experience" (82). What is required to counteract the straight and natural, according to Levesque-Lopman, is "a new orientation that deconstructs and reexamines what 'appears' to be gender-neutral; that transcends the limitations imposed by male culture" (82). The call to "transcend" the male culture by "starting from women's perspective" may raise red flags with some postmodern feminists who argue that such transgression fortifies arbitrary gender constructs (82). Yet, to think that a narrative starting from women's perspectives would tread the dangerous male-female dichotomy is to assume the existence of a female-centric discourse substantial enough to come close to its male counterpart. This is another myth. As de Beauvoir writes, "man represents both the positive and the neutral... whereas women represents only the negative" (15). It is therefore pertinent for women to lay foot in the neutral. *Nightwood* begins from not only

women's perspective but from the oppressed and the queer. It refuses to conform to the natural attitude. It is stubbornly queer, advocating the need to be bent and to bend to see, opposing the dominant straight culture of seeing.

Bent bodies insist on a slanted perspective of the scene. The women arrange the situation by orientating the scene around their bodies. Their bodies shape the narrative of place. As Ahmed writes, "space is dependent on bodily inhabitation" (6). Space comes into being, or rather becomes something familiar, only when, upon establishing an orientation, we reach out to inhabit it: "The familiar is an effect of inhabitation; we are not simply in the familiar, but rather the familiar is shaped by actions that reach out toward objects that are already within reach" (7). Inhabitation as the key to shaping place is important to understanding a shifty novel like *Nightwood*. By focusing on how bent bodies inhabit space, hidden places emerge from the background and become less strange. One gets to see beyond what is straight ahead.

This is seen in the scene where Jenny dines with Robin at a place not clearly named: "Perhaps at the *Ambassadeurs* (Jenny feared meeting Nora). Perhaps dinner in the *Bois*" (NW 75). The adverb makes ambiguous the meeting place. Nothing much is revealed about place. It is only through seeing Jenny and Robin's bent bodies that place is brought into view. The scene reads:

Jenny leaning far over the table, Robin far back, her legs thrust under her, to balance the whole backward incline of the body, and Jenny so far forward that she had to catch her small legs in the back rung of the chair, ankle out and toe in, not to pitch forward on the table—thus they presented the two halves of a movement that had, as in sculpture, the beauty and the absurdity of a desire that is in flower but that can have no burgeoning, unable to execute its destiny; a movement that can



divulge neither caution nor daring, for the fundamental condition for completion was in neither of them; they were like Greek runners, with lifted feet but without the relief of the final command that would bring the foot down—eternally angry, eternally separated, in a cataleptic frozen gesture of abandon. (75-76)

What is immediately striking is the tension between the women. The body language, Jenny “leaning far forward” and Robin “far back,” tells the nature of the relationship (75). Jenny is the predator and Robin the withdrawn. The diction (“whole backward,” “so far forward”) puts the two bodies in stark contrast. Jenny’s commitment to her posture, “ankle out and toe in, not to pitch forward on the table,” emphasises the tautness of the body (75). Robin, at the other side of the table, may be reclining but her body is not relaxed. The need to “balance” suggests effort, evident in the violent image of “thrusting” her legs under Jenny. The bodies are strained, striving to keep in position. Still, to envision the bodies—their entirety and in relation to one another—the space in which this power struggle occurs needs to come into view. For a phenomenology of place, more salient is the dismissive treatment of place and what this entails for the nature of women’s relationship to space. Here space is not nebulous or Euclidean, but refers to the physical space of a situation. In *Nightwood*, whilst space may not be as physically present and described in the way that it is in *Mrs Dalloway*, it is not an elusive construct. Place is meant to be ambivalent and material at the same time.

We must read between the lines and through bodies to uncover a narrative of place. To find place in the dining scene, we look at the barely mentioned table and chairs. It is significant that the narrative never pins down the exact venue of the dinner but is quick to emplace the women. They appear in front of one another at “the

table,” already seated in “the chair[s],” occupying space (75). The definite article, “the,” is used instead of the indefinite, “a,” and whilst this indicates specificity, so acknowledging space, the objects of space only come into existence when they are cited in reference to the bodies. The table and chairs become meaningful, their materiality emphasised, because actions occur across and on the furniture. They must exist in order for the scene to take place even though they remain in the background. This attitude towards place is clarified with Ahmed’s notion of “acts of relegation,” where “some things are relegated to the background in order *to sustain* a certain direction; in other words, in order to keep attention on what is faced” (31).

Ahmed furthers her explanation with the example of Husserl writing in a summer house where place provides the setting for the “familiar [to slide] into the familial” (32). As the philosopher is working at his table, back facing his children, he does not see them but “they are sensed as being there,” their presence “made available through memory of even habitual knowledge” (32). The children are relegated because they are in the background and also because they can be neglected in favour of work. “Such acts of relegation,” Ahmed explains, “are forgotten in the very preoccupation with it is that is faced” (31). She points out that our attention to certain things involves a “more general orientation toward the world” and that the “objects that we direct our attention toward reveal the direction we have taken in life” (31).

In the context of the dining episode, what is faced is the exchange between Robin and Jenny, and what is relegated is the space in which this happens. It is neglected because the general orientation of the trained eye and mind is tailored towards the main conflict. An act of facing always involves an act of relegation. What is superficially seen in the dining scene is a straightforward presentation of two women in a tug of war. As Ahmed observes, “The objects we direct our attention

toward reveal the direction we have taken in life” and quite often this involves “a more general orientation toward the world” (32). *Nightwood* works against the grain of the general and presents the relegated—that is, the background, the subliminal, and the unperceived. It illuminates on the queer experience via a different sort of bracketing from the epoché, which is the suspension of natural beliefs and judgements about the world. It suspends the general orientation and introduces a different angle to things. Returning to the scene, Barnes may have purposefully presented what is obvious, namely the tense bodies, but once attention shifts to that which is relegated, the bent bodies emerge. One who is used to seeing straight fails to notice place or the slanted bodies, imposing instead a rigid orientation on the scene so that focus is on the animosity between the women. Putting place back into the narrative reveals that what prevents the perception of place is the imposition of a general orientation, a dominant consensus of how and what things should be, which dismisses alternative angles and orientations of seeing.

Details of place are scarce in this scene. But, as I will argue, a single table suffices to expose the normative modality of experience that hinders exploration of relations outside social norms. The narrative seems to be ambivalent about place (is it the *Ambassadeurs* or the *Bois*?) but, in actuality, Barnes has already drawn up a very tangible place that can only be seen by a perceiver who is willing to undertake the slanted orientation from which place is conceived. Jenny and Robin’s postures reveal the dynamics of their relationship. But if their postures are re-examined in relation to the table, then the power relation between them is played down and what becomes visible are two bodies slanted in the same direction. Instead of opposing one another, the bodies are now alike. No wonder “they present two halves of a movement” (NW 75). The table is not a banal object that comes into being because of the women but it

is always there, waiting to be noticed. And once noticed, it turns into the main fixture of the scene. It is now clear that what is slanted are the bodies. And since they keep their positions, we have to bend to see the slant-ness. The table and the women are stationary, but the other perceiver—the reader—is re-orientated. It is when the bodies are seen inhabiting place that one realises it is not disparity between the women but their very sameness that marks the fatality of their liaison.

As we yield to the direction to which the bodies are slanted, two almost parallel bodies emerge. They are diagonally stretched: one towards the table and the other away from it. Like two parallel lines that run alongside each other but never touching and forever divided by the gulf stretched out by the table, Jenny and Robin share a “desire” that “can have no burgeoning” (75). They remain bent as “two halves of a movement” that are ready to go (75); yet, like “Greek runners, with lifted feet but without the relief of the final command that would bring the foot down,” they do not move (76). This is a rare moment between Jenny and Robin where a sense of Robin’s feelings is vaguely palpable and implicitly expressed. The novel never expresses how she feels towards Jenny, but here there is whisper of a possible reciprocity, or at least it hints of camaraderie. Then, as though preferring malaise, the narrative returns to the women’s destructive love. The concluding sentence seals their fateful and hopeless union: they are “eternally angry, eternally separated, in a cataleptic frozen gesture of abandonment” (76).

The women seem to be self-sabotaging, subjecting themselves to unfavourable conditions, frozen and abandoned. Motionless, in spite of their anger and strained bodies, Robin and Jenny are too intentionally passive. As aforementioned, the women are moved into their respective positions by circumstances beyond their control and are kept still because of one another. They actively fight to remain in a position of

non-movement, of a supposed passivity. This passivity must not be mistaken for non-resistance or conformity that makes them victims of circumstances. Here I argue that passivity is a response, or rather the lack of need to respond, that arises from complete embracing and acceptance of who one is and to whom one is devoted. There is no need to move and unsettle position if she is resolute and even happy, albeit an “awful happiness,” with where and who she is and what she believes in (*NW* 70).

To clarify, happiness and comfort do not diminish anger nor deflect the issue of marginalisation. As *Nightwood* guarantees, the women are “eternally angry” (76). Anger, I contend, is directed to the standards of society and its people who abandon those who live along the margins. To move is to be straightened out by the dominant culture. Bodies remain bent because they are committed to their positions. More importantly, it is the shared experience of being bent together that empowers queer women to continue rejecting proper or natural positions so as to see straight. This is, unfortunately, not quite the case for the men.

Taylor observes how characters in *Nightwood* assume the “downward pose of shame” in which bowing down is “a physical act performed by shamed characters and as a textual symptom through the repeated emphasis on descent” (115). Although Felix, the Doctor, Nora, and Robin are shamed by their disqualifications, she asserts that shame must not be associated with depravity but with performativity, therefore crucial in the process of identity-making. Taylor’s most compelling argument on shame centres on Felix and the Doctor:

Barnes explicitly links Felix’s bowing down to his internalized sense of shame and his wish to assume a coherent and socially acceptable identity. His ‘diversity of blood,’ his mixed history and race, has made him ‘the accumulated and single—the embarrassed’ .... Felix is so

thoroughly shaped by shame that the interest-excitement that forms the basis for his ‘bowing down’ has become wrapped up with the mechanism of shame: his shame response, through its centrality to his affective life, becomes itself an affect invested with interest. (116-117)

Felix carries the generational shame of his race. Whilst the Doctor bears the “painful isolation and wish for self-effacement associated with homosexual shame” (128), his shame “ultimately concludes in the embarrassment of the figure called upon to produce his shame” (129). Yet, although more transgressive, this feeling related to homosexuality is constantly shuffling between “queer shame and gay pride.”<sup>56</sup> Taylor elaborates on how the Doctor’s identity is “born out of a negative”:

[The] language in which O’Connor in particular describes himself suggests that his queer subjectivity has been formed in the wounds of insult. Some of his most insulting self-descriptive epithets were excised during the editorial process (presumably to prevent censors’ objections), including the italicised portion of the following: “‘You see before you, madame,’” he said, “one who in *common parlance* is called a ‘faggot,’ a ‘fairy,’ a ‘queen.’ I was created in anxiety”. Not unlike the word ‘queer’, the terms O’Connor uses to describe himself are rooted in homophobic shaming. (131)

For Felix and the Doctor, the provenance of shame is trauma that results from “failed communication” between subjects (131). Following Taylor’s argument, the failure to recognise oneself in another disrupts identification, resulting in shame which is fundamental in shaping identity.

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<sup>56</sup> “Queer shame or gay pride?” is the title of one of the sections in Taylor’s chapter on *Nightwood*. It discusses the tension between shame and pride experienced by the homosexual and Taylor concludes, “Pride itself takes on the characteristics of shame, and is ultimately felt as a kind of physical trauma” (134). Shame is laden with mixed feeling and necessary for the creation of pride.

For the women, however, there is little textual evidence to link shame to failed communication of this nature. Taylor connects their shame to sex and/or “human proximity to animal” (142). She refers to an omitted “scene of guilt” (119), where there is “an explicit description of oral sex between two women” (118). The scene, retrieved from Barnes’s related drafts, reads:

... a girl standing before her girl, her skirts flung back one on one, while between the columns the handsome head of the girls made boy by God, bends back, the posture of that head volts forth the difference between one woman and another—crying softly between tongues, the terrible excommunication of the toilet. (*Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts* 262)

Whilst the graphic description supports Taylor’s claim that guilt stems from sapphic erotics, this removed portion, which is supposed to be part of the Doctor’s speech, does not describe Nora, Robin, or Jenny. In another example of shame, one that is not removed, Barnes describes Robin’s descent into bestiality in the church scene as “perhaps the most shameful thing imaginable,” and that “Robin’s relation to the dog is so intensely and uncomfortably physical” that some have thought it to be “sexual in nature” (142). Whilst the coupling in the toilet is obscene and the church scene degrading in Robin’s atavistic morphology, these do not speak of anxiety and embarrassment stemming from the women’s identity or their love for one another. If they are ashamed, it has nothing to do with their nonconformity and fluid identity. The men in *Nightwood*, falling short of the normative definition of man, struggle with inadequacy, as misfits of society. The women do not share this struggle, at least not with regards to their orientation.

Given that shame is foregrounded by personal or collective histories and identity crises (as with the Doctor and Felix), and is a result of the failure to identify with the dominant culture, the same cannot be said about Nora, Jenny, and Robin. Their feelings do not vacillate between queer shame and gay pride. It is not a question of why and how they inherit their sexual orientation. Focus, I think, should be on the effects of affirming non-normative orientations and modes of perception. More significant is the concomitant affective and unifying space that is built from the experiences of bent bodies. It is interesting that the word, “bend,” used as a verb, comes from the Old English *bendan*, which means to bind, as in binding a bow with strings. Thinking along these lines, to bend is to join and string one and one together. In *Nightwood* the women are united as they turn from the world and bend towards one another. Their symbiotic relationships are sustained by intense and mixed feelings. The destructiveness of the nature of their relationships constructs a bond between the women that ties them together and keeps them going.

The connection between the women is best summed up in the Doctor’s description of their perverse solidarity. He says to Nora,

... in the end you’ll all be locked together, like the poor beasts that get their antlers mixed and are found dead that way, their heads fattened with a knowledge of each other they never wanted, having had to contemplate each other, head-on and eye to eye, until death; well, that will be you and Jenny and Robin. (107)

The bodies are twisted together in confusion and mess. There is at once unity and disharmony. The image of beasts entangled, their antlers mixed, reflects the complex dynamics of the relationship between the three women. Like the deer trapped, they are caught in a passionate imbroglio caused by the drives to possess and dispossess one



another. The Doctor's vision somewhat comes to pass when they are present together. We get a closer look at the dynamics of the relationships and the deadlock that ensues in one of the later scenes where Nora visits Jenny.

Although Robin is not physically in the apartment when Nora visits Jenny, her presence pervades. Apart from the photograph and doll, Robin is also present through her thoughts and voice that haunt Jenny and Nora's exchange:

In great agitation, she said, 'I went out this afternoon, I didn't think she could call me because you have been away to the country, Robin said, and would be back this evening so she would have to stay home with you because you had been so good to her always.... She had told me often enough, 'Don't leave the house because I don't know exactly when I am going to be able to get away because I can't hurt Nora.'

(150)

Shuffling between the pronouns and repeating Robin's words, Jenny brings Robin into the dialogue. She preserves Robin's presence by speaking as she did; in doing so, she re-creates the scene that occurred earlier in the day. She involves Nora in the reenactment, giving her a clearer sense of Robin's feelings for her in the last days of their relationship. Not only is Robin brought into the present scene, Nora is also led back to the earlier happenings in the apartment. This explains the effect of Robin's words on Nora, whose "voice broke" upon hearing her (150). The moment is climactic and poignant, for up until this point Robin has never initiated anything as close to a confession of affection as this: "'I don't know exactly when I am going to be able to get away because I can't hurt Nora'" (150).

By the end of the exchange, Jenny is "shuddering" and falls on Nora's lap, and Nora is hurt and "dead" (150). They are aggrieved and suffering. Sharing the same

lover, Nora and Jenny are rivals, but at the same time one is to the other “someone who might understand her torture” (150). Between Jenny and Nora, Jenny and Robin, Nora and Robin, a labyrinth of conflicting feelings emerges. They are entangled in opposing feelings for one another, unable to retreat or advance. The impossibility of progression or regression, the predicament of being stuck, materialises in the figure of the doll. Symbolic of “the life they cannot have,” it is a physical embodiment of impossibility (151). The sense of impossibility is passed from Nora to Jenny, shared by the lovers. It is a visual reminder of their entanglement, a perverse promise that they will always be connected. It is an impossibility that holds them together and keeps them striving. In the words of Nora, “Only the impossible lasts forever; with time, it is made accessible” (148).

The set-up of place reinforces the engulfing impossibility. For instance, when Nora recounts her meeting with Jenny to the Doctor, she begins by recalling her entrance into the house and what she sees:

I went to see Jenny. I remember the stairs. They were of brown wood, and the hall was ugly and dark, and her apartment depressing. No one would have known that she had money. The walls had a mustard-coloured paper on them as far as the salon, and something hideous in red and green and black in the hall, and away at the end, a bedroom facing the hall-door, with a double-bed. (149)

The house is as wretched as Jenny. Wilson observes, “Barnes’s description so blurs the lines between Jenny, her possessions, and the house that contains them all that our image of Jenny is of those objects” (439). The house is stale and has a depressing atmosphere, akin to the feeling Jenny stirs in others. Its ugliness takes after its owner who is closest to an antagonist in the novel. Jane Marcus also highlights the “vitriolic

description of Jenny” and crowns her “as the most abject character” (162). Jenny’s aptitude for destruction is fortified in the appearance of her run-down and dilapidated apartment.

The house also becomes a site where the conflict of emotions between the women is localised. Robin’s need to stay home with Nora and her begging Jenny to not “leave the house” reiterate the connection between staying home and staying with one’s beloved and/or leaving home and leaving one’s beloved. This is also expressed by Nora who feels that in their house she “had to watch [Robin] wanting to go and yet to stay” (148). The house is a spatial embodiment of their love. As the women enter and exit their abodes, they also return to and leave their loved ones. The houses of Nora and Robin and Jenny and Robin are sites of beginnings and endings, reflecting their pining and abandonment. These tense situations parallel the circumstances of the queer world, where to be at home is never to be able settle down. On homes in *Nightwood*, Wilson writes: “In attempting to place themselves, to make homes that will give them a place in the world, to shelter queer or unorthodox relationships, they end up with dwelling places that are no place like home” (433). Jenny’s apartment and Nora’s house become places where their sapphic loves are housed and struggles enacted. Taken further, places in *Nightwood* can be read as shelters where the imperceptible and impermissible become describable and possible.

### ***Body-World***

As seen in the previous section, the struggle and state of characters are not only reflected in their entangled bodies but also in place. Feelings are both embodied and emplaced. The women are impossible to move just as their situation is impossible.

Their bodies are acted out and displayed in ways that mirror the fatality of their love. Body and place are one, manifesting in the everyday lived experience.

In his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), Merleau-Ponty discusses the intertwining of the self and world. He reflects: “the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things” is “by making myself a world and by making them flesh” (135). One is *in* and *of* the world. There is a body-world relation that needs to be clarified, in which the body is not only receiving but also contributing to making meaning. Merleau-Ponty writes: “There is a circle of the touched and the touching, the touched takes hold of the touching; there is a circle of the visible and the seeing, the seeing is not without visible existence” (*TVTI* 143). It seems tautological but there is communication between the two sides, where one’s “movements no longer proceed unto the things to be seen, to be touched or unto [one’s] own body, but they address themselves to the body in general and for itself” (143). So the body does not just receive meaning but echoes in some ways the spatiality of the external. Conversely, place is not wholly outside the body; it can take form through the body. The exchange is part of the process of reversibility. In “The Body as a Basis for Being,” Suzanne Cataldi sums up Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility: “It contains the idea that one’s external perceptions and subjective impressions can switch places—reversibly wind up on their ‘opposite’ sides” (100). There is a “cross over” of impressions as the body “incorporates” the external into its bearing (100).<sup>57</sup>

To borrow Cataldi’s terms, women’s situation in *Nightwood*, precipitated by impossible love and love-hate relationships with one another, “reversibly crosses over onto [them] and is expressed in and through [their] bodies” (101). The body is spatial,

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<sup>57</sup> Cataldi explains reversibility in context of eroticism: “a woman’s perception of herself as sexually ‘cold’” and “sexually incapacitated” is “indicative of a perceived coldness” and “lack” in her external situation (100).

and through it place is personified and becomes feeling. As Ahmed affirms, “spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body” (9). This section discusses the emplacement of feeling bodies where the feeling of the body is also the feeling of place, that is to say places are spatial extensions of feelings.

Each character in *Nightwood* has a dwelling place, an edificial projection of his/herself. Take Nora’s house for example, which is a “salon” for “poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love” who “could be seen sitting about her oak table before the huge fire” (NW 55). It is not quite a home, but is a reception room because Nora is too compassionate to turn people away: “Nora had the face of all people who love the people” (57). In contrast, Jenny’s place reeks of “second-hand dealings with life” (72). Whilst Nora “robbed herself for everyone”—her home crowded with strangers; Jenny robbed others for herself—her house packed with stolen loot. Their abode is a part of and an extension of themselves.

The notion of emplaced feelings, or emplaced feeling bodies, is useful when analysing Robin who is wont to escape. The places with which she is associated are telling of who she is. When Robin first appears, the narrative follows the gaze of Felix who is hiding behind the palms:

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds, which seemed to have been forgotten—left without the usual silencing cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives—half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman, heavy and disheveled. (37-38)

Felix does not see the supine woman but is greeted by a scene reminiscent of Henri Rousseau's *The Dream*. The young woman is seen from a distance. Although she is the focus of the picture, her presence pales in comparison to the display of potted plants. The flux of descriptions encased by parenthetical commas overloads the sentence, as though the physical details are prying their way into the narrative before the young woman comes into the picture. Like the birds that refuse to be forgotten, place refuses to be relegated to the background.

The scene lays bare a setting so catching and vivid that intimate details like the woman's facial features are dim in comparison. If one is to see the woman, one has to abandon traditional modes of association and deduction and focus on the postured body. The body has to be seen in its givenness, broken and contorted. Like Felix, we see the woman's legs "spread" and her long hands reach over "either side of her face," as though pulled by two warring worlds (38). The positions of her limbs pin down the body in place. Her body stretches out to the vertical and horizontal planes of the room, as if to cover all grounds, as if to "cross over" to the external (Cataldi 100). Her limbs push against the luscious surroundings and cut into negative space which the body is, in actuality, not occupying. To recapitulate, negative space, according to Kern, is space unoccupied by the positive, the surrounding space that is not in focus. Her stretched arms and legs lead our attention from the body to the room, like lines that reach out from the body to the enviroing place. This way, the body, though dismembered, is rooted in place.

The place in question is the jungle-room. It is a set-up of an exoticised Eden, blending prelapsarian innocence with an uncanny, menacing excess. The physical arrangement of place introduces Robin to the reader. The theatricality of the scene (how it is set up to resemble Rousseau's painting) and its purposeful confusion (a

seemingly natural environment decorated with potted plants in a hotel room) present Robin as “a ‘picture’ forever arranged” (NW 41). Robin’s constructed nature, the theatricality of her presence, so to speak, is not new; *Nightwood* makes it clear that her existence is one construed by the narratives of others. But this scene, in mapping Robin onto place, gives us a spatial perspective of the elusive protagonist. The scene is described to be a “confusion” that holds the tension between two extremes (37), articulating Robin’s biformity: “the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds—meet of child and desperado” (38). Tension is also physically visible in “the pose of her annihilation” as opposing forces threaten to tear her apart (39). Still, in spite of the disharmony, Robin lies undisturbed. She is posed in a way that angularises her body: her legs open sideways whilst her hands extend over her face. There is a mannequin-like artificiality about the position that contrasts with the “earth-flesh” perfume and “texture” of her flesh, of “plant life” (38). Robin’s body effortlessly blends in with the jungle, but her posture suggests rigidity and limitation. Just as the child and desperado are fighting to coexist, her posture and body described as though they are from separate beings, the wilderness and the walled room are in conflict.

Looking at her position in the juxtaposition of places, one realises that Robin is not quite struggling with the tension between the innocent, primitive girl and the rapacious, depraved woman lurking inside her. Rather she adapts to the duality and lies restful. The way in which she sleeps, how her body is positioned, and where it is placed are at odds, but they work together to capture and develop the sense of Robin. When she finally comes around, the awakening is violent and she utters, “I was all right,” dramatically “[falling] back into the pose of her annihilation” (39). The use of past tense is peculiar. The assurance also points to her being comfortable in position,

emplaced and asleep. She is after all *la somnambule*. The regression into her initial pose is momentous. She willingly returns to the posture that makes her feel “all right,” as though if awakened she would have to face the physical manifestations of her inner chaos (39). The body is expressed through the falling back into position in the jungle-room; Robin accepts the confusion and embraces her biformity. Her involvement with place is guised in the extreme interlocking of emotions and expression. The little we know of Robin is magnified and expanded when deflected to the place of the jungle-room.

Place, as an extension of the body, expresses on behalf of the postured feeling body. Lying down, Robin occupies the topmost layer of the existing superimposed space of the jungle and room. Her flesh is described as of the “texture of plant life”; her head is like the sun “glowing about the circumference of a body of water” (38). The body lies in a perverse Eden that embodies the trinity of Creation—the earth, light, and sea manifest through the being of Robin. The spatial images do not intermesh but structurally divide the body. On the surface the body takes on the texture of plant life and beneath it is decaying soil. Because of the position, the head is elevated. It is a protrusion severed from the rest, the beacon of light shining upon the water in which the body is lying. Layers emerge as the body is broken down into parts. The body is topographical. Recumbent, it outlines gradient and contours that trace the form of the landscape. The jungle scene is no longer a two-dimensional painting but gains texture and thickness through the body. The mystery of Robin slowly dissipates as the topography drawn out by her posed body beckons a re-seeing of the body in place as a lived body in a world of textures.

This deflection of existence to surrounding place is apparent the second time Felix encounters Robin. This time, she is “[r]emoved from her setting” and he is



much closer, walking “a little short of her” (44). Whilst the dense setting in the previous episode reflects Robin’s confusion, the “bare chilly gardens” divulge little of she who is no longer posed in place and observed from afar (44). The scene adopts a more familiar mode of characterisation:

Her movements were slightly headlong and sideways; slow, clumsy and yet graceful, the ample gait of the night-watch. She wore no hat, and her pale head, with its short hair growing flat on the forehead made still narrower by the hanging curls almost on a level with the finely arched eyebrows, gave her the look of cherubs in Renaissance theatres; the eyeballs showing slightly rounded in profile, the temples low and square. (45)

Robin’s movements and features are in focus. Like Felix, the reader is given a head-on profile of Robin. One stands in close proximity to her and is given personal details that are absent in the previous scene. Yet, the overall profile, aside from unbridled contrasts (“headlong” and “sideways,” “clumsy” and “graceful”), is insipid and lacks the intensity of the Robin who first appeared in the jungle-room. Without place, without being emplaced, Robin is more removed from the narrative. Ironically, seeing the body from a distance, shaded and obscured, grants a more intimate access to Robin than being close beside her.

Somewhere in the scene, as though conscious of the importance of place as an anchoring force, the narrative shifts from tracking Robin’s movements to positioning the body in place. At some point Robin is likened to “an old statue” that “symbolizes the weather through which it has endured” (45). The moving body is not actually posed, but the reference keeps her still and situates her in a different garden that is subjected to “the work of wind and rain and the herd of seasons” (45). A more ancient

and weathered garden, evidently not the Luxembourg, is called into the scene. An alternative image comes to mind, hinting of the primal garden with which Robin is first associated. The phrases (“the work of man,” “formed in man’s image”) laced with biblical undertones further accentuate the connection. Robin seems to be in another place. The text subtly invokes a more substantial narrative of place: the spatialised narrative place hampers direct contact with Robin but emplaces her such that she is more intimately perceived through place. A linear narrative of the body is supplanted by a narrative of its surroundings. It is as if the narrative reflexively directs attention to place so as to locate it. The body of Robin comes into existence only through its emplacement.

Since both accounts of Robin, in the jungle-room and in the Luxembourg Gardens, are told from Felix’s point of view, it is his perception that has altered. No more trying to catch an up-close view of Robin, he now emplaces her, grasping her through the surrounding space. This way of seeing is counterintuitive. The shift in focus is also evident when Nora turns from seeing Robin, who is the primary object of her vision, to Jenny, who stumbles into her visual field. Instead of a tunnel vision of Robin, her perception widens; she sees past the object of her vision. The subject does not move but perception has shifted. Felix and Nora have re-orientated their gazes. The adjustment of perception is explicated in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of spatial vision, where to see something is to “take a certain hold upon it, to be able to follow on its surface a certain perceptual route” (*POP* 295). Felix’s eyes follow the space of the room; Nora’s are fixed on Jenny. As they follow these perceptual routes, their gazes “favour certain directions,” leading them to “the very significance of the object” (294). They learn to see the body in its place, to see where the body is not, spatialising and emplacing the body.

### *Negative Space*

The queer, lived body takes perceptual routes that diverge from heteronormative ways of seeing. In *Nightwood* the favoured perceptual route is a spatial one; it directs the eyes away from what is natural and positive to the negative. Nora sees Robin by way of a curious deflection; she looks away from Robin to better see her. Where the beloved is out of sight, the lover invokes her presence. Strangely enough, this kind of seeing brings the hidden, negative space into view and expands place.

The positive comprises the things visible and in the foreground; the negative is the obscured surroundings. Though obscure, the negative is more than a background. It has, as Kern argues, a “positive, constitutive function”: “the background itself is a positive element, of equal importance with all others” (153). Kern’s proposition of the negative as equal runs the risk of supposing an equilibrium where things are stable. Also, whilst it draws out the hidden and relegated, there is unevenness resulting from the shift of focus. It is difficult to regard elements of the positive and negative as equal because from any given viewpoint, there surely exists a certain focus that blurs out others. A hierarchy of significance, of what is in and out of focus, always remains.

What is important about the negative as a positive element is the raised awareness of the shifting nature of what is positive and negative, and of the flexibility of the hierarchy of their significance. Place cannot be in abeyance, comprising the background, for it is more invasive than elusive characters. *Nightwood* incessantly gives presence to the invisible, forbidden, and ambivalent through narratives of the negative. Narratives of the positive are constantly intercepted to the point that characters develop a reflex that brings negativity into perception. This reflex is indicative of a heightened sensitivity to place. Here I want to suggest that negativity is

restorative, that attention on the negative can reinstate agency and transgressive power that place potentially wields.

A few things are needed to explain negativity before it is discussed in the context of the novel. Negativity, from the Latin *negare*, means the denial or displacement of something. To be *of* something implicates the presence of the negated. It intends the positive. The negative is not a spatial cue that directs to the positive; it is an equally important signifier. It is also a receptacle for meaning. On the relation between the positive and negative, Merleau-Ponty writes about a philosophical negativity that “remain[s] strictly opposed and strictly commingled” with positivity (*TVTI* 52). Being is intuitively associated with “absolute positivity,” stopping the consideration of anything outside the realm of what is visible and known (52). Such is experience that has been passed down and regarded as real. In order to “rediscover the prereflective zone of the openness upon Being,” one has to “empty” the self and “discover it as the ‘nothing,’ the ‘void,’ which has the capacity for receiving the plenitude of the world” (52). If we stop thinking of meaning as positive and turn to the negative, we open up other sets of meaning. Merleau-Ponty is correct to say that “everything depends on the strictness with which we will be able to think through the negative” (53). The more we experience the negative, the more we are “purified” from “designations” like the mind and Ego that keep us within the positive (52). Experience is not mediated, for the negative only leads the eyes along a different perceptual course.

*Nightwood* reverses the order of perception. It draws out a spatial route that rearranges objects of vision. This is evident in the episode where Nora visits the Doctor in his house. Although the room is small and Nora instantly sees the Doctor who is right in the centre, she moves over the surroundings:

... she opened the door and for one second hesitated, so incredible was the disorder that met her eyes. The room was so small that it was just possible to walk sideways up to the bed; it was as if being condemned to the grave the doctor had decided to occupy it with the utmost abandon.

A pile of medical books, and volumes of a miscellaneous order, reached almost to the ceiling, water-stained and covered with dust. Just above them was a very small barred window, the only ventilation. On a maple dresser, certainly not of European make, lay a rusty pair of forceps, a broken scalpel, half a dozen odd instruments that she could not place, a catheter, some twenty perfume bottles, almost empty, pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs. From the half-open drawers of this chiffonier hung laces, ribands, stockings, ladies' underclothing and an abdominal brace, which gave the impression that the feminine finery had suffered venery. A swill pail stood at the head of the bed, brimming with abominations. There was something appallingly degraded about the room, like the rooms in brothels, which give even the most innocent a sensation of having been accomplice; yet this room was also muscular, a cross between a *chambre à coucher* and a boxer's training camp. There is a certain belligerence in a room in which a woman has never set foot; every object seems to be battling its own compression—and there is a metallic odour, as of beaten iron in a smithy.

In the narrow iron bed, with its heavy and dirty linen sheets, lay the doctor in a woman's flannel nightgown. (84-85)

Like Felix in the jungle-room, Nora is overwhelmed by the surrounding objects. Her eyes are fixed on the negative; she is directed towards the various objects in the room. Instead of looking to the Doctor, Nora is more curious about the room and its details. She embarks on a perceptual route that turns away from the centre, as if deliberately looking away from the subject whom she is so anxious to find in the first place.

Despite the desperation, exacerbated by Nora's urgent need for answers to Robin's departure, the pace of the narrative is moderate, almost slow-moving as the room is carefully surveyed. Time seemingly stretches out and the sense of urgency dissipates. As Nora looks around the room, the narrative describes its appearance according to her gaze. Within the long sentences are short phrases that take inventory of objects, one by one, carefully documenting what she sees. The excessive commas retard the flow of the narrative, tracing Nora's eye movement, as she slowly surveys the things on the dresser. Structurally, the punctuations separate the frames of the objects, distinguishing and highlighting each detail. Writing on vision and sexuality, Jean Gallagher analyses Nora's view, describing it as "a photographic perception... reminiscent of one that accompanies the clicking of a camera's shutter" ("Vision and Inversion" 290). As Nora's eyes moves from one thing to another, she notes their existence in a perfunctory manner. Photographic perception suggests a detachment from the scene, with emphasis on the mechanics of perceiving and preserving impressions.

Nora's perception is arguably more videographic in its compulsion to pan, to move in a particular direction, to capture a wide area. There is a flow in the way the room is described, "A pile of medical books... reached almost to the ceilings," "Just above them was a very small barred window," "On a maple dresser," "A swill-pail stood at the head of the bed," that emulates a continuity (85). The prepositions flesh

out spatial relations, moving the narrative from one point of the room to another. The videographic view of the room is telling of Nora's want to give direction and organise the room, to make sense of the visual disorder, of what she cannot understand.

By focusing on the negative, the narrative of the Doctor is replaced with the narrative of his room. This inverts the trained eye's order of perception. The Doctor is, in some sense, deprived of his significance and becomes, to use Merleau-Ponty's own coinage, a "being-for-the-gaze" instead of a "being-for-the-thinking-subject" (*POP* 295). The shift occurs when the Doctor, who is initially Nora's prime focus, ceases to become the main objective of the scene. Nora only meets him later in the narrative as she slowly surveys the room. When she does encounter him, he is described with reference to "the Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed" (85). Nora stops thinking of the Doctor as a counselor and sees him in and through the disarrayed room. The focus on place, on that which is the background, changes how we view Nora's experience and how we see the Doctor from being-for-the-thinking-subject to being-for-the-gaze.

Despite the detachment and apathy evoked by the tone of the narrative through the listing of objects (one that shows Nora's distance from the Doctor who has been established as a being-for-the-gaze), Nora's presence permeates the scene. She is excluded from and included in the narrative, her gaze still steering the narrative. The analysis of the room and how it is presented show Nora to be occupying a position somewhere between the first-person and third-person positions. Her rendering of place is up-close and self-excluding, personal and objective. The dual perspective allows Nora to see in two positions, from two distances.

Distance, to Merleau-Ponty, ensures a "privileged perspective [that] ensures the unity of the perceptual process" (*POP* 354). He explains, for maximum visibility,

“there is an optimum distance from which [every object] requires to be seen” (352).

He expands on the method of determining this distance:

This is obtained through a certain balance between the inner and outer horizon: a living body, seen at too close quarters, and divorced from any background against which it can stand out, is no longer a living body.... Again, seen from too great a distance, the body loses its living value, and is seen simply as a puppet or automaton. The living body itself appears when its microstructures is neither excessively nor insufficiently visible. (352)

At its core, the argument promotes a balance achieved via a negotiation between near and far. Balanced perception offers clarity without scrutiny, respecting the inherent distance between body and object without excessive blurring. Merleau-Ponty likens its workings to that of the microscope where one analyses the specimen closely whilst maintaining a critical distance ensured by the lenses. *Nightwood* finely reproduces this balance in a literary context through Nora’s privileged perception that enables her to be at once involved and self-excluded. Through narrative strategies and language that are unlike Woolf’s free indirect discourse, the novel creates distance between the perceiver and the perceived, creating its own spatial perspective that embraces both the first and third-person positions.

Nora’s complicity in the description of the scene, though nuanced, is important because her fixation on the negative inclines the paragraphs towards a narrative of place. Her view of the scene reveals how the negative expresses on behalf of the positive and how the narrative of place prepares and provides for that of the body. Nora’s position, as the first and third-person, is revealed in the perceptual route about the room which unravels in two ways: firstly, through spatial cueing, which are



signals for actions that direct and organise the narrative according to what she sees; secondly, through spatial language, which concerns how she expresses space (via the omniscient narrator). At the beginning of the episode, Nora is miserable and calls on the Doctor at three in the morning. The anxiety and desperation that broke the sleep of the concierge permeates the first two paragraphs, but diminishes in the third as the scene is narrated in a more detached voice. On first reading, as the narrative names the items in the room, the long section seems to be a third-person narrative situation. Yet, the videographic gaze of the narrator leads from the books on the floor to the ceiling, to the window, the maple dresser, and finally the bed.

Although Nora's eyes follow the mess of the room—"so incredible was the disorder that met her eyes"—the narrative gaze is continuous (84). This is due to the spatial cues that help join the fragments of the scene. Prepositions ("above," "On a maple dresser," "From the half-open drawers") and verbs ("reached almost to the ceiling," "stood at the head of the bed") create and direct movement, also shaping and manipulating the reading experience. Place is not described from a wide perspective view from above, but more possibly seen through the eyes of Nora who stands at the door, confronting the claustrophobic room and its dishevelled dweller.

Movement is also propelled by *listing*, which consecutively brings one object after another into view as each one is named. Listing also directs us to the unveiled aspects of characters. In this instance, Nora's list of things, which she picks out and arranges, amidst the disorder reveals much about the Doctor. The section begins with a sketchy account of medical equipment, probably because there are "half a dozen odd instruments that [Nora] could not place" (85). As the passage unfolds, the lack of precision is superseded by a confident identification of the variety of make-up and female clothing. The list grows more specific. Phrases are less tentative; parenthetical

descriptions are shortened, more precise: from the phrases, “a rusty pair of forceps,” “a dozen odd instruments,” to “pomades, creams, rouges, powder... chiffonier hung laces, ribands, stockings” (85). The overall shift in language and narrative mood suggests that whilst Nora is not the overt third-person narrator, her silenced presence is vocalised, her perception brought into view.

The list may appear objective, affirming a third-person narrative situation, but the objects and descriptions plot a narrative of place that is in keeping with Nora’s fixation on the negative. The argument that Nora reaches the Doctor through his possessions is crucial in mapping the spatial route which traces how the narrative of the body crosses over into place. Nora first glances at the medical books, then at the “rusty pair of forceps,” “a broken scalpel,” and the other instruments, before finally seeing the half-open drawers of ladies’ clothing and make-up (85). Her gaze actually traces the disintegration of the Doctor’s identity: from the façade of a man of medicine; to a doctor who is away from practice, rusty and broken; and finally, to a dolled up transvestite. The language is laced with irony that can only be appreciated by one who knows the Doctor’s double life. For instance, the “rusty pair of forceps,” “a broken scalpel,” “almost empty” perfume bottles, “an abdominal brace” take on a very different meaning when paired with details of the Doctor (85). His dubious medical credentials, camp and flamboyant mannerism, along with over-emotional ramblings, are dispersed in the banal objects lying around his room. Every object that “seems to be battling its own compression” is a reflection of the Doctor’s untamable ramblings (85). He is trapped in his own battles, imprisoned in a narrow room with a “barred window” and “iron bed” (85).

Listing objects may seem banal, but each object itself is symbolic. They are selected examples of the Doctor’s possessions, compiled into a list and arranged such

that the body can be seen in place. Discussing the use of examples, John Nash explains that whilst exemplification forms narratives, examples are not just “explanatory” but “carry a distinctiveness that propels narrative and opens it to multivocality” (“Exhibiting the Example” 3).<sup>58</sup> With this in mind, examples or the things in the Doctor’s house take on a narrative of their own, describing place and revealing the perceptual route of Nora and her view of the Doctor. Whilst the things do not guarantee a more vivid picture of characters, the Doctor’s possessions viewed through Nora’s eyes construct an organised disorder that can be interpreted as “more coded exhibition than personal insight” (Nash 19). From a narratological standpoint, listing is a narrative move that, on the surface, works towards a straightforward presentation of things; but more critically, it works within the linear structure and paves gaps in the list that make space for the negative, for alterity and diversity. One is re-directed and exposed to the unexpected. Because re-orientation occurs gradually within the structure of the list, one progressively adapts to the subtleties and becomes sensitive to minute details of the big picture that are usually overlooked. In this case, attention is directed to the objects scattered across the room which collectively piece together a semblance of the Doctor.

The problem with listing, though, is the list lacks personal touch. The catalogue of nouns and long descriptions is neutral and impersonal, emerging from what seems to be an authorial rather than first-person or figural narrative situation. Still, if we examine carefully the adjectives in narrative, it is arguable, a faint tinge of Nora’s thoughts and feelings glosses over the list. The specificity of the things stands in contrast to the superfluity of the list. The descriptions, “a rusty pair of forceps” and “a broken scalpel,” point not only to the things themselves but also the state of the

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<sup>58</sup> Nash’s discussion is specific to Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* and *Night and Day*.

things. The parenthetical clauses, “certainly not of European make,” “almost empty,” are descriptive. The impersonal narrative is interjected by rather subjective opinions explaining the condition of things. The adjectives describe more vividly the Doctor’s living environment; more significantly, they add to and reflect the state of existing things, presenting a consistent image of the Doctor’s fall from grace.

As mentioned earlier, the descriptions take on deeper significance for one who knows the Doctor’s double life. It might be said that she is Nora; the descriptions are her addition to the list. Nora’s impressions and thoughts about the things disrupt the linearity of the list. “Rusty” and “broken” do not merely describe the state of the tools; they also imply that the things are once a significant part in the Doctor’s life. They point to a past that is not disclosed in the novel. Put differently, things have a temporality and context. The bottles that are “almost empty” are remnants of past actions; the “half-opened drawers” inform of unfinished actions. Though inanimate, their presence and state, alongside the somberness of the room, depict the conflict of the Doctor’s dual life. They reveal his “unobserved self,” the self that Felix describes as “a melancholy that had no beginning or end” (117).

Nora’s perspective embedded in the third-person narrative enlivens the narrative of place. The tactility and condition of things, also how Nora’s gaze progresses in the house, expand place without reimagining an abstracted version of space. The small room enlarges as the narrative presents the scene from an amalgamation of positions. Nora, as the first and third-person voices, opens up another dimension of meaning to the descriptions, one that embellishes her initial passing thought that “it was as if being condemned to the grave the doctor had decided to occupy [the room] with the utmost abandon” (84). The metaphor, “grave,” materialises in the form of the deathly jail-like room. Nora follows up with this image by turning away from the positive—

the subject matter of the scene—and moves over to the physical place of the room. This particular spatial route that *Nightwood* traces for its characters is framed by the language and structure of the narrative. In this example, the Doctor is seen from two positions, through the third-person description of the things in his room as things in themselves, and also through the first-person narrative of the things for themselves. Together, they depict the Doctor's physical mess and, on a deeper level, his identity flux, without having Nora directly confront the positive.

The play on narrative perspective, distance, and voice is overt in *Nightwood*. Nora's thoughts woven into the third-person narrative is a variant of free indirect discourse, described by F. K. Stanzel as “namely the combination of the speech, the perception or the thought of a fictional character with the voice of the narrator as the teller” (*A Theory of Narrative* 219). This creates a “dual perspective” which involves “two persons with different points of view, opinions, judgements, and so on” (224). This mostly occurs in the third-person narrative but in the example above the third-person voice is closely knotted with Nora's consciousness. Whilst the passage is set in the style of a third-person narrative situation, the dual perspective is “between the narrating self and the experiencing self” (224). Nora's thoughts (“a dozen odd instruments she could not place... which gave the impression that the feminine finery had suffered venery”) are so seamlessly weaved into the narrative that the narrating self somewhat fuses with third-person narrator (85). Stanzel explains that this manner in which thoughts are rendered “effect a narrowing of the focus of the presentation on the experiencing self in its Here and Now” (224). Whilst it does focus on the present moment in the Doctor's room, thereby temporally limiting the experience, Nora's experiencing self also spatially expands the boundaries of the small room. Looking up and down, around the room, her perception magnifies the situation, both physically

and narratively. The doubling effect, a result of distance and close proximity, brings us into the Doctor's world. More importantly, it opens up a spatiality of the narrative according to Nora's experience, corresponding to her visual field. *Nightwood* uses the formal structure of the text, perspectives and points of view, to build the architecture of the novel.<sup>59</sup>

The similarities between framing narratives and designing architectural forms have been discussed in notable texts like Susanne Langer's *Feeling and Form* and Gérard Genette's *Figures I-III*, and Joseph A. Kestner's *The Spatiality of the Novel*. Philosophies on form contribute to what Kestner terms, a "spatial methodology" (10), which recognises and works with the "spatial poetics" of the novel (11). Whilst this approach to interpreting texts begins with analysing the language of place and scene, its chief motive is to bring attention to spatial form. With its steely focus on spatial form, spatialist poetics walks the line between physical and novelistic space, looking at the potential of space rather than actual somatic experiences (69). It is not quite interested in why and how certain places are affective or what place may mean to characters. Whilst my discussion of place does not read the architecture of the novel as Kestner intends, the ways in which spatial poetics approaches fiction space and identifies spatial properties within its construction help make sense of Barnes's challenging narrative. Reading formal structure as a sort of architectural construct adds a spatial dimension to the seemingly desultory and rambling conversations that form a significant part of the novel's fragmented narratives.

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<sup>59</sup> Theories on architecture and literature relate the novelistic structure to the architectural, noting how authors use geometry (lines, symmetry, points, and etc.) to frame narratives just like architects, painters, and sculptors.

### *What of the Night?*

Nora's angst is diffused as she organises the messy room; Felix's curiosity dampens as he tries to see past the verdure of plants; Jenny remains alone in her house of stolen goods and loves; the Doctor regresses into a mess, dilapidated as his room. Such are the effects of place. The physical structure and sense of place set the atmosphere. It is affective, evoking feelings and provoking responses. Place in *Nightwood* is hazy, of low visibility, minimally lit. It stirs up the darker and depressing side of characters, emphasises the destructiveness of their desires, and pronounces the inevitability of their unions. The night changes places and perception; things appear in literally a different light. *Nightwood*, with its rhetoric of the night, undercuts stability and questions what is normal. Seeing properly and mindfully, clearly and straightly, are practices of normativity that have been imbibed and regarded as the exemplar of perception. *Nightwood* forbids these taken for granted modes of experience, showing how reality can be fuzzy and inverted, confusing and slanted.

Phenomenology is transcendental philosophy, which "puts essences back into existence" and "places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude" (*POP* vii). Whilst *Nightwood* challenges the natural attitude and describes sense experience more holistically through the emphasis on place, it neither puts essence back into existence nor rebuilds the "primitive contact" with "the world which is always 'already there' before reflection begins" (*POP* vii). The world exposed in its narrative is not transcendental or abstract. It emerges when the power is out, when the sun goes down. In this world of the dark, visibility is impaired. Experience cannot be pure or knowledge-imparting; it also must not be remedied and altered in order to see the world as it should be. In *Nightwood*, disadvantage is manageable and embraced in the dark. Whilst phenomenology counteracts impediments to experience, I argue that

*Nightwood*'s embrace of the night is a kind of corrective to the fixity of Merleau-Ponty's postulated perception.

Darkness in *Nightwood* is usually discussed in light of its queerness and spatiality. According to Brian Glavey, "[Barnes] seems to suggest that a spatial poetics might be well wrought without being well lit.... *Nightwood* is a work oddly dedicated to visibility" ("Dazzling Estrangement" 753). Visibility in relation to darkness is an idea picked up by Heather Love, who mildly suggests that the aesthetics of darkness share "an indeterminacy" with the queer ("Introduction: Modernism at Night" 747). She elaborates that queer modernism is "an encounter with the illegible": "Queer lives and queer feelings scribbled over but still just visible—you can half make them out in the dark" (747). Gallagher also discusses about how the night is "a subject of anxious scrutiny," illuminating "the anxiety-laden conditions of visibility for the newly emerging gender identities of the modernist period" (282). The night is explicated only by implication and in conjunction with the illegible and half visible, in other words, things of the unknown.

For Glavey, Love, and Gallagher, *Nightwood* "offers a vocabulary for talking about queerness, modernism, and the aesthetic" (Glavey 751), where darkness, like the queer, is a "force of disruption" and has an "unlocatable quality" (Love 744). Such understandings deem the night almost transcendental, neglecting the very point of the night, which is, I believe, to bring to light the experience of the lived disadvantaged body. *Nightwood* does not attempt to create a new reality or hark back to a world that is already there. Rather, it uses the night to discover boundaries and disadvantageous circumstances, creating a scene for seeing in the dark that is not exclusive to the experience of the powerless body. Studies on *Nightwood* discuss poetic darkness and metaphorical invisibility, but do not explain the novel's relentless



harping on the night and its darkness. The question asked at the outset remains. Why so bent on the night? To try to answer this, and also to round up the chapter, we follow Nora and bring questions about the night to the Doctor. Like her, we ask: Watchman, what of the night?

“Watchman, What of the Night?” and “Go Down, Matthew” are the longest chapters in the novel featuring conversations between Nora and the Doctor. They are also the most heavily cut sections, with portions that were edited out constituting the bulk of the discarded related drafts. Despite the edits, Barnes felt that all the changes made it “still more the Doctors and Noras book.”<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, the titles correspond to the two main concerns raised in this chapter—the night and positionality. Whilst the latter has been expounded on, it is difficult to pin down what exactly is the night. It is literal darkness, the aura and atmosphere of place. It also sets the tone of scenes; it has its own language and poetics. The night is the theme, content, and form of the novel. On how the two chapters elucidate the night, Teresa de Lauretis writes:

The fifth and seventh chapters, the longest in the book, each consists of a conversation between Matthew and Nora, although they are rather monologues than dialogues. It is tempting to read them as a kind of theoretical or philosophical core of the novel, for they are thematically focused on what Barnes calls “the night,” a figure for sexuality as a traumatic, unmanageable excess of affect leading to abject degradation. (“*Nightwood* and the ‘Terror of Uncertain Signs’” 120)

For her, the night is a figurative representation of enigma and trauma: “I think the ‘terror of uncertain signs’ that made *Nightwood* unreadable for me was the disturbing, spectral presence of something silent, uncanny, unrepresentable, and yet figured”

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<sup>60</sup> From Barnes’s 28 June 1935 letter to Coleman (quoted in Plumb’s Introduction to *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts*, p. xiii).

(129). This uncertainty is precipitated by the darkness engulfing the novel. The garrulous Doctor, who supposedly has the answers, fails to clarify what exactly is the night. Instead of coming straight to the point of the night, he bursts into a digressive sermon that is, frankly, exasperating to listen. Yet this is not a deliberate excursus but an “unmanageable excess” (de Lauretis 120). He keeps exclaiming that he is coming to the night of nights, beseeching Nora to be patient and wait for him. His anxiety is plaited with excitement, as if he cannot help rambling on about the interminable night.

The Doctor’s obsession is established at the beginning: “his favourite topic, and one which he talked on whenever he had a chance was the night” (NW 86). He begins by talking about the “polarity of times and times” and immediately sets up a dichotomy between day and night: “Every day is thought upon and calculated, but the night is not premeditated” (87). Day is aligned with the Bible that “lies the one way”; the night is a “dark door” (87). Whilst the day is associated with the righteous, the night opens to a “Town of Darkness” (87). Taken further, the day represents the objective and straight, the law unbending, where “everything is thought upon and calculated” (87). It stands for the dominant ideology upholding social structure.

In contrast, apprehension and uncertainty rule the dark. The night “does something to a person’s identity” and “his ‘identity’ is no longer his own” (87). It defamiliarises the ordinary. Even fear becomes “bottom-out and wrong side up” (87). An inversion takes place. It is repeated when the Doctor mentions a certain “Great Enigma” that can only be understood “unless you turn the head the other way, and come upon thinking with the eye that you fear, which is called the back of the head” (89). The night inverts the ways of seeing, turning against the trained eye. The difference in perception by day and night and the inversion that takes place are condensed into the Doctor’s questions for Nora:

‘Do things look in the ten and twelve of noon as they look in the dark? Is the hand, the face, the foot, the same face and hand and foot seen by the sun? For now the hand lies in a shadow; its beauties and its deformities are in a smoke—there is a sickle of doubt across the cheek bone thrown by the hat’s brim, so there is half a face to be peered back into speculation. A leaf of darkness has fallen under the chin and lies deep upon the arches of the eyes; the eyes themselves have changed their colour. The very mother’s head you swore by in the dock is a heavier head, crowned with ponderable hair.’ (92)

He speaks of the veil of uncertainty that the night throws upon things. The body, as a whole, appears differently. It is different because it is clearer. Darkness does not obscure, only bringing out curves and protrusions.

A cursory understanding of the night renders the act of seeing in the dark obfuscating, but meticulous attention to the language uncovers the surprising clarity brought by the night. In the passage cited, in spite of the tentative manner in which the body is described (“smoke,” “doubt,” “speculation”), there is precision and clarity in the language. For example, “doubt” denotes uncertainty, but its vagueness is counteracted by the phrase, “a sickle of doubt,” where the odd use of “sickle” implies sharpness and precision, invoking the image of a distinctly curved blade. This stylistic manoeuvre occurs again in the description of the “leaf of darkness” that “lies deep upon the arches of the eyes” (92). “Deep” suggests that the leaf is probably beyond sight, lost in the arches; it also indicates how deeply set the eyes are. Note that the sickle of doubt is cast “across the cheek bone” and the leaf is lost in the “arches,” both of which are contours of the face best highlighted with shades of dark and light tones. This points to the much-neglected fact that whilst the night questions the certainty of

things seen by day, it is not complete darkness but brings shades to what would otherwise be supposedly bright and clear. In her 23 June letter to Coleman, Barnes wrote that she liked *Nightwood* for the title because “it sound[s] like night-shade,” emphasising her penchant for shades of darkness.<sup>61</sup> Having shades is the foremost quality of the night. Because the night encompasses shades of the dark, it makes use of light as well. In the presence of shadows and some dim light, things in the dark can be vaguely made out and seem familiar, though they appear different and new.

The night does not change things; it presents them in a different light, leaving the perceiver with a vagueness that defamiliarises what is known and suspends natural beliefs. It functions somewhat like conditions of disability (for instance, a person with colour blindness or an anosognosic) that interrupt causal relations and reason, which indirectly cause phenomena to be perceived as organically as possible in the moment of experience. For Merleau-Ponty, the experience of a person with disability is a way of explaining how the disunity of bodily functions can thwart the workings of a priori sedimented experience.

The trope of the night also works to challenge experience, except *Nightwood* does not present the night as a disability but as a naturally occurring situation. This puts disability into perspective, for it is not necessarily a condition from which some suffer. It certainly is not the same as being disadvantaged. It follows that if anyone can suffer from such disadvantage then by the same token, everyone possesses the propensity to see things in their givenness and not as they are known. The night provides that opportunity. One does not have to be disabled to be impervious to the ready-made world. The night can offer a scene to re-see the things that are deemed

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<sup>61</sup> From Barnes’s letter to Coleman on the 23 June 1935, quoted in Plumb’s Introduction, p. viii.

true and unquestionable by day. *Nightwood* reveals the night as not a handicap to visibility, but a visual aid that un-trains the eye.

The night tears down the world as it is known and shows the world as it is given. This is seen in the Doctor's lament for the pariahs of the night:

... those who turn the day into night, the young, the drug addict, the profligate, the drunken and that most miserable, the lover who watches all night long in fear and anguish. These can never again live the life of the day. When one meets them at high noon they give off, as if it were a protective emanation, something dark and muted. The light does not become them any longer. They begin to have an unrecorded look.

(101)

The entourage carries with them a “protective emanation” of the dark, which “turn[s] the day into night” (101). They effuse the aura of the night, preventing the light from becoming them. In other words, they do not have to conform to the day and what it presupposes. This “unseen adversary,” presumably the night, which deals “continual blows” to the miserable and broken, is not inflicting harm but is “protective” of them (101). Light thus has no effect on them; they refuse its enlightenment. It is noteworthy that the people of the night are marginalised, not disabled. Being marginalised, ironically, qualifies them for the night scene; their “unrecorded look” gives them the privilege of being nameless (101). The night reduces one to a state of anonymity, where ideally she forgets associations and knowledge in the temporal moment of experience. In doing so it empowers and sets the scene for somatic experience. The thinking body is reduced and gives way to the emplaced feeling and lived body.

In the concluding lines, the Doctor expresses what may be the ultimate affect and substance of the night. In a black wagon, going down under the trees quietly in darkness, he says to himself:

The trees are better, and grass is better, and the animals are all right  
and the birds in the air are fine. And everything we do is decent when  
the mind begins to forget—the design of life; and good when we are  
forgotten—the design of death. (112)

The environing world looks better when knowledge fails. The night compels the mind to forget what it has learned. Forgetting goes in line with perceiving: “To perceive is not to remember,” writes Merleau-Ponty (*POP* 26). By forgetting, one resists “a host of impressions accompanied by memories capable of clinching them” (26). It is good to be removed from the design that maps and organises experience. Even better is to be removed from the self that thinks before existence. The idea of giving in to the night and forgetting the design of life that presides over the day wrecks the unity of the thinking body and the objectivity of its sensibilities. This is not to put forward the night as the ideal scene for experience in opposition with the day. Rather, the night throws light on the problems of experiencing *straightly* and *uprightly* in the day.

But darkness does not go easy on its prisoners. Addicted, forsaken, miserable, and in fear, the people of the cabalistic night are broken. The odd situation of being unfinished causes them to forget themselves and recklessly receive the world. Nora gives herself up for Robin; she lives by a “self-sacrificing devotion” that denies her own existence (Frank, *The Widening Gyre* 39). Jenny is forever removed and can never belong: “She has the strength of an incomplete accident—one is always waiting for the rest of it” (*NW* 105). Felix is a wandering Jew, the Doctor a transvestite. And Robin is the “innocent” (*NW* 155), who “has not reached the human state where moral

values become relevant” (Frank 34). The characters lack enlightenment in one way or another. They are fundamentally beings that put themselves out there in the working world, craving to experience other selves, the world and its places.

The night scenes—we recall bent and posed bodies sustained by queer desire, consuming feelings, resistant to conformity—are painful to read. Experiencing in the dark is laborious and agonising, but it is the only way to bring up experiences of the disadvantaged without attributing difference to nature, causality, and disability. The night does not occur outside the ordinary and is part of the “taken-for-granted” schema of the world that Levesque-Lopman talks about (81). *Nightwood* uses what is familiar and seemingly inconspicuous to disorientate and challenge the trained eye and mind, bringing to light the fallibility of reality and the underlying constructivism of natural and normative beliefs. The world at night, with its uncertainty and freedom, offers anonymity and privacy, where the unspeakable and unrepresentable—the queer folks—are visible and out in the open. Although they can “never again live the life of the day” and sit “sighing at the turnstile of heaven,” the queer continue to experience, to maintain contact with “the floor” which represents the tangibility of the material world (NW 101). This longingness to experience and cry out in spite of fear and melancholy is satisfied in the night, in ambivalent space.

Nora’s parlour—a guesthouse for vagrants; Jenny’s inherited mansion—a museum cluttered with loot; and Felix’s house, built on spurious claims to aristocracy, are places of threshold. They negotiate the irreconcilable and make space for co-existence. The Doctor comments on one such place: “Look for the girls also in the toilets at night, and you will find them kneeling in that great secret confessional crying between tongues” (101-102). The toilet, secret and liminal, is an exclusive place for women built within the public sphere, providing some privacy for her to

hide away and cry. The next chapter on Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* discusses women's experiences in such spaces, where experience can be many and fixed at the same time, simultaneous and not successive, limiting but not oppressive. Following the Doctor's advice, we will look for girls in toilets, or lavabos as Rhys calls them, and examine their experiences of liminal places. It is in the toilet and hotel rooms where we find the women of Rhys's texts re-experiencing places of their past.



#### 4. A Room of Her Past: Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*

In *Nightwood*, the night obscures vision and brings to light other ways of seeing. In Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, darkness comes in the shade of the past. It shrouds the cities of London and Paris, obscuring vision and blurring the boundary between past and present. The world presented is dark and macabre, inhospitable to the lone woman. Published in 1939, *Good Morning, Midnight* was Rhys's worst received novel since *Quartet*. Lillian Pizzichini, author of Rhys's biography *The Blue Hour*, writes, "No one wanted to read it.... Jean's dark vision was too much for her contemporaries" (220). The story of the aged and lone Sasha Jenson, it is true, is depressing to read. The setting is just as dismal. Descriptions of rooms are stale, almost repetitive. Ergo a room is always the same room....

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, former experiences of rooms are revived and re-explored in present rooms. The past in context is not thought. It does not clarify the ambiguities of the present, or serve as a priori knowledge. Rhys presents a subjective past that neither repeats nor represents events, disrupting the perpetuation of certain knowledge. Rather, in the Platonic sense, the past manifests in the consequential reappearance of the absent, of an event, for example, that has happened and haunts the individual, reappearing as an image or scene in the present, which is the result of a complex mix of memory and imagination. The past, in the form of memory, to use Paul Ricoeur's words, is "a simple presence to the mind" (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 17). It is an integral part of Sasha's consciousness that evokes "pathos," or "affection" each time she recalls something (26).<sup>62</sup> It inhabits her perception, creating as a Lockean store-house of ideas, except hers is not an inventory of mental notes of a

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<sup>62</sup> Ricoeur differentiates memory as evocation from search: the first is affection and the latter a "search or recall" (26). In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the distinction is seldom clear, and at times the embodiment of the past is a combination of Ricoeur's opposites.

contemplative past, but of lived experiences. The past as a continuing presence in the present is formative to consciousness, providing a useful additive to a phenomenological understanding of the past or neglect of the past.

The past has hitherto not been discussed with regards to phenomenology for the simple reason that Merleau-Ponty has little to say explicitly about it. When it is mentioned, it is lost in the gossamer web of arguments about history or treated as “previous memories” (*POP* 17). This is perhaps because the past, if it is not in the form of memory, does not quite exist for Merleau-Ponty. He writes,

Our individual past, for example, cannot be given to us either on the one hand by the actual survival of states of consciousness or paths traced in the brain, or on the other hand by a consciousness of the past which constitutes it and immediately arrives at it: in either case we should lack any sense of the past, for the past would, strictly speaking, be present. If anything of the past is to exist for us, it can be only in an ambiguous presence, anterior to any express evocation, like a field upon which we have an opening. (*POP* 424)

It seems the past cannot be brought to the present by a consciousness of the past for such a consciousness does not exist. If *consciousness-of-something* indicates intentionality, thus a consciousness of the past directs one towards the past, then a consciousness of the past cannot exist because it does not point backwards to the past, or frame the past as “an object of thought” for the present (424). Rather one would be immersed in an “atmosphere” of the past, where the past is “ubiquitous” and present (424). And, if we were to step into this field of unreflective possibilities, where its opening closes on itself, we are surely trapped in the past. It is as if the past, a realm of potential and possibilities, is within close proximity but inaccessible.

Carman, too, sees the past as “forever beneath and beyond the limits of... immediate experience” (*Merleau-Ponty* 156). It cannot be apprehended by a present consciousness of the past because that would make it present. To Merleau-Ponty, there can be no graspable past, or if at all, only a vague sense of it. Two assumptions underpin his deliberation: firstly, the consciousness of the past directs attention to the past and “immediately arrives at it”; secondly, the past invoked is supplanted by the present (*POP* 424). Time is rendered asynchronous and linear. There is no room for a consciousness that holds experience at the threshold of the past and present. What we need is another means of access. What I am suggesting is to think of the past with a different kind of mindfulness where the object of focus is place. The idea is to get to the subjective past through a spatial consciousness that has been set by past experiences in and of places.

Created through narratives of places with spatial vocabulary highlighting objects, furniture, orientations, directions, interior and exterior arrangements, spatial consciousness might be the panacea for phenomenology’s problems of the past as knowledge. It is a literary imperative that reads past experiences as embodied and emplaced, working out ways to talk about the subjective past as inhabiting and necessary. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the narrative of place is the narrative of the past, given that Sasha’s experience of places is connected to her resistance to and/or acceptance of things and events from her past. She walks into new rooms and they are familiar; she revisits rooms from her past and they are somehow strange. Hers is not a consciousness of the past, but a consciousness of place.

This chapter develops the idea of spatial consciousness and shows how the past is enacted in a structure of spatiality that relieves it of trauma. In present rooms Sasha inhabits the room of her past without the pains of re-living the trauma again. It

is a way of experience that helps the lone woman organise the discrepancies and/or similarities between what she sees and what she once saw. The chapter examines the elephant in the rooms of *Good Morning, Midnight*: the past. It shows how Sasha's habit of structuring thought around spatiality acts out the past in the present, creating experience that is reflecting and exploratory. The discussion then moves on to the workings of spatial consciousness—how it recuperates oppositions like the interior and exterior, past and present, private and public, bringing together a plethora of familiar and unfamiliar images. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the past and place are the verso and recto of spatial consciousness. They form the lens through which Sasha experiences rooms.

### ***Contextualising Rhysian Place***

A decade after the publication of *A Room of One's Own* (1928), “this business of rooms” was still a matter of concern in Rhys's writing (*GMM* 33). In spite of political and social improvements, many women struggled to find a place of their own. The 1920s was a transformative period for women. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act (1919), Matrimonial Causes Act (1923), and Equal Franchise Act (1928) were some changes in social justice that helped achieve more or less equal political and social rights for women. In 1929, thousands of women in England participated in their first general election, or the Flapper election. Small wonder, by the 1930s, more than a third of the women population were employed. Still, notwithstanding access to job opportunities and greater public presence, the condition of many women did not improve. Even with a weekly allowance of £2 10s and many accommodating hotel rooms in the late 1930s, Sasha Jenson never has a place of her own.

Sasha moves from room to room; she is neither satisfied nor feels as if she belongs. Hotel rooms are claustrophobic and haunting, whilst cafés and boulevards are less than welcoming. Rhys is wont to create places that lack transgressive potential, where the glimmer of hope for change wanes. The house on Green Street is “dark and quiet and not friendly to me,” laments Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark* (49); the cafés in Paris shone lights that “were hard and cold, like ice” on Julia Martin in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (16); the Boulevard St Michel “with its rows of glaring cafés” deters Marya Zelli in *Quartet* (67). Rhysian place, unlike Woolf’s spirited London, is place unabashedly tied to the women’s sufferings and backstories. The opening line of *Good Morning, Midnight* reads, “‘Quite like old times,’ the room says. ‘Yes? No?’” (9). Place literally divulges Sasha’s unknown past—she must have been in a similar room before. The measure of rooms is her feelings and thoughts towards it. One moment Sasha snuggles under the covers of the blanket and the next instant the room transforms into a past-laden room reminding her of “all the rooms” and “all the streets” in which she has ever lived or walked (91). The narrative of place, especially in *Good Morning, Midnight*, is personal and of the past.

In her unfinished posthumous autobiography, *Smile Please*, Rhys relates place to the past. She remembers leaving Dominica:

[My father] came with my aunt and myself as far as Bridgetown, Barbados, where we caught the ocean boat. When we said goodbye, he hugged me tightly but I said: ‘Goodbye, goodbye’ very cheerfully, for already I was on my way to England.... Already all my childhood, the West Indies, my father and mother had been left behind; I was forgetting them. They were the past. (93-94)

Rhys's documenting of places is telling. She is specific about the departure point: a sub-clause informs that Bridgetown is in Barbados, and as she boards the boat and looks back, she bids farewell to the entire West Indies. Here place is more than a port or a town. The shores of Bridgetown stand for the entire Caribbean region, more saliently, for Rhys's life and everything she has. She writes on departure again when she recalls leaving England, associating London with her dismayed past: "I knelt down and thanked God for getting me away from H. E. & W. Graves and from London" (141). During her time in London, Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith, a previous lover, regularly sent cheques to her via his solicitors at H. E. & W. Graves.<sup>63</sup> Leaving London meant she could get away from the torrid affair which left her disillusioned and lost. Disappointment and humiliation were etched into the city of London. As with leaving Dominica, Rhys left behind London, Lancelot, lost love, and hope. She was forgetting the past. Places exist for Rhys as physical structures of the past. In her fiction, places are also spatial manifestations of her characters' inner lives.

Another writer whose narrative of place tends towards the qualities evoked by Rhysian place is Katherine Mansfield. Brought up in New Zealand, which was then under colonial rule, Mansfield wrote short stories that sometimes share a similar sense of dislocation. Her travels about continental Europe and moves between London and New Zealand parallel Rhys's turbulent journeys. Both writers were alienated from the cultures of their birth countries and dislocation is a recurring theme in their oeuvres. Mansfield's "The Swing of the Pendulum" (1911), which is about a destitute woman living in a rented room who encounters a strange man who forces himself on her for money, is reminiscent of *Good Morning, Midnight's* denouement. Like Sasha, Viola

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<sup>63</sup> Pizzichini notes that when Rhys received the first of a series of cheques she was "hurt and angry by Lancey's display of careless wealth and would have torn the cheque in two and send it back to the lawyer" if not for the exact moment that "her rent was due" (113).

is a self-proclaimed pacifist: “I never wanted to fight” (781). But whilst Rhys’s protagonist is nonresistant till the end, Mansfield’s retaliates and wins her first fight. Still, the predicaments of women in stories like “Life of Ma Parker” and “Miss Brill,” both published in 1922, echo the displacement of Rhys’s women. These parallels, explored later in this chapter, resonate more significantly given both authors’ status as outsiders and their straitened circumstances.<sup>64</sup>

On the relation between self and place, or the lack of self and placelessness, Kerry Johnson states, “‘woman’ and ‘landscape’ cannot be disengaged from one another” (“Mapping the Sea Change” 58). Through a mainly post-colonial viewpoint, Johnson argues that spatial representation in Rhys’s work is contingent on the female character’s fractured identities. Place is unwelcoming because the colonial subject is displaced. Andrew Thacker attributes the “rather negative representational spaces of the city” to European Imperialism and Rhys’s identity as a Creole woman exiled from Dominica and marginalised in England and Paris (*Moving Through Modernity* 194). Snaith, too, emphasises “the single *colonial* woman” (“‘A Savage from the Cannibal islands’: Jean Rhys and London” 76). Johnson, Snaith, and Thacker and are not alone in their post-colonial reading.

With the success of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhysian scholarship is caught in the undertow of identity and racial-related readings. Critics ascribe intention for writing to “political and economical identity, driven by the history of white racism” (Savory, *Jean Rhys* 134), and “the remembrance of a lost Creole or Caribbean past” (GoGwilt, *The Passage of Literature* 85). Mary Lou Emery goes so far as to say, “Viewing Rhys as a Third World writer as well as a woman in exile in Paris helps us to understand

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<sup>64</sup> This is not to label them as post-colonial writers, but to recognise that their experiences of Imperialism have influence on the portrayals of women living in Western metropolises.

better her outsider status there” (*Jean Rhys at “World End”* 9). Interweaving fiction with autobiographical material is an undertaking incidentally endorsed by Rhys in an interview with Mary Cantwell: “Whenever I asked about one of them—Jean Rhys’ women they’ve been called—she replied with ‘I’” (“A Conversation with Jean Rhys” 23). Studying Rhys’s works as post-colonial and autobiographical is important and contextualises the experience of dislocation. But a phenomenological reading can deepen the understanding of how subjective experience is situated experience, tied to and shaped by the material, working world. It adds a layer of personal interpretation and subjective difference to those wider ideological movements.

Post-colonial readings of Rhys tend to interpret the narrative of place to be political where “intimate space merges into national space” (Thacker 206). Many discussions of spatial arrangement start from the assumption of Rhys’s awareness of “the slipperiness of geographical, national and racist boundaries in the region given its conflicted history” (Snaith 78). Dwelling on authorial biography and the political and socio-cultural milieu of the time give historical processes authority and locate textual significance in a certain past. Phenomenology, however, approaches history quite differently. It sees the past as that towards which the body is directed, not originating from. It refrains from looking at the past with the events of history in mind, instead recasting the past in present perception. This way phenomenology allows for a more open-ended reading of Rhys’s text, with Sasha’s experience and evasions of the lived world at the forefront.

### ***A Radical Reflection on Good Morning, Midnight***

*Good Morning, Midnight* is a novel about Sasha’s experience of the present just as it is about her reflection on the past. She has learned from past experiences that certain



places are to be avoided whilst others frequented. Sasha thinks of places to go and not go: “avoidance of certain cafés, of certain streets, of certain spots, and everything will go off beautifully” (*GMM* 14). But her attempts at rational determinism almost always go awry. Instead of bypassing places of yesteryear, sticking to the itinerary of “Eating. A movie. Eating again. One drink. A long walk back to the hotel. Bed. Luminal. Sleep” (14), Sasha finds herself re-entering the sites of her past. The novel documents her journeys in and out of places that trigger or suppress her memory of the past. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, past and present coincide, reflection and experience intersect, thinking and seeing happen concurrently. In the last pages, Sasha laments: “I am uneasy, half of myself somewhere else” (148). She is, I argue, always half in the present and half in the past, half-perceiving and half-thinking, wandering present places and wondering about past rooms. Phenomenologically speaking, this makes Sasha a reminiscing subject or a thinking body, her experience of the present thought-out before the moment of experience.

We confront once again the mind-body dualism where thinking is the will of the mind and seeing is a bodily act of that will. Knowledge and the past are sediments that intercept primary contact with the world. They are kinds of thought, of a priori knowledge and pre-history. Alcoff explains on how thought puts Man at the centre of the universe: “Man organizes and shapes his world, conferring on it meaning and intelligibility, and thus man is constitutive for all knowledge” (40). Man is aggrandised and assumes absolute knowledge and objectivity. An expositor of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, Albert Rabil, Jr., highlights the “appeal to an *absolute*”: “the thinker is an observer of a world from which he can remove himself” (*Merleau-Ponty* 19). The problem of thought arises when it is automatically equated with knowledge. Alcoff and Rabil recapitulate the longstanding idea in Cartesian tradition

that man with his all-knowing mind is the centre around which the world revolves. The phenomenologists believed in a different world, a lived world which, according to Merleau-Ponty,

is there before any possible analysis of mine, and it would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object correspondingly to different perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis. (*POP* x-xi)

Phenomenology's problem with the Cartesian tradition is the supremacy of reason: "there is no thought that embraces all our thought" (xv). To reason is human, but to claim reason as knowledge is to return to *cogito, ergo sum*.

The resolution is to situate thought in the lived body, within a corporeal structure of subjectivity. To subsume thought into the lived experience, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we think of knowledge not as an absolute preexisting substance that determines experience, but rather he admits "*provisionally* that there is a merely possible stuff of knowledge" (281). Possibilities become meaningful only when realised in relation to the body. The stuff of knowledge, in the hands of rationalists and empiricists, is knowledge that is single and absolute. But to the phenomenologist, it is a product of "thinking, judging, believing, remembering, imagining, expecting" which are all processes ultimately "anchored in the body and so bear traces, if only faint ones, of the *situatedness* of perception" (Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* 13). From this perspective, knowledge serves as another subjective but non-perceptual way by which the visual field can be understood. It is therefore not that the Cartesian thinking subject knows before his material existence, but that the lived body situated in a material world begins to think and remember things from its position in the world.

Thought, like any a priori stuff, is the *bête noire* of phenomenology because it does not acknowledge perspectivism as situated but assumes sovereignty and truth over experience. Should reflection and thought processes be anchored as bodily phenomena in the lived body in a material world, experience becomes at once reflecting and exploratory.

The word, “reflect,” connotes the dual action of looking back to something past and also looking away from what is going on. According to Merleau-Ponty, reflecting involves “distancing or objectifying sensation” (such that it is diluted of plausible associations), and confronting it (*POP* 280). It is an intellectual activity that analyses sensations. Such reflection is tantamount to “a theoretical version of experience” and “should not be given any first-hand value” (280). There is another kind of reflection that can add to our understanding of experience, provided the “primary faith inspired by perception” (faith being the synthesis of data and preconceived structures of data) is discounted (280). This is “a new type of reflection,” where at the outset of perception nothing in the visual field is “thematized” or “posited” (281). Merleau-Ponty postulates a radical reflection, which, unlike other reflections, does not ascertain preconceived knowledge but strives towards discovering oneself:<sup>65</sup>

The task of a radical reflection, the kind that aims at self-comprehension, consists, paradoxically enough, in recovering the unreflective experience of the world, and subsequently reassigning to it the verificatory attitude and reflective operations, and displaying reflection as one possibility of my being. (280)

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<sup>65</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, genuine reflection, which recognises that “expressive experience” and “expressive significance” are anterior to “sign significance” and assigning meaning, comes close to radical reflection (*POP* 340). This is contrasted with analytic reflection, which “does away” with the “relationship of the subject and the world” (340).

Radical reflection involves encountering phenomena as they are in the world. One reflects on them so as to arrive at an understanding of the world not as a singular truth, but as meaning in relation to the body. Instead of wondering about what appears before the eyes and what sensations are provoked by sight, it asks “What am I really seeing?” The lynchpin of radical reflection is the suspension of “vital communication” between acts of perception and analysis (281). This does not promise to get rid of synthesis and knowledge, but to “at least limit [the communication], by concentrating our gaze on part of the spectacle and devoting the whole of the perception field to it” (281). To radically reflect, Merleau-Ponty instructs, “we must keep in mind the moments of our exploratory journey and relate the points on the surface to each other” (281). We relate moments; we do not rationalise them. This makes room for reason without presuming that “the determinate forms reached through the critical attitude are actually the primordial experience” (281).

To radically reflect is to see with our eyes and also the mind’s eye, along with their blind spots. Merleau-Ponty explains,

[the] mind’s eye too has its blind spot, but, because it is of the mind, cannot be unaware of it, nor treat as a simple state of non-vision, which requires no particular mention, the very act of reflection which is *quoad nos* [in relation to us] its act of birth. (*TVTI* 33)

With our eyes, we see freely; with the mind’s eye, we, perforce, have to think before seeing. The mechanics of a radical reflection founded on an unreflective fund of experience and matures upon intersecting with a reflective attitude are, admittedly, paradoxical. Reflection is a two-stage process of recovering and reassigning. A way to approach the workings of the eyes and the mind’s eye is to examine the interplay of

reflection and experience, past and present, re-living and living, which is a pattern manifested and repeated in *Good Morning, Midnight*.

An episode that illustrates the dual process of reflection and experience transpires in the Pecanelli bar. When Sasha decides to visit the bar, she rationalises, “I don’t see why I shouldn’t revisit it. I have never made scenes there, collapsed, cried—so far as I know I have a perfectly clean slate” (34). She thinks for a moment and concludes that her memory of the bar is pleasant: “We used to go about there.... Nothing to cry about” (34). She searches for impressions of time spent in the bar to justify her “perfectly clean slate” (34). With the mind’s assurance, she walks in only to find an empty room and a new proprietor. The site of pleasant memories—she remembers spending time with a certain boy in the bar—suddenly transforms into a foreign place with exotic pictures on the walls and puzzled patrons staring at her. Her plan to ensure no aimless wandering falls apart and she becomes the “mad old Englishwoman, wandering around Montparnasse” (36). The scene, worse than she thought, reminds her of another time when things were also worse than imagined. Her mind brings up images of London where she returned after attempting to drown herself. She replays her family’s cruel admonishment: “We consider you as dead. Why didn’t you make a hole in the water? Why didn’t you drown yourself in the Seine?” (36). The rejection, which initiated her life of hotel hopping, drinking and crying, returns and hits Sasha once again as she stands in the Pecanelli now, alone, with no one to turn to, no place to go.

The memory of London leads to the final thoughts on her circumstances which come to her as she is distracted by the difficult menu. The old menu is replaced by Javanese cuisine; the unfamiliar words throw her off. Sasha has to read it over and over again. The uneasy thoughts about her past commingle with the discomfort of

viewing the foreign menu. Here what the mind sees conflates with the menu before Sasha's eyes. This is furthered when Sasha is drawn to the back of the menu covered with sketches of little women and the words, "Send more money, send more money," written all over (38). They remind Sasha of her own poverty, how she used to send telegraphs for her £2 10s.

Analysing the menu as a narrative of social suffering, Andrea Zengulys gives her interpretation of the scribblings:

Used either to teach an English phrase to a dinner companion who will be ordering a telegram in Paris or to write out the worrying thoughts of an English speaker who will order a telegram on his or her own behalf, the menu documents a desperate situation—that of a person pleading for money in a strange city through complicated channels of language and technology. ("Menu, Memento, Souvenir" 31)

The scribblings of situations mirror Sasha's plight as she too awaits her inheritance money and struggles in a foreign city. Her struggle is laid out on the menu: its exotic cuisine alienates her and the scribblings draw her circumstance. As she browses the menu, she is reminded of her past. Her memory of London unfolds whilst she reads the menu: "All this time I am reading the menu over and over again" (38). Sasha's recollection of receiving "a solicitor's letter every Tuesday containing £2 10s. 0d" is arguably provoked by the scribblings on the menu (36). Here remembering and thinking are processes anchored in the body as Sasha sits in the Pecanelli and tries to read the menu. The menu provides new data for experience which only comes into full significance when her exploration of the menu meets up with points in her memory. The different moments of reading the menu—looking at the Spécialités Javanaises and seeing the sketches—are points in her exploratory experience that

reflect her position as a lone, impoverished stranger in Paris. They become significant when read in relation to the reflection of her past, a connection bridged by Sasha when she picks up a pen and writes, “I hope you got that. Yes, I got it” (38). Not only does she align herself with the women that came before her—they all have “no pride, no name, no face, no country” (38)—she also brings that part of herself, which exists in the past as evoked in the memory, into the present.

As Sasha faces the scribbles on the menu, she envisions herself like the other women sitting in cafés requesting money. When she responds in writing, she too participates in the practice of sending telegrams. In that moment, the past and present, the women and Sasha, seem to shore in the same temporal and spatial setting. The request, “Send more money,” is conjugated in the simple present tense to either imply the repeated nature of the action or its scheduled occurrence in the near future. Either way, it is not bounded by time and its repetition brings the scenes of women sketching on the menu to the present. More significantly, Sasha perpetuates the collection of images by envisioning the telegraph-wires buzzing. The shift from simple present to the present continuous tense makes the action continuous, as if the requests or plights of these desperate women have not ceased. The sketches set the scene of women sending telegrams, which is in turn reified by Sasha in the first-person: “I think of all the telegraph-wires buzzing” (38). This is finally affirmed by the third-person narratorial voice, as if reiterating the prevalence and ongoing nature of such a scene. It is not just the women who were sending telegrams, but Sasha too is sending them. Telegraph-wires, buzzing incessantly, connecting the past and present, hover over the women.

What is Sasha seeing? Is it herself or the women? I think she sees both. The penning of an answer confirms her identification and indicates detachment. Zemgulys

writes that Sasha's reply implies "that such telegrams are futile, that the only thing that will be 'got' is the message and not 'more money'" (31). Whilst Sasha is like the women, she is apart from them because she realises the senselessness of the requests. Zemgulys contends that although Sasha does recognise "the urgent situation," she "mockingly relates to the menu's impoverished predecessor and finds amusement to the futility of their urgent pleas" (31). Whilst this reading is compelling, Sasha's amusement also hints of a perverse stoical resignation consistent with her self-deprecation. Despite how her past has benumbed her and after countless rejections have left her shamed, Sasha, like the women, continues to ask for money. The key phrase, "In spite of everything," is ambivalent, though in context "everything" could mean all the sufferings and poverty, failed requests and rejections, that the women have been through (38). It is amusing to Sasha that the telegraph wires still buzz, that she still sends for money, in spite of everything. Contrary to Zemgulys's argument that Sasha "enjoy[s] her flush present in contrast to another's desperate one" (31), she in fact mocks her own resilience and shamelessness.

The amusement does not demand pity. Contrasted with the confessional account of her past in the previous section, her response does not invite empathy. Sasha sees herself in the scribbles but does not mull over it. She is detached, re-visiting the past without re-living the pain. Her experience in the Pecanelli is a mix of reflecting and seeing, directing Sasha towards a self-comprehension in which destitution and melancholy are treated and understood without being caught in the riptide of emotions. Her past experience shows her as desperate and afflicted, but the present experience proves she is long-suffering. Zemgulys summarises Sasha's predicament: like the young poor women, she is "desperate but not pathetic, one demanding our recognition but not our pity" (35). Rhys's method of interposing



reflection and experience makes one think and see as Sasha weaves in and out of the past and present. Non-vision of the past is facilitated by vision of the present; blind spots of the mind are looked at again through thoughts anchored in the body. In the Pecanelli scene, non-vision and vision, reflection and exploration come together. The stuff of knowledge, to use Merleau-Ponty's words, which is present in the past, is not truth but provisional possibilities that become significant when we see Sasha situated in the Pecanelli, in the liminal space of her past and present, memory and experience.

### *Between Seeing and Thinking*

The interpenetration of the past and present enlarges the scope of perception, bridging seeing and thinking, suggesting that the processes may not be as mutually exclusive as we think. To recapitulate, perception involves the lived body inhabiting and beholding the lived world and then organising its data as they are presented. To perceive is to be in the world and behold it in its finitude as immediately as possible as it appears before the body in a given locale. The trouble with this is it precludes the past from what is seen. Also troubling is how perception assumes "a sedimentation from the past," as though the past is the fount of all hindrances to experience (Rabil, Jr. 19). In any case, the past cannot appear as a given in the present scene because it has passed and is therefore absent. Any hint of its presence is ambivalent.

In addition to the list of troubles is the faint air of passivity surrounding perceptual experience. Picture the seer looking at and receiving visual data before analysis and reflection take place. The body is oriented towards one object; but aside from the intentionality presupposed in the orientation, the act of receiving before organising occurs is, to some extent, passive. She is an observer of the lived world, not a participant. This is where phenomenology dispels the illusion of observing,

exposing passivity by roiling the sediments of experience. Its rigorous exfoliation abrades subjective experience in pursuance of an originary and immediate connection with phenomena. Yet being in the world means experience is coloured by thought and the primacy of contact is compromised. For the project of a phenomenology of place with emphasis on women's experience, it is important to situate thought bodily and spatially so that thinking works compatibly with seeing. This calls for a rethinking of what it means to perceive such that experience is both subjective and originary.

The act of seeing is invariably tied to visibility. As discussed in the previous chapter, this has political implications because the invisible include the socially marginalised and taboos (such as prostitution and homosexuality) that are usually kept out of sight so as to maintain order. Examining how experience transits from invisible to visible and the political possibilities of this change, Joan W. Scott views visibility as "literal transparency" where becoming visible through seeing "breaks the silence... challenges prevailing notions, and opens new possibilities for everyone" ("Experience" 23).<sup>66</sup> Seeing is epistemological: "Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct, unmediated apprehension of a world of transparent objects" (23). The choice of word, "knowledge," is intentional. Noting that vision is the "evidence of experience" (24), Scott explains that since "experience is taken as the origin of knowledge" then vision becomes the "bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built": "Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured... are left aside" (25).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Scott, engaging with political theory and feminism in this essay, argues against the passive acceptance of vision as evidence of experience and transparency as a means to knowledge.

<sup>67</sup> Vision is used in a similar way as perception is used in phenomenology. Whilst both entail the receiving and organising of data, Scott regards vision as a means to reproduce knowledge in service of the ideological system.

Vision treads the delicate line between the act of seeing and the metaphor of visibility. To use Scott's terms, one is "subjective perceptual clarity" and the other "transparent vision" (35). Clarity is given through subjective intervention, through forms of reflection; transparency claims unmediated vision. Although Scott's study of vision is tangential to embodied perception, the schism—between seeing something and making it visible—evinces a blind spot in the phenomenology of perception. That is, the body that sees is a body that has seen; it is historical and cultural. Scott warns that experience cannot be naturalised, "through a belief in the unmediated relationship between words and things" (36), or put differently, between things as they are in the world and objects as they are seen through the body in the world.

Distinguishing object from thing, Nash writes:<sup>68</sup>

If objects are representative, for instance in denoting their class of items, or in embodying cultural values, or in belonging to a subjective appropriation, they might be thought of as something like conventional metonymic examples (an 'example of its class'). The thing's oddity, on the other hand, is also its singularity: it is non-representative and finally irreducible to subjective appropriation. (4)

Relating this distinction to Scott's, what is central to "transparent vision" is the thing which cannot be represented in any other way but in its givenness. Subjective perceptual clarity, on the other hand, illuminates the object, wherein seeing allows the subject to grasp a certain relationship between personal experiences and the object located in a socio-historical context.

Working this thing-object dialectic of perception into the Pecanelli scene, the sketches and writings can be interpreted as a representation of class, racial, gender

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<sup>68</sup> Nash examines thing and object with regards to shoes in Woolf's works.

struggles, and power relations in society that become visible as Sasha brings them to life, so to speak. As the telegraph-wires buzz on, her destitution and the women's sufferings become visible. The banal act of seeing the menu begins to bear political significance, revealing the existence of the forgotten women and voicing their appeals, which if not for Sasha's itchy fingers would have been left unnoticed at the back of the menu, excluded from public discourse.

A similar experience of seeing unfolds in Mansfield's "Miss Brill" when the eponymous protagonist takes out her fur and stares into its "sad little eyes" that said, "What has been happening to me?" (331). The rhetorical question takes on a larger significance when Miss Brill is mocked by a girl who calls her a "stupid old thing" with a funny fur that is "exactly like a fried whiting" (335). It becomes clear that the question at the outset of the story is directed at the owner who is represented in the aged fur. The need to preserve the lacklustre object which has suffered a knock and is losing its firmness parallels Miss Brill's overly sanguine disposition in spite of her disengagement. She sees herself as a romantic observer and an important participant, who is familiar with the Sunday crowd and events: "she had a part and came every Sunday" (334). But, notwithstanding the attempts to belong, Miss Brill is alone. Despite her efforts, she is the disengaged participant. The illusion she maintains is comparable to the image of the presentable fur she upkeeps. As both fantasies shatter at the giggle of the girl, Miss Brill uncharacteristically skips her Sunday treat, which symbolically points to her inability to keep up with the act and finish the show as she usually would. When she returns home, she "quickly, without looking, laid [the fur] inside" the box and put the lid on (335). The careful scrutiny in the beginning is supplanted by a careless tossing. The crux in the chain of actions is the fact that she deliberately avoids looking at the fur. This time, instead of speaking to her, the

ignored object cries in the dark box. More than a personification, it reiterates the relation between object and appearance and, more importantly, that between in-/visibility of the personal and socio-cultural.

If the initial perception of the fur is a transparent vision of a thing merely reflecting the state of its givenness, then the final encounter with it is coming into contact with an object where Miss Brill, without seeing the fur, experiences a moment of subjective perceptual clarity. The fur is pushed aside just as Miss Brill is neglected; its cries give away her desolation. The sprightly appearance masks the cruel blows of life with which the old lady has been dealt, blows that become apparent when she sees the moth-powdered and timeworn fur. The once revered adornment has deteriorated and the imagery—like a fried whiting—conjures a stiff and shriveled nonentity that is lost in the exuberant crowd. This sight corresponds to the circumstances of Miss Brill and renders visible what has been omitted in the text. Nothing about her past and present is specified. But, by the end of the story, we get a sense of her loneliness, of being left behind by the current of life that waits for no one.

As Heather Murray notes, stories like “Miss Brill” find some of Mansfield’s “gloomiest moments” (“Katherine Mansfield and Her British Critics” 107). They depict “cruelty and undisguised suffering”: “mankind must struggle on alone” (100). The struggle portrayed in Miss Brill’s suffering and subjection to the forces of society and ethos of a pernicious materialism is shared by the invalid gentleman who is presumably dead. The old man whom she used to see on Sunday afternoons is no longer there, but she envisions him just as the band rests, when it is most quiet. In the brief interlude, she visualises and brings him on stage; the timely moment aligns the lone woman and man. The aged woman and the man share a common suffering; they stand for those unceremoniously discarded by a forward-moving society represented

by the boy and girl, the “young ones, the laughing ones” the caustic and apathetic (335). “Miss Brill” presents a social milieu where the young are caught up in their own times, where couples engage in exclusive activities,<sup>69</sup> where groups of people support themselves; a society blind to the lone, wandering pariahs who continuously cross their paths in hopes of somehow reconnecting with the world to which they once belonged.

If Murray is right to say that “Miss Brill” depicts humankind’s “undisguised sufferings,” then Rhys departs from Mansfield in that her novels are unapologetically gender-specific (100). What is persistent in both authors, however, is how seeing objects makes visible the repressed and covert, extending the situation of experience to a wider but not abstract context—be it social, cultural, or historical—whilst approaching the objects as the body is oriented towards them. The intent behind analysing how Sasha and Miss Brill see is not to politicise perceptual experiences, but to open up a space for considering politics, history, culture, power or the lack of it as constitutive of women’s experiences of the lived world. The bodies in *Good Morning*, *Midnight* and “Miss Brill” are aging and have suffered; their experiences only make sense because their circumstances are reflected in the objects on which they fixate.

Bill Brown explains the relation between perceiver and object perceived in his discussion on “the fluidity of objects” where objects “decompose and recompose themselves as the object of a new fascination” (“The Secret Life of Things” 3). The fluidity consists in “dislocating material” from its appearance “into an aesthetic scene” (3). Fusing the material and the poetic imagination reveals how the imagination of materiality asks how “human subjects and material objects constitute one another” (5).

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<sup>69</sup> “Miss Brill” teems with images of couples: “Only two people shared her seat” (331); “An Englishman and his wife” (332); “Two young girls in red came by and two young soldiers in blue met them” (333); “Two peasant women in funny straws passed” (333).

In this respect, objects are appropriated and imagined, representing some context that matters to the subject. If so, are the women seeing or thinking when they experience? Or, asked differently, can experience comprise of seeing and thinking, be exploratory and reflecting? Radical reflection vouches for this possibility, even though the body in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is androcentric and arguably ahistorical and apolitical. If the body is nostalgic like Sasha and Miss Brill's, then radical reflection, which taps on the unreflective fund of experience, cannot be reflecting and exploratory since the past once reflected upon cannot be subdued. Merleau-Ponty likens the past to a field "anterior to any express evocation," but the past is unambiguous for the women (*POP* 424). It is the actual field into which they have already entered. Once accessed, the past spirals uncontrollably into the present. For this reason the visions the women conjure are very affected by their past and afflictions, pulling Miss Brill back into the dark room and Sasha into the hotel room, where they neither flee nor fight.

Scott is critical of certain forms of subjectivity and ideological bent that formulate aspects of history as factual: they "reproduce rather than contest given ideological systems" (25). She explains that when we encounter the repressed and hidden, "we know they exist but not how they've been constructed; we know their existence offers a critique of normative practices, but not the extent of the critique" (25). In this regard, it seems Sasha and Miss Brill's experiences with the sketches and fur expose the silent sufferings of the marginalised groups with which they identify but do not probe into how social and historical processes have shaped how they experience. Also problematic for Scott is how in feminist writings "the relationship between thought and experience is represented as transparent (the visual metaphor combines with the visceral)" (31). This is also where she and other like-minded critics may take issue with "Miss Brill" and particularly *Good Morning, Midnight* because

the women's experiences are both visceral and metaphorical to some degree, which seems to "universalize the identity of women and so to ground claims for the legitimacy of women's history in the shared experience of historians of women and those women whose stories they tell" (31). Whilst this is a real concern, the texts do not lay claim to any universal experience. They do not represent and generalise women or humankind's experience—Mansfield and Rhys never let us forget how alone and dislocated their protagonists are. Instead, the authors show the importance of connection or some form of solidarity, albeit imagined, that helps their women gain insight beyond what they can perceive, given social limitations and displacement.

Another difference between Miss Brill and Sasha is their thought process. Thought, in "Miss Brill," is the conscious imagining of collective experience. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, however, the only matter Sasha thinks about is her past. Thought and action always circle back to the past. In the Pecanelli scene, we see how her choice of place is affected by the memory of place. Her travels about Paris are designed to ensure no aimless wanderings, no crying in public. She must have a "programme, not to leave anything to chance" (*GMM* 14). Given the methodical itinerary planning, Sasha seems to *think* experience rather than actually experience. Yet, although she sees the world with subjective perceptual clarity—after the clarifying moment, she sees differently, i.e., understands the present in relation to the past—Sasha does not dwell on the past. Instead clarity forces her to fixate on something else; that being place.

A careful reading of the encounters of place reveals that Sasha's eyes see where the mind's eye misses, and the mind recovers what the eyes do not see. From the outset, Sasha divulges her clockwork ritual of planning itineraries: "I have decided on a place to eat in at midday, a place to eat in at night, a place to have my drink in



after dinner. I have arranged my little life” (9). The choice to visit one place instead of another is dependent on how much unpleasant memory is evoked in a particular place. When she decides to go to the Pecanelli, she reasons, “I don’t see why I shouldn’t go revisit it. I have never made scenes there, collapsed, cried” (34). Her consciousness of place is built on distressing memories from the past. Returning to Paris after being abandoned and losing her baby, Sasha sees the streets as sites that trigger memories of trauma. As she wanders about Paris, she “remember[s] this, remember[s] that”: “Here this happened, here that happened” (15). Significantly, hers is a consciousness of the past that latches onto place. It is not purely a consciousness of the past, but of place. Place intercepts the relation between reflecting and seeing, mitigating the crippling effects of the past. Sasha cannot help but connect places, or semblances of familiar places, to what she has experienced. So instead of recalling the past or trying to forget it, she relates to it through a spatiality that enables her to come in contact without re-experiencing the trauma. This spatiality involves a vocabulary, routines, awareness of the potential of places, and spatial practices that describe experiences in spatial terms. Sasha practices a way of living that is dependent on the places she goes to and from morning to night, where she has her meals, where she spends time between meals. To stop the replay of tragedy, she comes up with a list of alternative places.

Alice Borinsky argues that Sasha’s decisions to visit safer places are linked to her guest status:

her being a parasite is not a vocation exercised with the passion and capacity for manipulation associated with the role in literature. It is more of an unquestioned, passive acceptance of things as they are even to the point of constituting her own appearance from the images of

mannequins in display windows. (“Jean Rhys: Poses of a Woman as Guest” 240)

This suggests that Sasha is a “helpless” woman of no identity (229). Far from a passive guest who flees from cafés, I contend that Sasha’s place-planning is typical of a streetwise woman. She does not recoil from places because of otherness and lack of belonging. Rather she is clear about the ghost of herself from her past with which she refuses to be associated, knowing very well to avoid places likely to bring up the past.

Georg Simmel, in his seminal essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” describes “the metropolitan type” to create “a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it” (326).<sup>70</sup> In a similar way, Sasha’s obsession to maintain composure, dressing well and having her makeup on, is a “rational” reaction, creating “a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness” (326). The hard exterior protects her. Sasha’s composed demeanour and attitude, compared to her docility in Part Three where she follows Enno and is clueless about Paris, is fueled by her refusal to relive the traumatic past. Eschewing confrontations that imperil her, she ensures “avoidance of certain cafés, of certain streets, of certain spots” (14). As she walks into the Cinema Danton, the Pecanelli, and the Luxembourg Gardens with this intention, she is effectively undertaking a spatially directed motive that creates a situation of plotted out places and begins her narrative of place.

Sasha has invented an alternative itinerary of Paris for the lone woman. She directs herself towards and away from certain places, a manoeuvre reflecting her circumscribed perspectival orientation, one that results from an accumulation of past

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<sup>70</sup> Written at the turn of the century in 1903, Simmel delineates how the individual copes with an urban and capitalist society. Whilst he notes that the individual is threatened by the urbanising and money-driven society which are arguably forces that oppress Sasha, I focus on the past.

traumas. In an attempt to avoid remembering by bypassing places, her consciousness of the past ironically and inadvertently transforms into a *consciousness-of-place*. Her sensitivity towards places as trigger points or comfort zones translates into a reflex and intuition for space that enable her to evaluate then enter or exit rooms based on her feelings and thoughts. Overtime, Sasha develops a habit of experiencing rooms, which houses together the past and present.

### ***The Habit of Rooms***

Sasha's experience is reflecting and exploratory, mindful and embodied, teetering the line between past and present. She frequently lapses into the past and ends up crying in a lavabo; if not, she is heedlessly following the lead of the present, walking into the snares of the neighbour *commis* and René. Each resurgence of the past is not unexpected. The ways in which her memory is invoked trace out a pattern that anticipates later renaissances of the past. Right at the beginning, when Sasha lays out how she has arranged her life by deciding on places to have her meals, she is setting into motion a pattern, a habit involving place, which would recur throughout the novel.

Aside from the emphasis on place, the ritualistic quality of the arrangement is striking. Her experience seems to be rooted in habituation. Regardless of whether she sticks to the path or not, habit drives her to remember. The wanderings into "wrong" places are not accidental, for there is nothing aimless about her walks. In much the same vein, if her physical wanderings manifest her mental wonderings, then there is also nothing aleatory about the insertions of the past. Each time Sasha enters a place, the past flashes in the present. When she gets a new room, it is expected that it would be as the room before. For Sasha, "things repeat themselves over and over again" (*GMM* 56). This is not to say that there are no new experiences, but that nothing

surprises her. Hence when she does visit a place that is not previously mentioned and is not on her itinerary, for example when she walks the Boulevard St Michel, it is almost certain that she must have experienced the place before or mention somewhere about an element of the past. Sure enough, Sasha admits, “I have walked along here so often” (39). There is a pattern to her experience and memory: certain places automatically revive memories. Soon, it becomes normal for Sasha to habitually experience the past in the present.

The notion of habit is important because it undermines the self as a mindful and reflecting agent, actively recollecting and ruminating on the past. Recollection, according to Ricoeur, is a search where “the effort to recall constitutes a case of intellectual effort and is associated with the effort of intellection” (29). It requires the ability to recognise, appropriate, and even reconstruct memory for the present. In this respect, Sasha does not search for the past inasmuch as it is brought up because she is used to doing so. She habitually remembers rather than deliberately—an indication that she is not a *thinking* body. Hers is redolent of Henri Bergson’s *mémoire-habitude*, or habit-memory, which is not the survival of the past, but rather living the past out in the present experience. Habit, Bergson elaborates, is “formed by repeated actions that are amassed in the body: these do not represent the past, they merely act it” (*Matter and Memory* 92). This kind of memory is not recollection where the mind drifts and searches for a past encased in glass. Like any other habits, it involves the body’s motor habits: “it is lived and acted, rather than represented” (91). Just as Sasha habitually walks in and out of places, the past is acted out and then stopped.

On habit-memory and how it is embodied, Edward Casey writes:

For the habitual in matters of memory is neither strictly mental (as in the case of “image memory”) nor entirely physical (as in trace theory).

It is both at once, thoroughly mental and yet wholly bodily.... In habit, character, virtue, and style alike, we find an inextricable commixture of intention and behavior, of animation by mind and enactment by body. (“Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty” 280)

Habit marries the psychological and the physical, allowing the union of two exclusive terms. What this means for a phenomenology of place is that the past does not act as sedimentation that obscures the vision of place by superimposing a representation of what has happened. As Bergson affirms, habit-memory “no longer *represents* our past to us; it *acts* it” (94). It becomes part of the lived experience, a faculty of the mind that is bodily and concurrent in the moment of experience. Perhaps habit-memory is a misnomer—“if it still deserves the name of memory, it is not because it conserves bygone images, but because it prolongs their useful effect into the present moment” (Bergson 94). But the idea of habitually acting out the past in the present implies repetition and movement, traversing to and fro, temporally and spatially. This way one can access the unreflective fund of experience, since the body enacts it in the present and without being trapped in the field of the past. To some degree, habit is the solution to Merleau-Ponty’s reservation about the past. Whilst he is reticent about memory as representation and invention, he is more receptive to ideas regarding habit.

In his longstanding fascination with the phenomenon of the phantom limb, Merleau-Ponty finds that “our body comprises as it were two distinct layers, that of the habit-body and that of the body at this moment” (*POP* 95). The habit-body enacts all possible actions that the dismembered body at present can no longer perform. It dawns on the subject that what was once possible for the body to manipulate has now become “what *one* can manipulate”: “it must have ceased to be a thing *manipulatable for me* and become a thing *manipulatable in itself*” (95). One realises that “there

appears round our personal existence a margin of *almost* impersonal existence, which can be practically taken for granted, and which I rely on to keep me alive” (96). The habit-body exposes the unconscious reliance on something outside lived experience that has been internalised as formative to existence. In context, the past survives for Sasha not as a representation of things past but as “a manner of being and with a certain degree of generality” (96). The past is not dated or spread out as a picture; it comes into being through a generality, one that is of rooms. Her memory of a certain anonymous room infiltrates all experiences of places; it is “always the same room” (120). By claiming that all rooms are the same, that places are always the same room, Sasha gives prominence to a particular room that she never exactly gives details about. Yet this *room* is the *cynosure* of all her experiences of places.

Sasha’s habitus and experiences have an indelible connection with the past that first manifests in the enigmatic *room* which she claims is always constant: Serge’s exhibition studio is a room that expands and the dress-house is a room of many rooms. Because she remembers the room habitually, it follows that she must be thinking frequently about it, whether she does it consciously or subconsciously. Yet, in Rhys’s work, remembering the past in the form of a room and what has taken place within is almost a habitual response, much like a reflex action. Here the connection between the mind’s activity and bodily action is intentional. For Merleau-Ponty, this kind of reflex action, which is a combination of the workings of the mind and body, is much like “memory, emotion and the phantom limb,” all “equivalents in the context of being in the world” (*POP* 99). The impression of memory, he explains,

establish and maintain [the past event], prevent it from being abolished, and cause it to still count in the organism. They keep empty an area in

which the subject's history fills, they enable the latter to build up the phantom.... (99-100)

As “the stump that keep[s] the amputated limb in the circuit of existence” (99), so memory functions like a phantom existence which is especially evident under certain circumstances where “it is possible to bring to light constant responses to stimuli which are themselves constant” (100). *Good Morning, Midnight* creates a world of these circumstances, incubating the phantom existence of memory so that its recall is physiological and not solely psychological. Significantly, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, it is because of our being-in-the-world, “which provides all our reflexes with their meaning, and which is thus their basis,” that memory and the physical are integrated into patterns of behaviours lived out in the world (100).

Sasha's impulse to compare places with the room is a habit that causes her to act in certain ways. The room is her phantom limb. To her any room is either a place “where you hide from the wolves outside” or it is not a room at all (*GMM* 33). This explains why she either lays motionless in rooms or flees from them. It is not a single memory of one unique room that affects her behaviour, but it is “a memory of having had that memory... until finally only the essential form remains” (*POP* 96). New rooms may be entirely different and familiar rooms are transformed, but, according to Merleau-Ponty, such “renewal touches only the content of our experience and not its structure” (96). It is no longer about what the room looks like, but how spatiality has structured Sasha's memory and becomes the way by which her past is acted out in the present. This is seen when she recalls the place she once lived with Enno. Whilst she is not eager to put a date to the memory (“Was it 1923 or 1924?” “Was it in 1926 or 1927?”), she is certain that the place is “round the corner, in the Rue Victor-Cousin” (11). Her memory of place does not manifest because of external stimulus where she

associates one place with another by resemblance. Places come into Sasha's view because of her habit of remembering them. What she has is a spatial consciousness that through rooms brings the past into the present.

### *Spatial Consciousness*

“‘Quite like old times,’ the room says. ‘Yes? No?’” (9). The opening line bespeaks the spatial consciousness that permeates *Good Morning, Midnight*. It can be thought of as a consciousness of place and its effects, or an acute sensitivity to the material environment. Place becomes part of consciousness; direction and orientation are integrated into actions. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, spatial consciousness is a result of Sasha's habit of emplacing the past: traumatic memories are recuperated in rooms of the present. As the past and present settle in one place, mutually exclusive acts such as thinking and perceiving are also knitted together. Nicole Flynn affirms that Rhys's interwar novels deal with “quintessentially modernist themes such as internal division, the boundary between internal and external” (“Clockwork Women” 41). Judith K. Gardiner adds “those between dark and light, past and present, despair and hope, inside and outside, nature and art, life and death, male and female” to the list (“*Good Morning, Midnight: Good Night, Modernism*” 234). Particular to *Good Morning, Midnight* is how spatial consciousness along with its structure of spatiality reconciles oppositions, enabling Sasha to think and see at the same time.

A study of Sasha's experience of place reveals how spatial consciousness roils sediments that regulate experience and interfere with the primacy of perception. More importantly, spatial consciousness brings to light another kind of sedimentation, one that is not a priori but formulated by the external world to thrust upon the subject. Merleau-Ponty beseeches us to reflect on this sedimentation that is from within: “we



must recognize a sort of sedimentation of our life: an attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation acquires a favoured status for us” (*POP* 513).

To take this further, it is the only sort of sedimentation that we cannot—and perhaps do not need to—remove because it is proof of our being in the world.

The role of spatiality in Sasha’s memory becomes apparent when her thought-processes, memories of Enno, life in Paris and England, and her dead child surface as she walks Paris and goes into rooms. Tragedies and glimpses of her traumatic past are episodically framed in places. An examination of place opens up an exploration of past experiences. “Quite like the old times”—a seemingly congenial welcome is impregnated with hints of Sasha’s past experiences and her strange affinity with rooms. To begin with, the spatial arrangement of the first hotel room described in the novel gives insight into her past: “There are two beds, a big one for madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for monsieur” (9). Too large for a lone woman, the spacious room likely reminds her of times with Enno in Paris, later confirmed by her last thoughts before turning in: “Was it in 1923 or 1924 that we lived around the corner, in the Rue Victor-Cousin...” (11). The pain of the memory is placated as the past is structured around a spatial vocabulary: the location of the place and the sterile arrangement of the room. The entire experience of the room is tinged with a film of the past with which she tries to identify but fails. Merleau-Ponty explains that such recall of the past does not function as memory because it is not a “representation in the mode of objective consciousness and as a ‘dated’ moment” (*POP* 96). Rather, this past, which remains a “true present,” does not leave Sasha (96). It is acted out in the present as she recognises and describes places.

Spatial consciousness is reified in Part Three where the entire section is structured around a list of places that organises the narratives. Each part begins with

naming the room in which the narrative takes place: “*The room at the Steens*,” “*The room in the hotel in Amsterdam that night*,” “the hotel in the Rue Lamartine,” “*The house in the Boulevard Magenta*.” These are quasi-headings; each is a synopsis, as if place is enough to capture the essence of the episode. The solid structure of spatiality is juxtaposed with fractured time. The chapter floats in and out of the past; the play on time and tenses obfuscates the distinction between experiencing and reflecting. This is most evident at the end of the section when Sasha remembers the last room, one near the Place de la Madeleine, and concludes that all the rooms mentioned are “always the same room” (120). She waits in this room for the money she requested, indicating that this moment in the narrative occurs in her memory. The mix of present and present continuous tenses brings the past into the present. The twice mentioned phrase in continuous tense, “the night is coming” (120), suggests that the money would come too as Sasha waits for Enno, but yet at present she is still waiting. The state that she was in merges with her present predicament: she was waiting for Enno and now she is still waiting, perhaps for another source of allowance. The emphasis on the presentness of the narrative—“Now, money, for the night is coming” (120)—blurs time. Although the shifts in temporality are jarring, the structure of spatiality holds the narrative together, enforcing a relatively coherent and sound recall of memories for Sasha to reflect on and re-experience.

Part Three ends with Sasha contemplating the sameness of rooms:

Eat. Drink. Walk. March. Back to the hotel. To the Hotel of Arrival, the Hotel of Departure, the Hotel of the Future, the Hotel of Martinique, and the Universe. ... Back to the hotel without a name in the street without a name. You press the button and the door opens.

This is the Hotel Without-a-Name in the Street Without-a-Name, and

the clients have no names, no faces. You go up the stairs. Always the same stairs, always the same room. (120)

The short sentences reduce experience into a paratactic prose. Like an instruction manual on how to experience place, the description is dull and mechanical. Nameless places and routine activities emphasise Sasha's isolation. Studying rooms in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Jan Curtis states that "the room is a means of rendering oneself insensitive to the inevitability of suffering" ("The Room and the Black Background" 266). Instead of thinking of apathy as resignation, I argue that Sasha's insensitivity stems from the habitual remembering of the past that after multiple repetitions runs dry of emotions. Because she is first conscious of place and not circumstances, Sasha is spared from withdrawing into the recesses of her mind where the past devours her and inhibits the experience of the present. The structure of spatiality, weaving together the aleatory narratives of experience in the chapter, also creates a presentness by adding a cyclic quality to the experience of rooms where the past is a lived present (akin to Merleau-Ponty's "true present"). This presentness, enabling reflecting and experiencing at the same time, is captured in the following: "The room says: 'Quite like old times. Yes? ... No? ... Yes'" (120). The déjà vu moment recalls the opening line, suggesting that the section assumed to be reflecting on the past could be Sasha's present experience. By situating memory in place, the past is precipitated into the present, and Sasha can reflect and experience at the same time.

Spatial consciousness emplaces the past in present place; the narrative of the memory becomes a narrative of place. The past is immanent in the present, so spatial consciousness does not look backwards. It is concerned with the present and also the future. As radical as it sounds, the idea that spatial consciousness operates in part by patterning memories onto places suggests that it is preemptive, directing at the near

future. If every place Sasha visits potentially evokes the presence of the past, then she can take anticipatory measures to counteract trauma. As a matter of fact she is very conscious of places because she has full understanding of how uncontrollable her emotions can be if she steps into the wrong one. “I must be careful about that. These things are very important,” Sasha reminds herself (9). Opening the doors to wrong places is equivalent to opening up wounds. It is not a stretch to say that spatial consciousness drives Sasha to seek out places that ensure emotional equilibrium. It keeps her sane to continue with her itinerary. The lavabo is one such place. Of the many places in the novel, the lavabo is particularly interesting because of its historical and social resonances. Generally, as a representative of private places in the public sphere, it is laden with ideological meanings that threaten to confine Sasha within the social system that imprisons her. Yet, as a meeting point of her past and present, reflection and experience, place is a spatial manifestation of experience. In it thought is a bodily event, lived experience is subjective and somatic.

Offering shelter from public scrutiny, the lavabos in the basements of cafés stow Sasha away. Elizabeth Wilson points out that in the early twentieth century restrooms were specifically created to seduce women into departmental stores: they could “go unchaperoned or certainly free of men’s protection” (*The Sphinx in the City* 60). The lavabo is where Sasha hides away from the streets and men. When she cannot stop crying, it is the “familiar” and “empty” lavabo that saves her (*GMM* 10). Domosh and Seager describe early modern London and write about “spaces in the city that were designed to reform the ‘inappropriate’ woman” (*Putting Women in Place* 74). Although they discuss spaces where prostitutes and fallen women were rehabilitated for domestic life in a much earlier period, their argument can be applied to the lavabo as a space that makes Sasha well again for public life. The lavabo also

bears marks of Bachelard's cellar, what he calls a "*dark entity*" (18).<sup>71</sup> Regarded as a space of "buried madness and walled-in tragedy," the underground lavabo is a space where the misbehaved are tucked away (20). It is in these "closed interior spaces" like the lavabo that women "meditate on their past sins and remake themselves into rational and self-controlled women" (Domosh and Seager 74). It seems controlling the mind is correcting the body, cleaning one's mind is cleaning up one's act. Indeed the lavabo is where Sasha feels safe and sane—there she stops crying. Yet, any control she has is undermined by the function of this deliberately carved-out space for women to reflect on their bad thoughts and correct their misbehaviour. Space indirectly polices women, and Sasha's instinctive reaction to hide away in the lavabo seems to confirm her obedience.

The role of restrooms, as Wilson states, is to seduce women into the public with promise of a private place for reflection. The seduction is more sinister when the reflective experience is designed to reproduce gender norms beneath the guise of affording privacy, solidifying existing social stratifications. Whilst Sasha goes into lavabos to calm herself, she does not reflect on her behaviour. Instead, she recalls lavabos in Paris, London, and Florence. With these images Sasha creates her own space comprising of "fifteen women" queuing in the marbled London toilet, "the very pretty, fantastically dressed girl who rushed in, hugged and kissed the old dame" in Florence, and "the attendant [who] peddled drugs" in the Paris toilette (10). Notably, the scenes, albeit from her past, are without the sense of search that accompanies memory. Sasha's habit of recalling places is fed by an acute spatial consciousness that reflexively, without thinking, calls forth images of places.

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<sup>71</sup> Bachelard discusses verticality in the house: the attic as the highest room and the cellar (basement) the lowest.

The lack of thought implied must not be confused with inertia. Habit-memory is effected by what Casey calls “active habituating”: “Habituation here takes its most concrete form in the body's inhabitation of the world, its active insertion into space and time” (“Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty” 285). To inhabit is to be passively contained by space and time, and also to actively “know our way around in a given circumstance” (285). Sasha may be shunning the public and hiding from the world upstairs in an empty and cut-off space in the basement, but the withdrawals often lead her to behold a lived space of her own. Her entrance into places like the lavabo embeds her in a fully materialised situation of superimposed scenes created by her spatial consciousness. This reflexive consciousness of place does not inhibit experience in the way that sedimentation and associationism do. It neither searches for the past nor represents reality. It acts out the past whilst effacing its time stamp and holding onto spatiality. By acting out the scenes, continuing the gestures of tenderness between the women, spatial consciousness communicates a feminine compassion that stands in contrast to the cold, dark streets of male presence. The collected scenes of women in lavabos build camaraderie. In the lavabo Sasha is not forced into obedience and her behaviour regulated. Instead she brings to the present a group of wayward women who are far from abiding. She resists the introspection and self-reflection demanded by the semi-private space and envisions a collective experience and feminine existence.

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the lavabo is where Sasha somewhat reflects and cleans up her act. It is a specific kind of reflection, one different from a backward-looking search of the past. The concomitant cleaning up in the lavabo is also not the same as regulating behaviour. Rather, the catharsis facilitated by spatiality relieves Sasha from the mind-body separation, reconciling thought to bodily experience.

Whereas in the closed interior spaces described by Domosh and Seager the disobedient body is secondary to the reflective mind (which disciplines the body), in the lavabo there is no such hierarchy. The lavabo, although used synonymously to mean the restroom in the novel, derives from the Latin *lavō* (to wash), which refers to only the basin for washing hands. Instead of using the French *toilette* or lavatory, Rhys chooses the obscure lavabo.<sup>72</sup> The word, not commonly used by the French, is historically ecclesiastical, translating as “I will wash,” invoking cleansing rites in Catholicism. The washing that takes place in the lavabo can be read as a physical cleaning as well as a purification of mind or spirit. A dual catharsis unfolds: Sasha is dry, cleansed mentally and physically.

In the opening scene, when Sasha cries uncontrollably, she goes to the lavabo and is “dry” (10). The word, “dry,” is peculiar though explainable—she has after all stopped crying. But as she rambles on about how she tried to drown herself, dryness becomes associated with the botched suicide: she is dry because she has been pulled out of the river. She does not recollect her past experience; there is emphasis that she has forgotten it. It is only brought up because of the empty lavabo which effects a peace and sterility that dry her—a dryness that encourages her to recapture the feeling of sanity and of being saved. Sasha has forgotten the trauma, but she relives the rescue: “I realized how lucky I am. Saved rescued, fished-up, half-drowned, out of the deep, dark river, dry clothes, hair shampooed and set” (10). The realisation that she is no longer crying reinforces her dry body, assuring her that she is no longer drowning in the river or in emotions. The mental and bodily dryness are dovetailed by the spatiality of the lavabo that stops Sasha from dwelling on the past and re-living the

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<sup>72</sup> Only in *Good Morning, Midnight* is the lavabo used to mean the restroom. In *Voyage in the Dark*, “lavatory” is used instead. When Sasha says that the lavabo is “luckily empty” and that an old dame is “outside near the telephone,” the descriptions suggest a locked toilet cubicle (10). Also, when she asks, “What about that monograph on lavabos—toilets—ladies?,” the sub-clause further indicates that the two are the same (10).

crippling experience of losing control. As she rids herself of emotional excess, she disencumbers the baggage of the past and trauma. The cleaning up, or the reflection, which takes place in the lavabo is not based on recollection but works towards a reconciliation of the mind and body. In the lavabo, Sasha does not retreat into the recesses of her past evoked by the reflective mind. Rather, the scenes are acted out before her, creating a safe space in which she re-experiences and lives them out.

Specially set up as a private space where the knowing mind disciplines the feeling body, the lavabo like most interior spaces in public (for example, the dressing room) is part of a larger social design that looks on thought as the axis of human existence. However, as Sasha experiences and radically reflects, it transforms into a space that forges togetherness of the mind and body, a state of equivocation where thinking is not wholly an exercise of the mind and experience is not an exclusively material matter. The subversion of this separation feeds phenomenology as it puts the body back into the equation of experience, rendering experience subjective as the feeling body lives in the world. Reason, as Alcoff puts it, “was portrayed as universal and neutral precisely because it was bodiless” (42). The emphasis on the feeling body moves away from rational experience and takes into consideration experiential specificities, including “bodily distractions, hormonal cycles, emotional disturbances,” which were once unthought of in epistemologies of experience (Alcoff 42). Sasha, distracted and burdened by the past, sees the world differently. This is a kind of seeing particular to those who occupy a vantage point much lower than the dominant point of view. The perceptual experiences from this position articulate a different being-in-the-world that diverges from neutral, if not latently masculine, experiences.



### *Feminine Re-Vision*

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha's spatial consciousness animates places and envisages the past, offering a version of experience that debunks the neutrality of experience and reveals a far from dominant, non-masculinist way of seeing the world. Although set in the late 1930s when "new femininities,"<sup>73</sup> Scott McCracken observes, were "produced at the interstices between private and public spheres," Sasha prefers closed interior spaces (*Masculinities, Modernist Fiction and the Urban Public Sphere* 3). Unlike the new woman who ventures outside the home, she retreats to the room and shirks away from the alluring freedom of the urban city.

Between the malicious streets, ambivalent cafés, and claustrophobic rooms, Sasha chooses the place that secludes the outside. The cordoned room is the antithesis of the open streets. The willing exile seems self-sabotaging, but this physical fixity emplaces her, facilitating an examination of how she explores and sees space. Always entering places that are alike, Sasha revisits them in hope that the second time round she may comport differently and see situations anew. This final section discusses an alternative modality of seeing that is particular to women's experiences. It examines how Sasha's way of seeing veers from normative perception and is dependent on the rooms in which she inhabits. By analysing her experiences of rooms of the past and present, I will show that spatiality and material resemblances are essential to forming a feminine and revisionist kind of seeing that relates women's situation to the places they choose to explore. This kind of seeing affects how women see the world and manage their circumstances.

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<sup>73</sup> McCracken observes that new spaces in the urban public sphere at the end of the nineteenth century gave new opportunities for exploration to women. Teashops, for instance, "appear as signifiers of a new mass culture [...] as examples of women's assertive presence in London's new public sphere" (3)

Normative perception, or “correct perception,” as Merleau-Ponty calls it, occurs when “the unity of the object is based on the foreshadowing of an imminent order” (*POP* 20). This “correct perception” ironically “relieve[s] perception of its essential function, which is to lay the foundations of, or inaugurate, knowledge” (19). Human beings are trained to synthesise images, even if they are discordant with what is presented. Synopsis tends to take over seeing; there is a predilection to see things as complete entities. Seeing the front view of a cube is seeing all of its six facets. Seeing the room from the doorway is already witnessing a panoramic view of the house. Sean Dorrance Kelly picks up on this tendency and emphasises the need to differentiate between “experiencing something as a mere two-dimensional façade and experiencing it as a full three-dimensional entity” (“Seeing Things” 77). This distinction is “rarely made” because it is counterintuitive to think of or see objects as two-dimensional: “we almost always have experiences as of objects rather than as of mere facades” (77). In order to spur, what Kelly calls, a “gestalt shift” that uncovers the perception of objects as mere façades rather than holistic three-dimensional entities (78), “a little bit of exploration” is required (77).

Let us examine what exploration means from a phenomenological perspective. Say for example, when one visits Disneyland, which is a set of a world of its own, the illusion is taken to be real for the duration one stays in the theme park. In Disneyland there is no expectation of the real. Quite the contrary, one wants be swept up in the unreal such that it is the only reality for that particular day. Theme parks are supposed to enable that. As one buys into the illusion, one starts to live it as one would in the real world. This entails exploring the world, or, in context, the other sides of the set. Gradually, the surrounding “looks as if there are mere façades” (Kelly 78). This is not because it has altered in appearance or that one suddenly realises “the *hidden* aspects

of an experienced object” (78). Rather it happens because one is actually experiencing the set as a presented reality. Kelly elaborates on this:

If you explore the set enough in this way, then an amazing thing can happen. Now as you walk down the street, it doesn't look realistic at all. Instead of buildings on either side, it looks as if there are mere façades. Instead of feeling as if you're in the Old West, it feels as if you're on an Old West movie set. (78)

The “amazing thing” is not the illusion of the real which has collapsed or that reality has sunk in. But therein is the gestalt shift: “the whole thing looks like a set full of façades instead of like an Old West town” (78). Exploration allows one to see things as two dimensional, as they appear to the eye. It is a powerful tool, but useful as it is, there is something about exploring, physically or mentally, that does not quite apply to women's situations.

To begin with, to explore and discover in thought or action requires freedom and time. The flâneur, peripatetic, and dandy are classic figures of the exploratory spirit. The woman is not. The closest female alternatives, the prostitute and *demimonde*, are hardly free. Even today, exploration remains very much a male prerogative. The city attracts the male explorer but often ensnares women. Domosh and Seager describe women's movement in the modern city:

Much of their fear is focused on urban public spaces, such as streets, parks, and subways.... They avoided walking in certain places, at particular times, and often will not go out alone. Geographer Gill Valentine has argued that this behavioral response to our fear of crime constitutes a 'spatial expression of patriarchy' (1992: 27), since it

reflects and reinforces the traditional notion that women belong at home, not on the streets. (99-100)

Women simply cannot afford the luxury of time to explore the city, awaiting an epiphany. It is too risky. So women are a different kind of explorers; their exploration is different from the masculine experience; it is time-sparing and more directed.

Some explorer archetypes of the early twentieth century include Baudelaire's rag-picker poet who rummages the city for inspiration and Benjamin's flâneur who needs to hear and see the crowd. They are in search of stories, sights, and sounds. Sasha, in comparison, is a different kind of explorer. She does not draw from the city but throws herself to its dangerous mobs and unsafe streets. Her exploratory spirit manifests in the unrestrained flowing out of herself—by this I mean her past, feelings, thoughts—in certain rooms. Her vision of rooms always ignites a spatial flow that undermines the order of correct perception. This is evident when she crosses the inner/outer divide less consciously and almost effortlessly. Take for instance the introductory passage where she gives a prosaic description of the room:

There are two beds, a big one for the madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for the monsieur. The wash-basin is shut off by a curtain. It is a large room, the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible. The street outside is narrow, cobbled-stoned, going sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps. What they call an impasse. (9)

The account of the room paints a scene of Sasha entering the room and sees both parts of the room and street. Analysing this scene, GoGwilt argues that the separation between interior and exterior is bridged by the impasse “that undoes the separation of

interior and exterior (“The Interior” 69).<sup>74</sup> Notwithstanding this observation, Sasha’s lack of discernment for boundaries hinges on a less overt detail.

Note how the description segues from interior to exterior, as if there is no textual division, as if there are no windows. Before we dismiss this detail as inane, we might pause for a moment and recall Sasha’s preference for light rooms. She insists on the room with two windows, repeating, ““I mean a light room. A *light* one. Not a dark one”” (33). The window brings light from the outside into the room, allowing the exterior to impinge on the interior. It functions like a screen, giving glimpses to the outside world, or filtering out the external. If the house is a bodily system, then windows “from which people look out” are “metaphors for eyes and vision” (Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis* 25). Sasha reiterates this parallel when she describes walking about the city at night: houses as towering “cubes of darkness, with two lighted eyes at the top to sneer” (28). Frustrated with “hostile people” (37), she sees the lighted windows as fiery eyes, “[f]rowning and leering and sneering” at her (28). They warn and stare at the wandering woman, keeping her out of their territory. Sasha, however, does not share the sense of boundary. The fact that windows do not obstruct or hamper the view when she enters the room is telling of a vision that is open and continuous from interior to exterior.

Another memory of windows is found in the episode where Sasha realises her love for Enno when she sees him looking up at her, or rather “looking up at [their] window” (108). In this instance, the division between the street and room is stark: Enno is on the outside and she stands behind the curtain. Her vision in this example adheres to the inner/outer divide. This separation, however, is less prevalent in the

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<sup>74</sup> GoGwilt explores the monolingualism of “impasse,” both French and English. He refers to the “physical, architectural sense of the word” and also argues that the word “delineates the experience Rhys’s protagonists are bound to repeat in finding themselves trapped in the double bind of private and public metropolitan social space” (67).

present as seen in the opening section. As Sasha's life falls apart, the distinction between interior and exterior crumbles as well. The window no longer separates, as it did before placing Enno on the outside and Sasha in the hotel room, but is the portal that brings the exterior in. Her later perception of the interior and exterior is more fluid after her trauma; her perception of rooms has expanded. The new room without the spatial divide is a re-vision just as Sasha's view is revised. She embraces the hazy division and does not desire perceptual unity: all she wants is "this room, which is part of the street outside" (109). The mixing of the interior and exterior does not muddle experience. Rather the roiling of sediments causes the perceiver to be aware of residues and deposits from previous experiences. As Sasha explores places, moving in and out of the past and present, she never confuses façades with objects, though she does not care for the distinction.

Sasha's ability to not muddle façades with objects goes back to the dual acts of half-seeing and half-thinking the past and present. This is encapsulated in the motion of the gramophone record playing in her mind: "The gramophone is going strong in my head: 'Here this happened, here that happened.'" (15). The use of present continuous tense ("going") perpetuates action; the record is going strong at the moment of Sasha's narration. But progress is combatted by the past tense that frames the incantation. Additionally, "here" fixes on a certain place and holds back the continuing action of the playing record, also slowing down Sasha's walking. Each time she identifies a "here," the specific locale is both of the past and present; she is thinking about the place in the past and seeing the place in the present simultaneously. There is therefore no relation between the past and present because they are not separate. The two are seamlessly one.

Pizzichini stresses that “Sasha makes no connections between past and present, between old lovers and new: they are all the same” (217). Truly, to Sasha, the past and present co-exist in places and are part of the larger framework that is the lived streets of London. In a letter to the American novelist, Evelyn Scott, Rhys wrote: “I mean that the past exists—side by side with the present, not behind it; that what was—is” (qtd. in Pizzichini 208). The way in which Rhys positions the past and present suggests a structure to temporality, as if the past and present have a spatial dimension. As Sasha walks into places, inhabiting “here,” past scenes are reeled before her. This is Sasha exploring places. She is not so much exploring the world that is already there as much as she is re-seeing the world that she once inhabited and is experiencing again.

As Sasha reacquaints with places and revisits rooms, she is reconfiguring her past. The prefix (re-) is vital to building the language of a new kind of seeing. More than seeing anew, it is re-vision. To experience in *Good Morning, Midnight* is more correctly to re-see and re-think the past. These revisionary activities are examples of what Sandra Gilbert describes as means to “review, reimagine, rethink, rewrite, revise, and reinterpret the events and documents that constitute [history]” (“What Do Feminist Critics Want” 32).<sup>75</sup> Gilbert believes that the only way to claim “the private lives of women and sometimes their public lives” is to “redo our history” (32). In much the same vein, Sasha’s revisiting rooms and retelling her past are revisionary imperatives that try to claim back her voice and power from dominants like Enno and Mr. Blank. To re-vision the personal past is also a step towards revising a collective women’s history and reevaluating the patrimonial and hegemonic worldview. Sasha

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<sup>75</sup> Gilbert notes the importance of *re-* for feminist discourses: “words beginning with the prefix *re-* have lately become prominent in the language of feminist humanist, all of whom feel that, if feminism and humanism are not mutually contradictory terms, we must return to the history of what is called Western culture and reinterpret its central text” (“What Do Feminist Critics Want” 32).

may be habitually recalling her past in places rather than actively taking on the task of re-vision, but the acting out of past events and scenes is coeval with processes of re-thinking and re-seeing. Like feminist critics, Rhys expresses a revisionary imperative, though her ambition is not to reform the Western male tradition but to reenact and re-see the past that is dissociated and silenced.

Gilbert saw the urgency to revise the construction of women's history because of the problems historically experienced by them. Likewise the need for another kind of seeing, a re-vision, arises from the inadequacy of the phenomenological vision that leaves out women's situation. Merleau-Ponty defines seeing:

To see is to enter a universe of beings which *display themselves*... they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others. (*POP* 79).

He reasons that every object is a mirror of other objects, a reasoning rooted in the principle that one inhabits the object as it is in a lived world. So seeing an object is more than just seeing one side of it. It is to see its other sides by assuming other positions of surrounding objects, thus seeing them as well. This object transcendence is the basis of the spatial perspective central to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. It proves perception is lived experience where to see an object is to see it as embedded in a visual field of other objects that together form the world. That we are always seeing something from somewhere—we may even be seeing it from everywhere because of interrelationships between bodies—is Merleau-Ponty's idea of *being-in-the-world*, a world that is always already there.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> This is different from the Godlike perspective that does not take into consideration intentionality. It assumes an omnipresence, a view from above looking down on everywhere, whereas object transcendence begins from the things of a lived world.



What is missing from his vision, I think, is an interrogation of the objects. How are the objects presented, and what motivates the mirroring? There is neutrality and even naturalness that underpins Merleau-Ponty's universe of beings. It suggests that the surrounding objects mirror one another without mediation. For the privileged who walks into a universe of objects that confirms his vision and presence, being lodged in them is a welcomed predicament. He yields passively because he is assured of his lived experience. For the waifs and strays, the experience is vastly different. Objects reflected in every angle multiply their abjectness. To be surrounded by them is to be imprisoned in a house of mirrors. It is, as Sasha complains, "to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings" (25).

For a phenomenology of place, the object in question is place. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the object is the room that is both past and present. That every room in the novel is a mirror of all others, of rooms past, present, and future comes as no shock. More pressing are the motive and decision driving the perception of rooms. The "why" and "how" help frame a kind of seeing that is uniquely Sasha's, given the situation she lives in and circumstances she faces. It is a seeing that expands spatiality, resulting in a *mise en abyme* where the expansion reproduces rooms of the past. Far from enslaving her, the outflowing of spatial images comforts her: "Now the room expands and the iron band round my heart loosens" (83). There is something non-combative and pacifist about the transgressive power of Sasha's perception of space. She expresses rather poetically that it is "a strange feeling—when you know quite certainly in yourself that something is for always" (108-109). Somehow there is peace in knowing that rooms are always alike and death is imminent. Sasha knows the truth of rooms, which would "undermine the whole social system" (33), and is liberated

from “the insouciance, all the gaiety” (109). Her revisiting of places is restorative, not destructive. The rooms do not mirror her past in ways that make her a victim, but they make space for a re-vision of her experiences. This also explains her constant desire to find more rooms although they are never different to her. The place-seeking impetus, intensified by a restive spirit, is imperative to revisionist, feminine seeing.

The *feminine* needs context. It is broadly used to describe perception and experiences that are exclusive to women. Within the Western theoretical canon, the feminine is semantically confusing and polysemic. Ongoing debates between materialists and idealists, essentialists and constructionists, French and Anglo-American feminists, leave the term imprecise. Is the feminine a performance? Is it a process, as conceived by proponents of *écriture féminine*? Or, is it an otherness, even absence? The questions tunnel their way to aporia. To answer this from a phenomenological perspective, we turn to Husserl’s notion of essence, which is closer to the word, *eido*—a pure form of essence that underwrites impure, intellectual, and empirical descriptions. Diana Fuss explains that essence, “in this early twentieth-century phenomenological view, is not something that lies behind a given thing, but rather essence is that which is most *self-evident* and *self-given* about things” (*Essentially Speaking* 15). The phenomenological essence is not, in the Aristotelian sense, “irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person and thing” (2). Rather, it is the givenness of a person, thing, or event; the view as it appears to the perceiver. Phenomenologically, essence is the contrary of sediment. If the feminine is the essence of female existence, then this is true only to the extent that it demystifies preexisting masculinist forms and images of women. Here it takes on a corrective and restorative significance that re-routes the normative course of experience. A feminine kind of seeing can be described as a re-seeing that rebuilds the

originary connection with the world and re-examines the seer's relation to the world as it appears to her.

A feminine kind of seeing emerges from a feminine situation. Situating the feminine in the intersection of feminism and phenomenology, Young emphasises that if there are “‘feminine’ styles of body comportment and movement,” then there is a need to specify “a differentiation of the modalities of the lived body” (138). The dialogue on femininity must not begin with biological differences but with women's situation “within a given socio-historical set of circumstances” (139). The individual's situation always precedes the shared experiences of women and a unity “specific to a particular social formation during a particular historical epoch” (139). Stuck in rooms, Sasha may not have a style of movement, but there is a style of perception that is neither masculine nor neutral. Her perception of the world affects the way she sees.

John Berger in his prominent work *Ways of Seeing* presents a narrative about seeing that resembles Merleau-Ponty's, except his is more experiential. He writes,

We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.... Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world. (9)

Berger makes clear that the objects in question are human beings. He adds that seeing is “affected by what we know or what we believe” (8). There is recognition of the subjective lived perceptual experience and of women's vision. Berger notes the difference between men and women's social presence and how that affects

perception. A man's presence "may be fabricated" because he walks with privilege (46): If he does not meet the expectation of the power he embodies, he pretends and "the pretence is always towards a power which he exercises on others" (8). This is contrary to the woman whose

presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, tastes—indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence.... To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allocated and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. (46)

In addition to underscoring the differences in social power, Berger's emphasis on women's "chosen surroundings" and the "allocated and confined space" delineates the direct relation between women's situation and the places they choose to experience (46). To the extent that the relation between spaces forges women's experience, material resemblances also form the basis of a feminine seeing.

The connection between allocated situation and chosen surrounding gives insight into how and why Sasha sees as she does. She sees rooms everywhere because of the physical and metaphorical room that is the genesis of her trauma and tragedies. All experiences trace back to that particular room. To her, four walls and a tight space make any place a plausible room. I venture to say that the room is the fulcrum of feminine seeing in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Take for example the dress-house scene: Sasha describes working in a large room with "mannequins and sales women all mixed up" (21); as she tries to find the *kise* she passes by "showrooms, the fitting-

rooms, the mannequin's room," the "workrooms and offices and dozens of small rooms" (22). The room expands into a labyrinth of other rooms, stairs, passages—"all different, all exactly alike" (23). The *mise en abyme* creates a multiplicity of rooms; each room is a re-vision of the first *room*.

In addition, these rooms that are appear and passed by in a bid to find the room in Sasha's mind are not random and insignificant. They are what Elizabeth Bronfen terms "neutral territory"; they are "rooms which cannot be assigned to any people or ideas" and so "may have a revitalising influence" (*Dorothy Richardson's Art of Memory* 20).<sup>77</sup> Though neutral, they are not liminal in that they do not quite straddle the boundaries of dichotomous entities like the interior and exterior, private and public. Bronfen explains that such spaces are neutral because they stand in contrast to "semantically coded" spaces (20). Indeed, although these spaces, "mannequin rooms," "workrooms," are related to her employment and implicit of her social standing, they are no longer imposing (even though Sasha's search for the *kise* is in the first place a work order from her superior). Their brief mentions as Sasha literally passes by them in a hurry speak to the fact that she is no more concerned by them as she would have been, as exemplified in other episodes where she dwells and harps on rooms. These rooms become "neutral" as they give way to and "revitalise" Sasha's memory of rooms that matter to her, such as the lavabos.

Notably, in the scene every passage "ends in a lavatory," each invoking scenes of crying and hiding away (23). In the midst of anxiety and disorder, Sasha finds herself in a rather bathetic situation, surrounded by lavatories: "The number of

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<sup>77</sup> Although Bronfen's analysis is on Richardson's use of space, the idea of empty space can help to illuminate Rhys's writing of non-descript rooms. In the chapter "Locations of Passage and Habitation," Bronfen writes about how "empty" and "free" spaces such as the moving trains and cafés in Richardson's works "revitalise[s]" Miriam's experience of her own room. She discusses, for example, how the exterior space of London ("an open, free, exciting and mysterious space..."; "protective and separated from the rest of the world") serves as "external approximation to her own room," which also straddles between "openness" and "protection" (20).

lavatories in this place, *c'est inouï*" (23). The *kise* episode, Carole Angier notes, is "funnily horrible, horribly funny" (*Jean Rhys: Life and Work* 378). Scurrying around passages to find a room she does not know only to end up in different lavatories, the scene captures the foundering of Sasha's sangfroid. The events that have happened to her have accreted to point where "the horrors are pathetic, laughable" (Angier 378). At this point in her life, Sasha is in her late thirties, alone in Paris, and abandoned by Enno and her family. She has been "living for some time on bread and coffee," trying to survive as she drifts from room to room, job to job (*GMM* 21). The unraveling rooms unreservedly call onto the scene the rooms in Brussels, the Steens', the Boulevard Magenta, the Rue Lamartine.... Material resemblances bring about an expanding spatiality. This behemoth of rooms now becomes a structure of her past, mirroring her memories and emotions. In this moment, her anxiety of being humiliated by Mr. Blank intensifies and merges with the humiliation she felt when Enno had left her pregnant and poor, encompassing the degradation and oppression endured by "all the fools and all the defeated" (25).

The *mise en abyme* continues. As Sasha stays confined in the dress-house room, she is also trapped in society's room where "all the doors are shut" (*GMM* 23). The idea of "rooms within rooms" is delineated by Penny Sparke, who in her sharp analysis of retail spaces in the early twentieth century, discusses how the organisation and use of rooms were relocated from the private to the public, resulting in a "layering of inside spaces" where department stores were panoptic structures that overlooked "'inside' experiences" (*The Modern Interior* 57). Furniture and familiar room settings in shop displays simulated domestic life and created experiences that were supposedly "shut off from the outside world and contained within safe, unthreatening... spaces" (57). Likewise in *Good Morning, Midnight*, the innocuous

appearance of something is an elaborate ruse. The dress-house painted in delicate white and luxurious gold reflects the domestic and commercial, respectively. The Louis Quinze chairs and painted screens further erect a highly idealised domestic front. Sasha, however, does not fall for the illusion. She knows the chairs are “imitation” and the dolls are “malicious” (16). Society’s attempt to pass off the public for the private does not escape Sasha. She may be complicit in the deception, for she would greet customers and then escort them “to the floor above, where the real activities of the shop were carried on,” but she is not ignorant about the consumerist society and simulacrum of rooms (16).

In spite of her acuity, Sasha is still trapped, arguably by her perception of rooms that lends itself to the *mise en abyme*. This is where feminine seeing demonstrates its revisionist ability, reorganising the rooms and reinterpreting the dominant. Sasha may be lost in the dress-house but she manages to find a room: “I rush away from them into a fitting-room. It is hardly ever used.... I shut the door and lock it” (24). Instead of being locked out of social rooms, Sasha finds one of her own and locks it. By inserting her own room alongside the other locked rooms, she admits herself into the world that precludes her. She carves a private space in the large room of Society and revises the oppressive scenario, changing the relation between the ruling power of society and “all the fools and all the defeated” (25). Trapped in the metaphorical room of society, they who are vulnerable and cannot escape their lot stay together in the tiny fitting-room. Sasha does not seek justice but cries for them. The lack of resistance seems to serve hegemony and frankly there is little striving on Sasha’s part for social transformation. Zemgulys expresses her frustration at reading Rhys’s narrative, but adds that it “points to different kinds of transformative sentiments other than ‘revolutionary’” (37).

It is true that Rhys's women possess a passive-aggressiveness that is easily misunderstood for conformity. But this is precisely what makes Rhys a writer of the feminine experience. She plays to the liabilities of women like herself, women who are inefficient emotionally, physically, and socially, depicting an abject vulnerability that makes her characters act the way they do. The Rhysian women know and accept their weaknesses. Their instinct is for flight rather than fight. When asked about the political stance in her writings, Rhys replied, "I just wanted to say about life, not about propaganda" (Cantwell 25). It is never her ambition for her heroines to transcend or to challenge social order. Finding a room for herself, even if it agrees with social stratification, is Sasha's way of surviving the system that wants to do away with her lot. By locking herself in and going along with the way of society, creating a room of her past where she can reinterpret her circumstances, she lives another day, perhaps to find another room. As Cantwell quite rightly appraises, Rhys "has written about all the people who know how to survive but not to fight" (27).

"I'm not sure whether men need women, but I'm perfectly sure women need men," said Rhys (Cantwell 25). Her blunt view does not meld well with feminist currents. Even Diana Athill, editor and friend, was frustrated and "had no patience for [Rhys's] need to be admired as a woman" (Pizzichini 301). Still, the underlying feminine content in Rhys's writings of women in real destitution and depression has an oblique force so indirect and tamed that it is unrecognisable to feminist scholars.

A foretaste of Rhysian brand passive-aggressiveness appears when Sasha musters up the courage to find Mr. Blank, confronting Society in its own room. She makes it a point to enter without knocking, gesturing defiance, and delivers a diatribe against society:



Well, let's argue this out, Mr Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That's my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there's no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to cloth me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word.... Some must cry so that the others may be able to laugh more heartily. (25-26)

In Sasha's interior monologue, the small and dark room is contrasted with Mr Blank's large white and gold room. She interprets the social gap with the language of rooms, one that she is most familiar with. Social hierarchy is enacted in the setup of different rooms; the worry and monotony society inflicts translate to the uniformity of rooms and anxiety to find the right room and provision. Society has no room for inefficient members like Sasha. Her complaint against Mr. Blank becomes a rebuking of society as she relates the physical entrapment to capitalist oppression. By all accounts her speech is harsh and her arguments compelling. But, of course, she does not say this aloud. Still Sasha is relieved and liberated; she walks out into the streets where the air is "sweet" and "the dry leaves are blowing along" (26). Her sense of feeling free is not dependent on victory over her oppressors. She makes a point to herself about the workings of society and leaves it unheard. Just as she "will never tell the truth about the business of rooms," she will not divulge her analysis of society because "it would bust the roof off everything," giving away herself and all other destitute women (33).

It is difficult to comprehend Sasha's actions from a rigorously feminist perspective. Phenomenologically speaking, the act of describing the scene is an

experience for herself; it need not represent women. As Alcoff explains it, experience cannot be reduced to discourse: “lived experience includes such things as choices, intentions, and a range of inarticulate affects that exceeds discourse” (52). She adds that there can be a discourse of women’s experience only if it is supplemented with “phenomenological accounts of the embodied effects on subjectivity” (55). Sasha’s way of seeing is a result of her vulnerability, self-derision, and passive-aggressiveness. Her embodied experience is formed from impressions and memory of places. They make her vision unique and feminine. Sasha is the exemplary lived body that, as Young describes, “has culture and meaning inscribed in its habits, in its specific forms of perception and comportment” (*Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* 14). Her narrative is a description of a lived experience expressed through the perception of spatiality. *Pièce by pièce*, she habitually recalls the past and re-interprets events, revising the way she sees the lived world.

What is presented in *Good Morning, Midnight* is the subjective perceptual experience of one lone and destitute woman. Rhys lets us in on a particularised way of seeing that does not adhere to normative perception and a lived experience embracing the past and destitution which are excluded from phenomenological traditions. This kind of seeing is characterised by material resemblances, invigorated by the relation between the milieu which has shaped her and places she experiences, between the past and present. *Good Morning, Midnight* confronts us with a perception haunted by residuals of past experiences. The effects of such perception on women’s inhabitation, actions, and thoughts are further explored in Bowen’s short stories, which thrive on ghostly repercussions and haunted houses.

### 5. On Shaky Ground: Elizabeth Bowen's Ghost Fiction

Haunted rooms in *Good Morning, Midnight* are a precursor to the haunted houses in Elizabeth Bowen's ghost fiction. Whereas Rhys's rooms are haunted by the past, Bowen's houses are frightening, possessed by spectrality. Especially in "The Demon Lover" (1941), "Pink May" (1942), and "Hand in Glove" (1952), the fantastic is palpable and built into brick and mortar.<sup>78</sup> Spellbinding place, for Bowen, is not an alternative world antithetical to reality, but inspires an alternative way of looking at the world. In the preface to *A Day in the Dark and Other Stories* (1965), she states, "I do not make use of the supernatural as a get-out; it is inseparable (whether or not it comes to the surface) from my sense of life" (9). Founded on the co-existence of unreality and reality, Bowen's houses are threshold spaces, possessed by phantasms of the past, the dead, and forgotten, inhabited by wandering tenants. By housing the fantastic in living space, Bowen dramatises the ambivalence of women's everyday experiences and returns some opacity to the intelligible and visible world.

Place is uncanny but still recognisable in Bowen's fiction. As Jacqueline Rose notes, the short stories "push our sense of perceptual reality towards a type of vertigo or precipice" ("Bizarre Objects" 78). Dislocation and uncanny effects occur, Merleau-Ponty explains, "because one's own body has ceased to be a knowing body, and has ceased to draw together all objects in its one grip" (*POP* 329). In a similar manner, Bowen's characters are stripped of knowledge and become completely dependent on place. Their "thinking," to quote Merleau-Ponty, "starts from nowhere," for one is "united" with space (330). The affect of place is emphasised in "Notes on Writing a Novel" in which Bowen states: "The locale of the happening always colours the

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<sup>78</sup> "The Demon Lover" first appeared in *The Listener*; "Pink May" in *English Story*; and "Hand in Glove," written at the request of Cynthia Asquith, in *Second Ghost Book*. Parenthetical reference for the stories will be referred as "HG," "PM," and "TDL."

happening, and often, to a degree, shapes it” (39). Bowen’s narratives show the extent to which people are influenced by and their perception shaped by the environment in which they find themselves.

The texts in this thesis help us visualise and understand the workings of place in the phenomenological structure of perception. As discussed in previous chapters, place is intentional and responsible for orientating and positioning women. In *Nightwood*, nocturnal space bends perception; in *Good Morning, Midnight*, the room lets the past into present experience. In “The Demon Lover,” “Pink May,” and “Hand in Glove,” it is the haunted house that bedevils characters by gnawing at the past and what has been repressed. The stories comprise a fantasy world where ideas of place and women’s perception of places do not confirm preexisting formulas of experience. The haunted house, or “crazy house,” as Bowen calls it, refigures “reason” (*Collected Impressions* 44).

Haunted space negotiates between rational explanation and imagination. The supernatural cannot be “grasped in a single perception by all the senses, as ordinary experience does” (Delaplace, “What the Invisible Looks Like” 64). It illuminates the things which “usually escape our senses” (65). Bowen’s haunted space, in this regard, resists correct perception; the ghostly experience cannot be explained rationally. The haunted house stands against the Cartesian “treasure house of the mind” (*Meditations on First Philosophy* 46).<sup>79</sup> “Human reason,” Kant writes, “is by nature architectonic, viz., it considers all cognitions as belonging to a possible system” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 502). A system of precepts and rules, the treasure house (of mind) fits diverse experiences into its singular structure of understanding. Merleau-Ponty concurs with Kant that experience cannot be *mathematically* reasoned. This is reasoning that

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<sup>79</sup> Some translations use ‘storehouse’, from the Greek *thesauro*.

“begin[s] from self-constructed and well-defined definitions” and not “from concepts, which are already given but are also given in a confused manner” (54). Perception cannot be mathematical; perception akin to thought is nothing but “fraud” (17).

“Perception,” Merleau-Ponty states, “is not an act of understanding” (54). The real does not need to be understood; it must only be described. To conceive the world with human reason is, in Kant’s words, a silly attempt to “build nothing in philosophy except houses of cards” (637).

Built on shaky ground, quasi-real, and part-fantasy, haunted space is like a house of cards without the rational façade. It is unstable and ambivalent. Experience of haunted space, like the experience of the night and past, is a dramatisation of being in the world. Whilst *Nightwood* presents perception at a slant and *Good Morning*, *Midnight* perception as habit, all of which are possibilities of experience that are less deliberated in phenomenology, Bowen’s short stories reveal perception as belief. In the selected stories, place reflects and shapes its inhabitants’ beliefs. The perversion of the domestic home, from a place of safety to terror, shakes the female characters’ beliefs and equilibrium, which are in actuality evolved versions of social norms that reinforce the status quo. The haunted house subverts the home, which is “the ‘most’ feminine of spaces,” and so disparages the “deep-seated and seemingly ‘natural’ association” between women and the home (Domosh and Seager 2).

A phenomenology of place for women shows how women’s embeddedness in the world, often a socio-cultural world that for many women is the only kind of world, manifests in the way they approach and orientate themselves in place. In Bowen’s stories, being situated is to be subjected to social norms and beliefs which influence how women view themselves and the world. They are confined to physical and figurative spaces. The bedroom upstairs, for instance, imprisons the women in “Pink

May” and “The Demon Lover.” Haunted space, however, breaks the ultimate archetype of feminine space—the home—by superimposing upon domestic space a parallel space sustained by doubts of the faith that upholds the feminine and domestic ideal. The faith I speak of is an ingrained belief in certain ideologies that reinforces the power of the dominant and enables the continued marginalisation of the disadvantaged. Ideology of such force has the strength of belief. A classic example is the belief that the city at night is dangerous for the lone woman. Still today many women “avoid walking in certain places, at particular times, and often will not go out alone” (Domosh and Seager 100). Fear and oppression are spectres of patriarchy looming over the weaker gender.

Bowen’s stories engage the fear of place in a very different manner. Whilst gender stratified space is regulative, haunted space is restorative in its effort to shock and rouse inhabitants from inertia. It disrupts regulated perception, consequently tearing apart the synthesised world. The women in Bowen’s stories, conditioned to perceive the regulated world as ideal, do not deal well with the disequilibrium. Their reactions to the hauntings testify to the intensity of social and gender-codified conditioning to which women have been subjected. Most women, consciously or not, have been well disciplined, thoroughly accustomed to the hegemonic structure of perception.

Consider young Kathleen who, wanting to refuse her lover, could only say: “But that was—suppose you—I mean, suppose” (“TDL” 83); Mrs. Drover whose mouth “hung open... before she could issue her first scream” (87); and the women in “Pink May” and “Hand in Glove” whose desire to be wanted left one “ruined” (“PM” 160), the other “choke[d]” (“HG” 216). They suffer for overstepping their boundaries. Phyllis Lassner, in *Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of the Short Fiction*, affirms that women

are “[held] responsible” for “men’s failed dreams” and “betrayed expectations” (57). One breaks her promise to her ex-lover; another cheats on her husband; the third is too manly. Transgression has consequences: the women are haunted by the ghosts of their persecutor, and worse still, an internalised patrimonial sense of duty and honour. At first glance, the haunted house seems to be imprisoning. But, as I will explain shortly, its deviance is needed to reflect the perversity of the male-centric world, a regimented environment which women themselves are guilty of preserving.

As the haunted house is perverse, so is the lived world. Disciplined by “the law of the father,” Donna Haraway muses, “Who wouldn’t grow up warped?” (“Situated Knowledges” 54). Living in a “garrison town” which “plumed itself upon its romantic record,” Ethel Trevor in “Hand in Glove” sees marriage as a prize to be fought for (207). Her perception of the world is formed by what she believes the world to be. Warped beliefs lead to warped seeing. To expose “false vision” and relearn how to see, Haraway states that emphasis must be placed on “limited location and situated knowledge”: limited location refers to circumscribed mental and physical space in which women find themselves, and this specific vantage allows them to be “answerable for what [they] learn how to see” and provides knowledge (59).<sup>80</sup> Limited location relates to situatedness, which recognises that “I am thrown into a nature” that is “outside of me” and also “discernible at the centre of subjectivity” (*POP* 403).

Situatedness involves an understanding of what it means to be in a world that is lived. We have before us a world that precedes our existence, but we also shape the world according to our existence. To be situated entails balancing between faith in an

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<sup>80</sup> Haraway advocates a “feminist objectivity” which counteracts all “Western cultural narratives about objectivity” (59). As feminists, she continues, we must learn “how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name” (59).

already inhabited world and the belief in the power to inhabit the world. David Simpson, in *Situatedness, Or, Why We Keep Saying Where We're Coming From*, explains the task of situatedness:

It is meant to preserve rather than resolve the tension we experience between being in control and out of control, between seeing ourselves as agents of change and as passive receivers of what is already in place. (20)

His explanation echoes phenomenology's idea of being in and of the world. Though trenchant, both Merleau-Ponty and Simpson assume in their use of "I" and "We" that women are in "in control and out of control" in the same way as men are (20). Yet this is rarely the case in the patriarchal world which presents itself as neutral and its system as normal. We must look again at what it means for women to be situated. Haraway suggests that to be situated is to be "subjugated" (60). If she is right, then situatedness is not the body in the world from which women know themselves as subjects to the world, for they believe themselves subordinate to the subjects of the world. Experience is doubly sedimented for the subjugated. Unless they explicitly see their situation as subjugation, they can never break out of the illusion erected by dominant beliefs.

Place is the spatial embodiment of beliefs where myths and ideals of gender are practiced, and also where new beliefs may be formed and tried. All places are intentional, but the house as home has an added intentionality in terms of how it is designed to orientate women. This chapter interrogates the notion of belief within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and examines how experiences of certain places reveal the pernicious effects of beliefs, particularly a faith that goes without questioning. I show how perceptual beliefs are related to internalised social and



political beliefs that domesticate and disempower women. Phenomenologically, belief has an experiential dimension, i.e., the belief in something is a lived experience of the thing in question. Merleau-Ponty's idea of *perceptual faith* helps elucidate the unity of vision. Perceptual faith gives insight into questions of how we see the world with sedimented beliefs and how our experience is ordered in a manner common to humankind. Whilst this muted faith brings people together, ascertaining a world of selves, the practice of faith reaps differently for men and women, the aged and young, the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The different situatedness of men and women means that how each views the world from their positions would have influence on their practice of faith and the effects of faith on their action and behaviour. To presume that man in the world is the same as woman in the world homogenises situatedness.

Women's situatedness is often one of spatial delimitation. The domestic home is an example of delimited space. It constrains its mistress to her duties which are built into various rooms of the house like the kitchen. As the epitome of feminine space, the home—I am thinking of the domestic ideal carried over from the Victorian age—tries to keep women from straying outside the dominant socio-cultural ideology. Set in stone, it reifies biases and beliefs that subjugate those trapped within its walls. Bowen's haunted homes, in comparison, are less reassuring of beliefs. As I will argue later, the haunted house is a *mythical space* which is less knowable, but visible and veridical. It exists because the believer perceives it to exist. The women think and act in a certain way in mythical space because of handed down beliefs. Whilst the domestic home is an enforcer of beliefs, its wayward other as conceived in Bowen's stories scares its inhabitants out of them. The home is unhinged; the women feel displaced; space is no more monolithic. On the brink of demise, the women or those around them experience how wavering beliefs break strongholds. The haunted house,

nearly pushing its inhabitants over the ledge, is an intimidating place, full of power and potential for change.

In “The Demon Lover,” “Hand in Glove,” and “Pink May,” place has as much potential to liberate as it has to imprison. If place fortifies beliefs, it can also shake them. Evoking feelings of homeliness and homelessness, the haunted house is articulated as a space of ambivalence. This double space motivates the return home only to turn the returner away at its door. At work is the debunking of beliefs and making of myths. Double space is of the “hazily known and of the unknown” (Tuan, *Space and Place* 86).<sup>81</sup> Ambivalence surrounding the haunted house foils the normative order of perception and razes the ideal feminine space to the ground. Women are deracinated from conventions; their faith in the home and what it symbolises falters. In haunted space the female characters experience a moment of recognition in which they encounter and cogitate again something they once knew and believed in. Only this time, the place they call home is not protective but aggressive. The ghostly house precipitates an existential crisis that shakes epistemological beliefs. Bowen’s spatial stories tell us how our relation to the world is never exclusive to what we think is obvious such as common beliefs and imitated practices; in fact, any real connection to the world is dependent on how much remains unperceived and fuzzy. Only after we accept the world is ambivalent can we stop reducing it to formulas and synopses and begin experiencing things in their mystery and givenness.

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<sup>81</sup> Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan elaborates on the chiasmic nature of mythical space: it is “a fuzzy area” surrounding “pragmatic space” (86). In such space it is “the fuzzy ambience of the known which gives man confidence in the known” (87).

### ***The Haunted House is a Bad Home***

At the centre of the three stories is the haunted house. Often linked to the Gothic, it is associated with “curse narratives,” which Robert Mighall explains “bind the lives of the present generation to the misguided customs of the past” (*A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction* 80). Usually a castle or country manor, it commands an “imposing” presence, echoing also the strong patrimonial ties between fathers and heirs (Williams, *Art of Darkness* 39). Elsewhere, the haunted house appears in a myriad of genres from invasion narrative to mystery. Each domicile is imposing in its respective way. The old family manor in detective stories like Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868) and Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventures of the Speckled Band” (1892) is surrounded by an aura of otherness that thickens the mystery. In the twentieth century, the haunted house hosted more than ghosts and spirits. Notably, in the fantasy tales of H. P. Lovecraft, the house bridges science and the supernatural, functioning as a portal to alien worlds and mythic cosmos. Clearly the haunted house is a very important narrative trope. Amongst the many kinds of haunted house, I am interested in the one that illuminates the relation between women’s experience and place. This haunted house shares the setting of the domestic home and haunts its homemaker.

The domestic haunted house emerged with the cult of domesticity which proliferated in the 1800s. Also coined the cult of True Womanhood, Barbara Welter explains how conflation of the feminine ideal and domestic space made women “the hostage in the home”:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and

domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman. (“The Cult of True Womanhood” 151-152)

To be a true woman was to stay at home. Women were expected to “dispense comfort and cheer” (163), “keep busy at morally uplifting tasks” (164), and pick up “forms of artsy-craftsy activity” like needlework and flower arrangement (165). These tasks ensured the moral and aesthetic upkeep of the home. As the home came to represent virtue and taste, economic progress and growing affluence led to an increase in the number of bourgeois houses. This socio-architectural phenomenon found its way into literature and affected the narrative of place in haunted house fiction.

Significantly, the bourgeois domestic home was the *idée fixe* in women’s ghost fiction. Though not as imposing as the castle or abbey, the pretty house in West London in Rhoda Broughton’s “The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth” (1868) and the cosy cottage in Edith Nesbit’s *Man-Size in Marble* (1893) portray a different haunted house which despite its ghostly presence is familiar. This haunted house is close to home, neither aristocratic nor secluded. The move of the haunted house from noble estates to middle-class homes has implications for our discussion here. For one thing, it is not bound with patrimony but femininity. Given that the middle-class home is a “highly feminized phenomenon” where women “‘worked for love’,” its haunted counterpart can be read as a means of challenging the gendered foundations of the domestic home (Sparke, *As Long as It’s Pink* 19; Domosh and Seager 5). Instead of putting women in place, the haunted house shakes them from deep-seated domestic ideology, which Sharon Marcus explains is “the celebration within the middle class of separate spheres of home and work, divided along gendered lines that assigned a domestic realm to women and a public realm to men” (*Apartment Stories* 89-90). Indeed, in Bowen’s “Pink May,” “The Demon

Lover,” and “Hand in Glove,” the haunted house fails to meet the conditions of the domestic ideal and is a feminine nightmare.

The house locks its inhabitant away from the outside world and traps her in the spatial manifestation of her beliefs. As Hermoine Lee explains, “Places are used repeatedly to expose a deficiency in the people who inhabit them” (*Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* 132). She is right to the extent that “people” include the ones who once inhabited places and laid the foundation stones of culturally and socially divided spaces. The place in question is the haunted house; but more specifically, it is the haunted domestic home. To rephrase Lee’s words, the house is used to expose the problems of those who believe in and are influenced by the domestic ideology that dresses up the feminine and private sphere as ideal. “Certain locales,” Lee writes, “are always bad for the soul” (133). That is to say the home is bad for the homemaker.

An enduring motif of refuge and imprisonment, the home exposes the conflicting relation between women and place. Given its “close association with family and stability,” Rebecca Janicker affirms that the home is “especially good at provoking tension and anxiety in most people—both about the relationship of individual to family and of family to larger social and historical hole” (*The Literary Haunted House* 19). Approaching Bowen’s choice of the haunted house through Janicker’s insight, the stories capitalise on the female protagonists’ intimate relationship with the home: by undermining the stability of the house, Bowen disrupts the indelible link between women and home.

Unlike Woolf who wrote on the rights of women, Bowen is not known for her feminist politics. Ellmann claims in “Elizabeth Bowen: The Missing Corner” that “Bowen was no feminist,” citing Bowen in 1961: “I am not, and shall never be, a

feminist” (65).<sup>82</sup> Still, Bowen’s fascination with place, her “spellbound beholding” of scenes, puts emphasis on the environment over the personal. This is paramount to the understanding of women’s experience, for Bowen’s stories bring places to the foreground, enabling a first-hand examination of women’s participation in the world.

To Bowen, place is more than an “element”; it is an “actor” (Preface to *The Last September* 123). It is “lived,” in that it reflects the values and beliefs of past occupants and also the present inhabitants who then act according to those beliefs. In this regard, one’s experience in and of place is not an inconsequential encounter with objective space, but an engagement with a habitus shaped by the past and prevailing beliefs. Every bit of one’s encounter in and with place reveals the indoctrinated beliefs that one is acting out which also accounts for actions and reactions. The haunted house fiction puts the home under scrutiny, interrogating the forces that shape feminine experience and examining how domesticity and femininity are entangled in the mess that is the ideal home.

For a feminist phenomenology of place, Bowen’s haunted house perverts the domestic and frustrates the experience of the feminised home, ultimately exposing the ideology that keeps women in their roles, subservient to the set of values and morals mandated by the dominant culture. The codes of conduct and attitudes are in accordance with the domestic ideology internalised and reproduced by women themselves. Marcus gives insight into the “moral attributes” and “actions proper to wives and husbands”:

Domestic ideology dictated that women were to be self-sacrificing and virtuous, men enterprising, protective of their families, and susceptible to women’s softening influences. Women were to guarantee the

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<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Heather Bryant Jordan’s *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. p. xvi.

neatness, order, and comfort of the home by managing household finances and supervising servants; men were to earn the money with which women created the domestic comfort that would restore their husbands at the end of each working day. (90)

The similarities between the qualities of the home and its maker are striking. Women form the paragon of morality and virtue; the home is a safe haven, undefiled by the mechanistic and mercenary world. Their “softening influences” and ability to create “domestic comfort” are reflected in the home which is “comfortable” and, according to Sparke, does not “threaten or create dis-ease of any kind” (*As Long As It's Pink* 26). The home is an extension of women. It is a material projection and spatial embodiment of feminine qualities and beliefs. The home is happy and good because its maker is the Good Wife.

The house is a structure of domesticity and its female inhabitant embodies domestic values and expectations. Together, they present the home as the ideal feminine and domestic space. A *good* home is feminine and domestic. In Bowen's ghost fiction, the supernatural tears apart the *good* home and turns it into the *bad*: the haunted house. By subverting the *good* home, Bowen's haunted-house narratives challenge ideas of domesticity and femininity. They elucidate the importance of place in experience and how some ghostly additions to its appearance can alter the relation between women and place and expose the indoctrinated beliefs they have interiorised as their own.

On the note of the haunted house as a bad home, Stephen King discusses in a similar vein the idea of the “Bad House” that “seems to literally tear itself away” (*Danse Macabre* 152). It is the “prosaic fallout of the place” where the haunted house fiction begins (152). Instead of focusing on the psychological aspect of haunting or

emotional disequilibrium of characters, King describes the house to show the condition of those trapped inside. The state of the house reflects the state of its maker. Accordingly, for a feminist phenomenological reading of place, the narrative of the decrepit houses undergoing changing hands are material manifestations of the inner unrest and conflict of their female inhabitants. The house is not external to the individual's circumstance but is a way of enacting her unaddressed desires and silence. As Lee writes, "'Bowen's terrain'... is a spiritual as well as a geographical locality" (130). Bowen's haunted house is the antithesis of the domestic home which is supposed to be a cosy and private sphere, cleaned and managed by women, and representative of the nucleus family. In creating haunted, bad homes, Bowen tears apart the façade of the ideal home, exposing the problems of its domestic ideology.

In "The Demon Lover," for instance, Bowen refigures the concept of the home as shelter and reveals the underside of an overprotective environment. The house is too secured, to the point of being claustrophobic. In "Hand in Glove," claustrophobia is intensified in the attic, whilst in "Pink May" the most unsettling spaces are the bedroom and bathroom. It is no coincidence the haunting is acute and terrifying in the most private and feminine of rooms. The former bedroom of Kathleen is where she keeps herself safe; but it is also a place where the supernatural and fear creep in. The bedroom traditionally "considered part of the women's sphere... for privacy and for more intimate meetings" morphs into a site of struggle and tension (Sparke, *As Long As It's Pink* 24). It may be a temporary hideout, but it stirs anxiety. Likewise, in "Pink May," the bathroom where one cleanses and comes undone (like Sasha crying in the lavatory) becomes the place of terror. It unnerves the unnamed protagonist: "it made me heave the other way round in [her] bath, in order to keep one eye on the door" (154). Also, in "Hand in Glove," the attic or as Bachelard describes "the garret in



which we [are] alone” fails as a shelter (15). Unlike Clarissa Dalloway who could unwind in the attic room, Ethel is wound up and chokes in her attic. The haunted home compels the women to confront their domestic beliefs and what it means to have a lived experience of the world.

Domestic ideology affects experience. It functions as a kind of “prepersonal tradition,” assigning meaning to places like the home, “in accordance with an earlier agreement reached between  $x$  and the world” (*POP* 296). The “earlier agreement” in context of our discussion would be the gendered division of labour that has feminised the private and interior. As Domosh and Seager states, the home “resonates as a marker of women’s so-called inner character” (8). The home suffused with feminine qualities “endows every subsequent perception, of space with its meaning,” and is a structure which reveals “a communication with the world more ancient than thought” (*POP* 296). Women’s perception of the home is tainted by tradition, their direct experiences hampered by preexisting ideals of experience. The home is not neutral. It is, as Merleau-Ponty writes of space, “presupposed”: it cannot be “observed” since it is “already constituted” (296). Geometrically, the presupposed domestic space is perspectival: it consists of the actual space before her eyes and an invisible dimension that is automatically visualised. The preconception of space works similar to the extra dimension in tri-dimensional Euclidean space, adding depth to the flat visual field. Presupposed space is not flat but has depth, enabling the rotation of objects and a multi-perspectival view.

Depth has a phenomenological significance. The proclivity for a holistic grasp of things presupposes depth and causes one to abandon her unique “point of view” so as to assume a God-like perspective of the world (*POP* 298). “For God,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “breadth is immediately equivalent to depth” (298). But we are not God;

we are not above all and omnipresent. Our view of the world is exceedingly limited. In order to get to the “human experience of the world” and not “what God might think about it,” we must make depth visible (298). Depth needs to be described as it is lived. Rather than accepting depth as naturally invisible and that we are “simply badly placed to see it,” we take up positions in the world, describing one point of view at a time (297). As we actively live space and take up different positions within, we see that the extra dimension is not derived from the object seen, but “belongs to the perspective” (298). This is revelatory for the subject who has always perceived the world intelligibly. One realises that experience is not direct, between subject and object, but is mediated.

We are all guilty of depth perception. We think a square side suggests a cube; a door must lead to a room. Behind our seamless perception is an *intentional arc*. According to Merleau-Ponty, the intentional arc projects “our human setting, our physical, ideological situation and moral situation” (*POP* 157). It directs our actions and shapes perception. The intentional arc, Donald Landes defines, is “an embodied and meaningful orientation toward the world” (*The Merleau-Ponty Dictionary* 114). It seems the arc dovetails present individual experience and existing patterns of experience. The intentional arc reminds us that we are bodies situated in the world, meaning the world and others are part of lived experience. Both Merleau-Ponty and Landes regard milieu as constitutive of existence: people help us understand our lived experience and ourselves as subjects in and of the social world. If so, Kathleen Drover’s “setting,” determined by her duties as a sister, wife, mother, and fiancée, frames her situation and bestows her experience with significance. Yet, women’s orientation towards the world, though saturated with meaning, puts them in positions where their selves are often suppressed in support of those in power. The trouble is

women's situation (for example, being confined to domestic space) does not so much enable a meaningful individual experience of the world as it disenables them from other possible ways of experiencing the lived world.

Domestic space requires maintenance and upkeep. The woman is part of its setup; she is the homemaker. On this, Wendelin Küpers explains that in organised space, "practitioners" are "being carried forward by lines or cycles of intentionality" (*Phenomenology of the Embodied Organization* 130). There implies some degree of complicity on the part of those who participate in the practice. Some feminist critics have singled women out for their passivity: de Beauvoir notes how mothers impart domestic values to daughters; Sparke alleges that women are "sustainers of the status quo" (*As Long As It's Pink* 26). They are correct to say that women often take part in marginalising their own kind, but, salient as the claims are, they assume it is possible for all women to simply walk away from the home and everything that they have believed to be right and true. Such claims can be presumptuous and quite uncaring. It is more useful for our discussion to think of bodies phenomenologically, to think of them as intentional, not autonomous. This shifts focus from the body-in-itself to the body-in-the-world, which is interested in what motivates the body to act out intention. Also, as Küpers explicates, intentional bodies are not only "situated in, but also oriented operationally towards the world" (131). The adverb, "operationally," relates to Küpers's study of embodied organisation, but also signals a larger and more general structure at work, one that presets experience and orientates the body.

We have established that women's situation is a projection of greater socio-cultural and ideological situations. To understand what makes women experience place the way they do, we must first acknowledge that setting and situation are not neutral. The locale in which the scene is set and where she is situated shapes her

experience. As aforementioned, this space is tri-dimensional and has an invisible depth formed by the intentional arc. Arced and expanded beyond what is seen, place mediates spatial experience. It is intentional space, which according to Küpers is “where things invite or are marked in relation to practices, capacities and powers” (130). It is a milieu reflecting the extent to which it is influenced and demarcated by prevailing social standards, where things and events occurring within reinforce the dominant system. The benumbed body is just one part of active and intentional space.

The home is always intentional. But the haunted home in “The Demon Lover” is intentional in an additional way. Kathleen Drover’s experience is more than a projection of moral and social situations. It is synthesised by a double vision in which images of the house from memory converge with those that unfold in the present. The old house confronts Kathleen with “traces of her former habit of life” (“TDL” 80). She sees the past mingling with the present. The objects in the room automatically acquire a depth formed from the convergence of past and present impressions: “each object wore a film of another kind” (80). Walking into the room and “looking about her,” Kathleen observes many things including the white marble mantelpiece and the escritoire (80). As eye-catching as they are, her visual attention is on

the yellow smoke-stain up the white marble mantelpiece, the ring left by a vase on the top of the escritoire; the bruise in the wallpaper where, on the door being thrown open widely, the china handle had always hit the wall. The piano, having gone away to be stored, had left what looked like claw-marks on its part of the parquet. (80)

Here the placement of details differs from the natural order in which the things would have appeared. Emphasis is on the stains and bruises, the fallen state of the objects, which points to the passing of time, rather than the objects themselves. It is as if

Kathleen's perception is gradually invaded by a consciousness of the past: the clauses become longer, more descriptive, including parentheses. The backstory of each object in the room becomes more elaborate with the increasing presence of the past. They become fuller in appearance and deeper in meaning. The past sneaks up and takes over, giving prominence to invisibles like the removed piano and vase and the stories behind the ring and claw-marks. There is an inversion at work: the invisible is envisioned and the visible diminishes. Moreover, the liberal use of past tense, which contrasts with the single mention of the present continuous tense ("Now the prosaic woman, looking about her"), also shuts the house within the past (80). Kathleen is the living present encroaching on a shut-up time capsule.

The return of the past recurs in Bowen's fiction. In a complimentary reading of "The Demon Lover," Thomas Davis regards the house, its old furniture, and the missing fiancé's letter as "relics" (39), symbolising "the afterlife of the past in the present" ("Elizabeth Bowen's War Gothic" 34). In a similar vein, Neil Corcoran concludes that "the re-surfacing of contingent memory" plagues Kathleen (*Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* 164). Because "The Demon Lover" is an inter-war story, it is tempting to associate recurrence with historical past, which "incorporates the fear of civilizational decline and extinction" (Davis 35). Words like "afterlife" and "re-surfacing" imply continuum: the past discontinues the present so as to continue from where it left off. Davis suggests that the "past returns to make sense of the present" (35), echoing Ellmann's general observation of Bowen's fiction: "Her stories rarely unfold chronologically, but tend to psychoanalyze themselves, tracing present crises to past causes" ("Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen" 149). The impulse is always to trace back, to re-discover the past in the pretext of figuring the present. In doing so,

one is caught up in retrospection and reflection, and forgets that the past does not override the present, even if it influences it.

Consider this from a phenomenological perspective. According to Merleau-Ponty, whether willful or oblivious, one undertakes the past in the same way we take up decisions that support our motivations. The memory of the past, which is much like the expectation of death, is “a situation in which [one’s] presence is required” (*POP* 302). By giving away bits of the history of the stains, Kathleen inserts herself back into the home in which she no longer lives. She sees things with a tint of past impressions because “they already contain [the past] in their significance” (302). In this sense, the past is not superimposed on the present but first mediated through the body, summoned quite arbitrarily as Kathleen walks and looks around the room. With this I want to suggest a different reading to that of Davis and Ellmann’s which reads the present in correspondence to the past. My reading of the chiasmic perception in “The Demon Lover” focuses on the phenomenological implications of intertwining temporalities with an emphasis on how absence and presence add to the intentionality of place which puts women in place and obscures their vision.

To draw from Merleau-Ponty’s vocabulary, the past is an *invisible* and the present a *visible*. Using such terms brings perception into the analysis and by default implicates the seeing body. The body is a lived one; it is not an objective vessel or a passive receiver. Bowen’s female characters are illustrations of the phenomenal body, defined as “an irresolvable consciousness which is wholly present in every one of its manifestations” (*POP* 138). It is an embodiment of significances, of lingering affect. The amputee, for instance, continues to feel the limb which does not exist. She is acutely aware of absence, but at the same time “continues to allow for it” (94). This does not mean that the act of allowing is a conscious one. It merely tells us that one

does not actively stop the invisible from appearing. On this Merleau-Ponty firmly states that allowance is not a case of “I think that...”<sup>83</sup> The appearance of invisibles is not a “deliberate decision” (94). Kathleen’s perception and re-envisioning of the past does not occur “at the level of positing consciousness” (94). Instead consciousness is deflected from the thinking body and emplaced in the room.

In “The Demon Lover,” corporeality extends to the environment. The house and its furniture take on the consciousness of the owner. As she walks into her old Kensington abode, Kathleen is enclosed in another spatiality within the abandoned house, one which enacts the scene of smoke rising, the door swinging and hitting against the wall. The use of active verbs endows inanimate objects with life: “the door being thrown open widely, the china handle had always hit the wall” (80). Place is active and takes over the narrative. On behalf of Kathleen, it gradually pieces together the scene of former life in the house. Its presence is juxtaposed against the subject’s absence. This speaks to the extent to which Kathleen has allowed for the past to manifest itself. However, by doing so, she also recalls the invisibles and ideas that come with it, including habits and beliefs. This instinctive attraction to meaningful objects is part of what Merleau-Ponty terms “the power of habit” which “prompts us to revise our notion of ‘understand’” (*POP* 167). Habit improves understanding by “incorporate[ing]” the pre-existing sense of space into one’s “bodily space” (167). For Kathleen, her need to see to the plight of the house—“She had been anxious to see how the house was” (81)—is met by the habit of associating objects with narratives. Her perception is indicative of the embodied experience of the past and of domestic space, a perception curved by the intentional arc.

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<sup>83</sup> Merleau-Ponty uses the example of the amputee’s “awareness of the amputated arm or of the disabled arm as absent” (94).

The home is built on tradition, shaped by handed-down moral values and beliefs. This means it is active, a cog in the patriarchal machine, regulating gender relations. The woman, who thinks herself independent, is in actuality passively receiving from place. This kind of experience is secondary as it is already present and precedes existence. But, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that experience is not “a by-product of being,” in which case it cannot “[give] us access to being” (301). The distinction between experience as a product of being and as means to being is hard to make. But if we turn to the narratives of women’s experiences of haunted houses, the trauma and anxiety that result from the disparity between what they conceive the house to be and what they actually perceive in place could shed light on the extent to which intentional space influences experience. In the first place, disorientation and angst occur because the house is not the home that they have in mind. The haunted house fails as a home. Failure is its resistance to the propagation of dominant beliefs and domestic ideology.

The parallel between the unhomey home and the haunted house is seen in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1890). The house, which is also an ancestral home, supposedly conducive for “perfect rest” as decided by physicians in the narrator’s life, is “queer” and “haunted,” eventually driving her descent into madness (4). It is a “failed home,” Kate F. Ellis describes, “the place from which some (usually ‘fallen’ men) are locked out, and others (usually ‘innocent’ women) are locked in” (*The Contested Castle* ix). Failed homes like the haunted domestic space expose the failures of the home by twisting the domestic ideology engendering interior space. Like Gilman, Bowen uses the home to flag the dangers of believing domestic space is safe and nurturing. Rather than furthering the myth of feminine home, domestic space is demonised. And since the home puts women in



place—the homemaker as the feminine ideal—its ghostly counterpart displaces them from their inherited place and life at home.

My focus on setting in Bowen's stories departs from psychoanalytic readings on the unconscious. Critics like Sinéad Mooney maintain that "psychology meets the apparently inexplicable agency of the supernatural" in the ghost fiction ("Bowen and the Modern Ghost" 79). Corcoran similarly charts the return of carnal impulses as "human psychology is being opened up to its formative psycho-sexual patternings or stresses" (155). Whilst psychoanalytic perspectives give insight into the repressed, they fail to appreciate experience in its own context, preferring psychological origins to the material. Architecture is regarded as spiritual, symbolic of the inexplicable. Yet, for Bowen, as Lee affirms, place is "a spiritual as well as a geographical locality" (130). Instead of place being a psychological extension of the human mind, places in Bowen's stories have a mystifying presence of their own that "arose out of an intensified, all but spellbound beholding... of the scene in question" (Preface to *Stories by Elizabeth Bowen* 129). Bowen's terrain is a blend of material and mythical space that arrests the beholder. Its essence is captured in the haunted domestic home, especially since it is a tangible and familiar environment that in spite of ordinariness spellbinds its inhabitant.

Familiar yet estranged feelings toward the house are often explained by the phenomenon of the uncanny. In his seminal essay, "The Uncanny" (1919), Sigmund Freud points out that "an *unheimliches* house" is generally translated to "a *haunted* house" (241). *Das Unheimliche* (the unhomely) toys with the idea of unhomeliness, where the unhomely house, or the uncanny, is "nothing new or alien, but something which is old-established in the mind and which becomes alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241). This idea of the home that is unhomely, the

familiar that is unfamiliar can be related back to how space can at times seem like a phantom limb to the inhabitant who has long occupied the space. The appearance of the haunted house is not altogether “alien” to its inhabitant because it still belongs to her, albeit now envisioned at a distance separated by spectrality. By relating the uncanny to the phantom limb, we can move away from discussions of the haunted house that often fall back into “the perennial obsession of the Gothic genre” and the return of the repressed (Janicker, *The Literary Haunted House* 26). Instead we can think of the house as a bodily extension of the subject’s consciousness and material fabric of her socially shaped mind.

Although Bowen dabbled in the psychology of terror, her obsession was with material and mythical places. She once asked rhetorically, “Am I not a writer for whom places loom large?” (*Pictures and Conversations* 34). “Loom” is expressive of the haunting and mythical quality of place found in her fictional houses. This quality also distinguishes Bowen’s haunted house from the uncanny, which as Anthony Vidler describes, does not necessarily involve “the magical, the hallucinatory, and the supernatural” (*The Architectural Uncanny* 22). Part-fantasy, sinister in its want to situate women in wretched states, Bowen’s haunted house does not just evoke “a sense of lurking unease” or “an uncomfortable sense of haunting” (23). It is capable of either emplacing or displacing its inhabitants, depending on the nature of beliefs built into place. In any case, it brings awareness.

Places in Bowen’s stories are used to “expose a deficiency in the people who inhabit them (Lee 132). The women are shaken into re-cognition: Kathleen is stuck in the taxi; Ethel is strangled in the attic. Yet this does not mean that place is a means to an end, functional in the mechanistic sense, just as the phantom limb does not inform the amputee that there is a lack. Rather, it draws attention to the function and

existence of the parts of the body. Bowen's use of places, if explained through the phenomenology of the phantom limb, is a way to understand the lack of correspondence between the idea of the body and being a lived body in the world, between life and living in a material world. It is one thing to know there is a limb, and another to comprehend what this means: its muscular abilities and complex reflexes, for example. To begin to comprehend is not to think in the mind, but to live it. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself" (*POP* 87). In the short stories, Bowen is "enacting" the women's existence and allowing them to be haunted by their phantom limbs which take the form of places so as to force one to rethink the body and its relation to place, or the lived world.

The haunted house, or rather haunted space in general, is discussed in phenomenology. According to Merleau-Ponty, space becomes haunted when

[The body] applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. ("An Unpublished Text" 5)

His idea of haunted space may not cohere with popular definitions of the term but it still conveys that sense of being possessed by and losing control to some inexplicable higher power like magic. It is a "virtual space," he writes, which is not removed from one's "corporeal situation" (7). Haunted space is treated as a kind of mythical space that is magical and material at the same time. Mythical space is discussed more extensively later in the chapter, but at this point it is useful to introduce it as a space that "retain[s] the general setting" of the observable world and then "settle[s] in a

different theatre” (*POP* 331). Merleau-Ponty seems to imply that this space, before settling in the theatre in question (for example, the setting of haunted house fiction), is already performative in that it is endowed with symbolic significance.

Take the attic in “Hand in Glove” for example. It is alluded to but never directly appears until the final scene, which is in keeping with the attic being a place of storage, associated with the stale and unused. The general spatiality is exported to the haunted attic of Jasmine Lodge and filled with a similar but symbolic significance according to how space is seen and experienced by Ethel Trevor. The luggage in the attic “yawned” and “gaped”—verbs that on one hand connote lethargy and reinforce the storage space where objects freeze in time, and on the other hand demonstrate the watchfulness of the “fixed eyes,” as if the objects are waiting to pounce on the intruder (“HG” 215). The first set of significance has to do with the general setting; the second is affected by Ethel’s comportment. With fear she sees the open trunks yawning and gaping, “glanc[ing] this way, that way, backward over her shoulder,” as if expecting the trunks to shut their lids on her (215).

The object of Ethel’s anxiety and the anxiety itself, to use the language of phenomenology, “both express the same essential structure of [her] being,” that is “being situated in relation to an environment” whose “structure alone gives significance to the directions up and down in the physical world” (*POP* 331-332). The structure, or the haunted spatiality, holds together Ethel’s experience in the attic, her fear and anxiety, and her perception of the macabre trunks that only become more real to the extent that she does not leave the attic. As long as she stays in the “theatre,” the show will go on. The spatial manifestation of her bodily attitude perseveres and the haunted house remains, until the end where Ethel’s fierce pursuit of the glove causes her demise and brings the haunting to a close.

Here we see how the haunting of the attic is internalised and then projected back onto place, causing a dramatic enactment of the menacing glove. This episode is also important for it cautions against the lack of discernment of place and calls for a reflection of what it means to *be* in a lived world. If we return for the last time to the phantom limb, the pursuit of the glove, which Ethel has so convinced herself to be essential and must belong to her, can be read as her attempt to recuperate what has been removed from her. Yet, as mentioned, the bodily object here which is like the phantom limb is not meant to be ‘attached’ back to its owner. Ethel’s desire to seize the glove, thinking that the haunted glove can be transformed back into its ‘normal’ form, is symbolic of her want to exit the “theatre” by putting an end to the haunting. The imposition of a separate reality unto haunted space is an attempt to break out of the existing spatiality. And the consequence is dire for Ethel who fails to recognise the nature and power of place and how to inhabit mythical and material spaces. Though the story ends on a less ghostly note, it comes at the expense of one who has not yielded to the existential nature of space.

Space is not only essential; it is existential. For as long as those haunted live in the world of the haunting, haunted experience counts as perception. It exists because one believes one sees it, even if does not appear in objective space, according to the laws of perception. There is little need for a clear distinction between the real and unreal, cause and consequence. Haunting is not a “representation but a genuine presence” (*POP* 338). What one sees is what one gets. Reality is only as real as it appears, as real as it is lived. The focus is on the experience in its context. The haunted house is as real as it is lived, its haunting as spooky as felt, ghosts as human as seen.

### *The Power of Beliefs*

The house in each story is spooky and mythical. It comprises the general setting, which is the home, enacted in theatrical settings, which can include dreamscapes and mythological places like Mount Olympus. Linked to stories about divine beings and beasts, myth is often dismissed as fallacious, even though it never claims to be the truth. Susan Sellers, in *Myth and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, notes that myth can be conceived as “a mode of perception rather than an attempt at elucidation” (4). She draws from Susanne Langer and also Colin Falck’s mythic consciousness in which “the mythic mode of consciousness is a vision of reality,” thus also a mode of being, “of men’s place in reality” (Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature* 116). Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski resolves the tension between myth as being and as a tale of being in his elegant definition of myth as “a story told” and “a reality lived” (*Myth in Primitive Psychology* 21). Its fiction is bound to reality; the story lives on. There is an element of performance surrounding myth and so mythical space. But this performance is not associated with artificiality. Rather, as Malinowski tells us, it has to do with magic. Magic is made up of three parts: “the formula, the rite, and the condition of the performer” (112). As technical as it sounds, the “knowledge of magic” prepares the performer for the practice of magic (112). One does not question myth because, as with magic, it “never was created or invented”: “All magic simply *was* from the beginning” (113). It is self-sufficient and sustainable in its origin and continuation. Myth is magical like that.

Although Merleau-Ponty describes the magic of space—how it is presupposed and omnipresent—his mythical space is overlaid by a nagging unreality. His approach to mythical-like space, which draws from physiology (he relates the rising and falling moments in dreams to the up and down motions of the chest during respiration),

undermines the sufficiency of mythical space. The mythical seems to require a more down-to-earth counterpart, its space always tracing back to some physiological root. Bowenian place, however, in its haunting, is mysterious and material at the same time. To its inhabitants, mythical space is existential.

Looking at the ways in which the women relate to the home, first emplaced and then displaced, I want to address the spatiality and power of beliefs. Beliefs can either fortify or demolish existing space. The issue is not the belief per se. Neither is it about evaluating or righting the wrong. More salient is how beliefs are truths taken to be Truth, acted upon in the name of Truth. On the bright side, although beliefs are firm and relentless, they have the potential to ignite change. As Charles S. Pierce describes beliefs in his 1878 essay, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," "belief is a rule for action" (129). A meeting place for monistic principals of the dominant and the material application of rules, belief "appeases" doubt and "relaxes" thought (129). Older forms of thought rest and new thoughts may germinate. It follows that if the house is a site of built-in ideology, then it is also where natural thought suspends, beliefs debunked, myths invented. The ambivalence of haunted space mythologises the normative, eventually exposing the socio-political structure of perception and the power of mis/beliefs.

If we shift the inquiry from that of what is real or unreal, Truth or myth, and instead focus on how mythical space can be sensible, embodying ideas and appearances, then the issue at hand is not a matter of binary differences but of perceptual attitudes. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan asserts that mythical space cannot "be readily verified, or proven false, by the evidence of the senses" (*Space and Place* 85). Places like El Dorado, Sodom and Gomorrah have "to exist because they [are] key elements in complex systems of belief" (86). The existence of mythical space stands

for “a whole way of looking at the world” that acknowledges “areas of the hazily known and of the unknown” (86). There is a symbiotic relation between the known and unknown. Tuan explains that although “errors abound in the unperceived field,” it is not erroneous but “is every man's irreducible mythical space, the fuzzy ambience of the known” (87). Mythical space in this regard commingles the known and unknown, and can also be understood as objective space in which one knows one exists and the subjective sources that comprise one's existence. Put simply, mythical space is as objective as one knows of it and as subjective as one personalises it. In Bowen's haunted house stories, the home is as terrifying as the characters believe it to be. The key to perceiving haunted place is her beliefs.

By now it should be clear that perception of space is a result of preconceived ideas, but what exactly are these ideas and how do they affect women in particular? Beliefs influence identity, thoughts, and experience, creating “a whole way of looking at the world” (Tuan 86). They are received and actively practiced. Whilst it is commonsense that faith requires action—the believer must practice her faith—the focus on place here looks at how beliefs become operative through place. Casey explains that abstract and neutral spaces are localised and made meaningful because of “the manipulation of natural or artificial materials” (*Getting Back Into Place* 114). Places are built to serve “particular predelineated purposes,” for example residential and sports buildings (114). Casey accounts for the social aspects of place but not the processes of socio-cultural conditioning in which human beings are socialised into accepting and practicing the law of the land. There is a gender bias and political side to these social purposes that need to be spelled out.

Sensitive to the more nuanced ways in which social norms and tradition are ingrained in us, Ahmed suggests thinking of beliefs as “inheritance... what we receive



from others, as our ‘point of arrival’ into the familial and social order” (125). They link us to those who came before and with those who share the same lineage; they fit us into social groups and distance us from non-believers. Ahmed digs deeper into the implications of inheritance:

Indeed, the word inheritance includes two meanings: to receive and to possess. In a way, we convert what we receive into possessions, a conversion that often ‘hides’ the conditions of having received, as if the possession is too simply ‘already there.’ (126)

We act as if beliefs are “already there” in the world we inhabit—something taken for granted. They orientate us and reproduce the orientations of our predecessors. Beliefs are more powerful than we believe them to be. They are anchorages, situating human beings in the world that is orientated around the beliefs we share.

For those who come into the world less privileged and with a lower position in the social ladder, the inheritance is a burden, a hegemonic ideology that reproduces normative perception and attitude, strengthening the dominant and discriminating against the dispossessed. Such prized inheritance—in the form of social norms and normative beliefs—has a different hold on women who are not the decreed inheritors. Women are “receivers,” in Ahmed’s terms, whose “reception is not about choice” (125).<sup>84</sup> In the home women inherit social beliefs which they then naturalise as personal beliefs. Staying at home in the evening and doing housework are diluted forms of domestic ideology and femininity worked into the private space. We witness in Bowen’s stories how female characters believe certain ideas about themselves before entering the houses. There in the home they practice their beliefs, every action and thought presupposing space. The home is more than a background that facilitates

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<sup>84</sup> Ahmed’s discussion on inheritance and reception centres on the passing down of histories, of “normative whiteness,” and of “compulsory heterosexuality” (127).

the process of inheriting. It is, Ahmed writes, “‘inherited’ as a dwelling” (126). To dwell in place is to inherit the beliefs that come with it.

Belief has a spatial element: it is manifested and enforced in place. An excursus on place from Bowen’s personal writings throws light on the power of belief. In July 1935, Bowen was in search for a new house in London, which later came to be No. 2 Clarence Terrace. The experience of walking into people’s houses was, in her own words, “alarming” (*The Mulberry Tree* 210). In a letter to Woolf, dated 31<sup>st</sup> July 1935, Bowen wrote:

It is impossible to believe that the people discovered in rooms sitting stiffly about as dolls in dolls-house attitudes are not to be sold with the house, and to remember that it is not necessary to ask oneself whether one likes them. I had no idea so many houses could be macabre and horrifying. (211)

The houses are “macabre” because of their doll-like inhabitants. The anecdote reveals much about Bowen’s view of place and its inhabitants. Her perception is shaped by the belief that houses and people are intimately related. The idea of place is knitted with people: a narrative of place tells of the personal stories of those who inhabit it.

An analysis of place gives insight into what shapes perception. Merleau-Ponty offers his take on what forms “initial perception”:

Every perception presupposes, on the perceiving subject’s part, a certain past, and the abstract function of perception, as a coming together of objects, implies some more occult act by which we elaborate our environment. (*POP* 328)

Perception begins with presupposition and the thing perceived is shaped by some inexplicable “occult act.” There is a “background” to every place (328). One can say

there is a backstory to every perception. There is an intimate and interactive relation between human beings and the world. Robert Tally Jr. describes it like this: “We are situated in a world that is not of our making, but our very essence (that is, existence itself) requires us to shape our world” (*Spatiality* 66). Notwithstanding the fact that one automatically inherits a place in a world that precedes one’s existence, one has the freedom to shape.

Presupposition comes from the idea that perception is based on *le préjugé du monde*, that is, “widely held prejudice” (*POP* 5). The term more accurately translates to “the unquestioned belief in the world,” which is the “cause and content” of experience (Landes 223). Experience makes sense because “perception has long provided us with objects” which “we transpose... into consciousness” (*POP* 5). We think we see something only because we “know perfectly well” it exists in the world, at least we think we do (5). However, with ghosts, we are not so sure. Supernatural encounters as regarded as rare, one of a kind, experiences. Such experience, Merleau-Ponty writes, is “taken in its private context as if it did not belong to the same universe as others” (*POP* 7). It is anomalous and treated as less of an experience. As with seeing in the dark and through the past, seeing ghosts is one of many “unclear sights” that seer tends to say, “It is so only for us” (7). This is the problem Merleau-Ponty has with scientific analyses and casual explanations: these hypotheses “save the prejudice in favour of an objective world” (7). Unclear experiences are dismissed because of existing unquestionable perceptual beliefs. It follows that the more unclear experience is deemed to be, the deeper beliefs are set in stone.

Experience of haunted space is especially fuzzy because it cannot be roped into preexisting formulas of perception. Unlike dreams and memory, it cannot be causally or psychologically rationalised. There is no waking life or present moment

that awaits the haunted. Perception is uncertain; the foundation on which it is built becomes shaky. In “What the Invisible Looks Like,” Grégory Delaplace highlights the problem of seeing ghosts from a phenomenological perspective:

Ghosts, as sensations that challenge abruptly the implicit certainty that ‘the world is what we see’, give us in a flash the uncanny suspicion that what we perceive might actually *not* be the entire world. Ghosts give us an uncertain glimpse of a dimension that usually remains invisible to us but that might nevertheless be part of the world. (65)

Spectrality “casts doubts on human perception” (55); it challenges the “single regime of perception” (65). This regime is a belief system that functions similarly to the immanent order common in people known as perceptual faith.

Perceptual faith, described in Merleau-Ponty’s manuscript dated 1959, is “a faith common to the natural man and the philosopher—the moment he opens his eyes; they refer to a deep-seated set of mute ‘opinions’ implicated in our lives” (*TVTI* 3).<sup>85</sup> It is “naïve evidence of the world,” enigmatic but “common” to all (3). That being said, it is common because it is presupposed rather than unanimously agreed upon. It is “perfectly familiar” but impossible to explain (3). The only important matter here is “the very fact that this vision is *mine*” (5). Attention is on the “singular” relation between the world and I, a relation that “makes me sometimes remain in appearances, and it is also what sometimes brings me to the things themselves” (8). Whilst this idea is in line with the examination of lived experience in his earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*, it does not directly tackle the falsity of vision and misleading beliefs.

Perceptual faith deflects from the task of differentiating true and false vision,

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<sup>85</sup> Written more than a decade after *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished work published posthumously in English under the working title, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), is a compilation of ideas in progress and working notes, a work of which “only the first part was written” (Lefort, Foreword to *TVTI* xx).

seeing and believing, moving away from epistemological concerns. The problem of “synthesis” in *Phenomenology of Perception* is supplanted by “metamorphosis” (TVTI 8). Twenty-four years after the publication of his groundbreaking work, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of perception moves from a set of stylised acts (for example, recalling previous images and associating one with the other) to one that involves an abrupt change and growth, a metamorphosis “by which the appearances are instantaneously stripped of a value they owed merely to the absence of a true perception” (8). Perception is not made of parts substituting parts but is wholly transmuted. Part of this shift is motivated by perceptual faith which Maxine Sheets-Johnstone points out is “a way of avoiding epistemology” (*The Primacy of Movement* 300). She elaborates that “faith is epistemologically vacuous” and proves the world cannot be reduced analytically (300). More precisely, it cannot even be challenged.

We often think it is easy to justify or debunk beliefs since they can be tested in our everyday lives. Donald Davidson refutes this assumption on the grounds that we cannot stand outside beliefs. “No such confrontation makes sense,” he explains, “for of course we can’t get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happening of which we are aware” (*Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* 144). External “intermediaries,” such as “sensations and observations,” are subjective and situational, only accentuating the “epistemological problem” of beliefs (144). The futility of justifying beliefs with “intermediaries” is illustrated in “Pink May.” Not convinced of the ghostly presence, the secondary character constantly interrupts the protagonist with questions that challenge her belief.

‘*But look, did you ever see it?*’

‘Well, not exactly. No, I can’t say I *saw* it.’

‘*You mean, you simply heard it?*’

‘Well, not exactly that...’

‘*You saw things move?*’

‘Well, I never turned round in time. I... (160)

Against the interrogative tone of her companion, the protagonist sounds tentative. The apprehension felt in her hesitant answers is brought out by the ellipses and repeated use of “Well.” Her companion seeks answers, evidence that would ease scepticism. The onlooker is a non-believer: s/he does not want to be convinced, but wants to hear justifications for the believer’s faith. This is apparent in the manner and chronology in which the questions are asked. The first few questions are as follow:

‘*You were frightened?*’

...

‘*What month?*’

...

‘*You never met them?*’ (151)

The questions reveal one’s quest for empirical evidence. The secondary character is a sceptic, a voice of reason and sanity. But, scepticism has seldom made sense to believers. It is pointless to justify beliefs, including perceptual faith, with “something outside [its] totality” (Davidson 146). The interrogating character in “Pink May” approaches the protagonist’s story from a place of unbelief. The increasingly strained conversation finally leaves the protagonist helpless and frustrated, exclaiming, “If you don’t understand—I’m sorry I ever told you the story!” (160). Her companion has failed to see—“can’t you see there must be *something?*” (160).

Unbelief in the mind and heart manifests in bodily actions, translating into an inability to see. The attempt to justify and check beliefs, as seen in “Pink May,” is vain and only exposes the tendency to refute a belief so as to reassure one’s own

beliefs. It is an example of the need for “further reassurance,” Donaldson explains, so that one may “add to his stock of beliefs” (146). One is sucked into an endless strife for assurance, comparisons, and other egoistical endeavours that serve the solipsistic self. Merleau-Ponty too makes clear that beliefs cannot be justified or checked against a thought or practice system of the world. Evidence and reason cannot be used on perceptual faith because at the heart of beliefs is “a germ of non-truth in the truth” (*TVTI* 28). What this implies, I infer, is that beliefs are characterised by truthfulness, though not necessarily truth. They are truthful in their endeavours to achieve some hold on the Truth. Whereas Truth is a single modality of experience, akin to tunnel vision, truthfulness allows one to tell it as it is, as true as experience is lived. Contrary to popular belief, faith is not blind and its workings are not invisible. As Richard Rorty puts it, we run into difficulties when explaining faith because “we [have] not succeeded in finding a translation at all” (*Consequences of Pragmatism* 6). The only way to attempt to prove or disprove beliefs is to “run over such possible stories” of the believer and “tell the whole story” (7).<sup>86</sup> The crux of belief is its truthfulness. And, if truthful it cannot be blind to doubt. To be truthful is therefore to see.

### ***Believing is Practically Seeing***

We have seen how faith has a perceptual component and is embodied and lived out. This section continues to examine how believing becomes seeing in Bowen’s stories and how belief manifests somatically and also spatially in the appearance of the haunted house. I will show how believing is a kind of seeing by drawing from phenomenology as well as pragmatism: phenomenology approaches beliefs as they

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<sup>86</sup> Rorty demonstrates the un/translatable nature of stories with the example of a foreigner who appropriates the language and beliefs of the local. The whole story of the foreigner must be told to “decide on the soundness of [local beliefs] against the possibility of [his false beliefs]” (7).

are embodied; and pragmatism values believable realities. Haunted experiences, re-envisioned through the lenses of phenomenology and pragmatism, are experiences of embodied and spatialised beliefs.

Beliefs are part of existence; they are embodied and acted out in the lived world. They are veridical only if one is in the thick of experience. Sandra Rosenthal and Patrick Bourgeois remind us that perceptual faith is “lived faith”: it “consists in living in the belief... that the world in which we live is really the real world” (*Pragmatism and Phenomenology* 174). To live in faith is to live by it, to believe before any “validity or verification” (174). It entails practice and performance through which one preserves faith and anticipates its fulfillment. This may well be true, but this brand of pragmatism neglects the issue of doubt, which as stated before is part of belief. The neglect, Sheets-Johnstone explains, is probably due to the difficulty of reconciling the acts of “confirming experientially” with “taking on faith” (299). Adding doubt would make perception’s task doubly tough.

Despite the difficulty, Merleau-Ponty insists on the importance of questioning. Questioning differs from the justification and checks that Davidson deems useless. It does not occur outside the totality of beliefs. Perceptual faith, writes Merleau-Ponty, is a “continuous interrogation” (*TVTI* 103). It is always “questioning itself about itself” (103). Herein is the paradox of perceptual faith: it is true in its truthfulness, but truthfulness itself means truth is not absolute and that doubt must exist alongside for it to be veridical. The doubting character of faith is not the same as scepticism. It is better described as inquisitiveness about our everyday experience. In an interview with *The Believer*, Rorty speaks briefly on inquiry: “Inquiry is a matter of problem-



solving in the here-and-now rather than a search for the Eternal.”<sup>87</sup> To doubt, or inquire, is a way of making sense of experience. It does not mean to determine the truth of the matter; it is more of a means to “ask” if something is “useful for solving the problems of the day” (Rorty). This approach to belief turns away from the past and preconceptions, instead focusing on its practice and impact on the believer. This puts emphasis back on the body and helps direct the discussion towards the women’s experiences of the haunted house and the impact of haunting on their perceptions. As Rorty says, “the hell with what the source is, let’s look at the consequences.”

The pragmatic focus on consequences of beliefs sheds light on the spatial manifestations of beliefs as depicted in the women’s experiences of the haunted houses in Bowen’s stories. If the appearance of place is a spatial projection of the women’s beliefs, then haunted house fiction can be read as narratives of questioning faith. Doubt appears viscerally in the form of a haunting, overlaying the house as the home held by social beliefs and domestic ideology. It is the belief in the house as a home that ironically enables the women to see their uncanny houses as haunting and macabre. The more they dwell in haunted space, the more discomfort and anxiety brew as a result of the discrepancies between the house as a home (idea) and the house as haunted (appearance). The haunted house with strange things and spectral happenings forces one to change perspective and see through the façade of beliefs.

Rose describes in “Bizarre Objects” how Bowen’s employment of strange objects upsets one’s equilibrium. Bizarre objects like the leather gloves, the mysterious letter, and the pink trees are objects that question “our relationship to the perceivable world, our confidence that there is a world which, simply by looking at it,

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<sup>87</sup> The interview took place in Rorty’s Palo Alto home and was conducted by Gideon Lewis-Kraus. It was published online in the June 2003 issue of *The Believer*.

is there to be seen” (78). Significantly, Rose points out, these bizarre objects may not be analysed as figments of the imagination or evidence of a psychotic break. They are products of “another way of seeing things” (83). In this regard, objects, happenings, places are not imbued with significance that steers perception, but with a creative power that opens a new way of looking at the world. One’s “perceptual instability” as a result of strange things and haunted spaces is therefore “partly redemptive, disintegrative of all knowing” (78). Rose’s point is illustrated in “Pink May” when the protagonist falls into an existential crisis at the end of the story, almost hysterical, crying out, “Let to oneself, one doesn’t just ruin one’s life!” (160). Even if we follow the doubting secondary character and question the hallucinatory origins of the protagonist’s story, the extent of her final breakdown is testimony of how haunted space causes the disintegration of the knowledge of the self. It cannot be described in a manner that satisfies the sceptic’s need for confirmation and representation.

From the outset, the sceptic presses for answers to get a clearer portrait of the ghost. The unnamed protagonist fails to communicate effectively and represent that which cannot be described. The haunted place stops the perceiver from reproducing visions of things according to ready-made ideas of them. To Rorty, this would qualify as an act against representationalism. His main critique of representation is how it has been packaged as a priori truth that upholds “traditional distinctions”:

A life spent representing objects accurately would be spent recording the results of calculations, reasoning through sorites (vagueness), calling off the observable properties of things, construing cases according to unambiguous criteria, getting things right. (*Consequences of Pragmatism* 164-165)

In “Pink May,” we see the protagonist somewhat resisting a life of representation. She

answers questions which aim at achieving a holistic representation of her experience with descriptions of what she felt and saw. She simply cannot convey the haunting as accurately as the sceptic demands of her. Like the pragmatist, the protagonist realises that there is “no method for knowing *when* one has reached the truth, or when one is closer to it than before” (166). But unlike the pragmatist who sees this as a revelatory moment, she is on the verge of a mental breakdown.

For the woman whose history has always been represented for her, fashioned by those in power, to lose the compass which she has hitherto used to navigate her life is absolutely terrifying and ghastly. Rorty assures us that getting rid of the compulsion to represent would allow us to “gain a renewed sense of community” where “what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark” (166). This presumes that everyone is unmoored in the same way, leveling out our confusion. Yet we are not equally in the dark. Unfortunately, for the misfits and pariahs, the loyalty that Rorty speaks of can be a euphemism for obedience. See the demon lover who expects Kathleen to wait for him, writing to her, “I shall rely upon you to keep your promise” (82).

It is evident in the short stories that there is no existential comfort, only fear and the horror of discovering one’s placelessness, displacement from the haunted house and herself. She suffers for being truthful and is visually and emotionally disorientated. Bowen’s haunted settings are spatial manifestations of intertwining belief and doubt, shaking the ground on which faith is built. Writing on ghostly presence in Bowen’s writing, Derek Hand suggests that the haunted house forces characters to “confront their own stark condition and predicament in the present moment” (“Ghost from our Future” 66). The “relationship of the person to place” is encapsulated in Bowen’s “spectral occupations” which “centre[s] round characters

under pressure in terms of their link to particular places: particular homes and houses” (65). Hauntings are projections of uneasiness and feelings of being out of place. And the haunted house disrupts the illusion of homeliness and illuminates the fate of displacement and homelessness. Bowen’s haunted houses, in widening the gap between belief and experience, challenge the naturalised and normative regime of experience adopted by their female inhabitants. Destabilising the belief system, which regulates perception, haunted space reveals their perceptions to be an understanding of the world from a subordinate position which sediments beliefs about identity. The women position themselves according to rooted beliefs, believing before seeing.

Conditioned to look up from down below, they are predisposed to behave in a certain way. For example, in the garden, confronted by her fiancé, young Kathleen does not move and hesitates to speak. Her inability to respond corresponds to her blurred vision brought upon by the darkness and the shadowy garden territorialised by the lover—a symbolic blindness from fear and anxiety. In a different place, however, where she recognises the oppression, she acts differently. In her Kensington house, realising that she is threatened and subjugated, controlled by the demon lover, Kathleen thinks of an escape plan. For the first time, “[the] idea of flight” occurs to her (“TDL” 86). The “hollowness of the house,” which “cancelled years on years of voices, habits and steps,” has a part in emptying Kathleen of rationality and diluting belief (85). She who is usually self-controlled loosens up and begins to see the actuality of the relationship with her fiancé: “He was set on me, that was what it was—not love. Not love, not meaning a person well” (86). She sees now that she was his possession, an object the demon lover has returned to retrieve.

Though Kathleen does not divulge the reason for her promise, she admits to the “complete suspension of *her* existence during that August week” (86). She was

benumbed and beside herself. The state of non-being extended into the months after her fiancé went missing and for a long whilst she was “dislocate[ed] from everything” (84). Even when she married William Drover, her “movements as Mrs. Drover were circumscribed” (84). It seems her existence is ever suspended, her identity defined and hence limited by forces outside herself. Young Kathleen committed her life to an “unnatural promise” because a man was set on her; she “put herself out” to suitors because she “share[d] her family’s anxiousness” (84). In a world where patrimonial beliefs are imposed, she does not exist for herself. Lassner adds that she is “driven by a male fantasy of her total devotion,” around which she builds her life (65). The internalised social gaze dictates her identity, but what is particularly interesting about the portrayal of Kathleen is how she has been socialised into accepting patrimonial beliefs to a point where the demands of society become the demands on the self. In Kathleen we see the tension between existential angst and societal pressure. Beliefs of society are naturalised by the individual as those of the self.

Believing that she must fulfill her duties as a fiancée, sister, daughter, wife, and mother, Kathleen’s personal experience is shaped by the social. Even when the enforcers of social conventions are absent, she is still haunted by the spectre of the dominant culture. What was and is social is naturalised into the personal and manifested in the physical. Though she has married another, she is not happy but plagued by illness. This is symptomatic of unaddressed angst and restlessness from being suspended in existence and having to wait until the promise is fulfilled, marriage is at hand, and the demon lover returns. It is also a state reflecting the coexistence of societal beliefs and existential anxiety, where outer and inner pressures coalesce and are difficult to tell apart. Caught between the personal and societal, Kathleen is in hesitation. It is as if waiting is intrinsic to her existence; she is expected

to wait. The letter from the demon lover writes, “I shall rely upon you to keep your promise” (82). As Lassner articulates it, the “fiancé had nothing to worry about, no need to doubt her bondage to him” (65). This is her loyalty, one starkly different from the empowering loyalty Rorty describes. Her loyalty to him and his demands of her reveal the power relation between Kathleen and her fiancé: he dominates her and she submits to his power. The subservience speaks to the seamless amalgamation of the social and personal. Kathleen has been conditioned to await and accept dominance.

The conjunction between social and personal, societal pressure and existential angst, is overt in the detail of the signature, K., which matches Kathleen’s initial. The ambivalence of the dead fiancé’s name, furthered by his shaded face, obscures his identity. To Lassner, this is evidence of intermingling consciousnesses to a point where “Kathleen is haunted by becoming his reflection” (66-67). Also noticing the detail of the signature, Corcoran agrees that it symbolises the “disruption of legitimate privacies” (159). Kathleen’s identity is tied to those around her. Hers is “a life lived under control, in check, unspontaneously, subserviently; and lived for others, not herself, a driven life” (160). Both Lassner and Corcoran identify the succession of consciousness as the primary consequence of oppression. Kathleen has completely internalised the gaze of the oppressor: “his consciousness overtakes hers” (Lassner 66). She sees herself as the self that the others see.

Kathleen, also Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*, is strangely obliged to the one in power. The subjugated have a pathological dependence on the dominant, even if they are subdued. Women, de Beauvoir writes, are often “weighed” by “a tradition of timidity and of submissiveness” (140). The tradition presents itself when young Kathleen dares not voice out her thoughts when with her fiancé, when she is unwilling to leave the house because she is “a woman whose utter dependability was the

keystone of her family life” (85). Corcoran contends that Kathleen’s “persistence” reveals the relationship between “possession and self-possession,” “commodity and identity” (164). I think the distinctions suggested by Corcoran are two sides of the same coin. Holding on to commodity or identity makes it obvious that Kathleen is strapped to the domestic tradition which ultimately creates again and promotes the need for possession and self-possession. Kathleen’s immobility and silence are acts of a fateful, albeit unconscious, resignation. She has given up “without attempting to take any action,” acting according to the limited vision and ingrained beliefs she has of herself (De Beauvoir 160).

A similar account of how perception influences beliefs is detailed in “Hand in Glove,” where the Trevor sisters imbibe social attitudes and believe before they see. Embodying traits of military history and romance, they are described as “tall and handsome” with “good bust and shoulders” (208). Though strong as soldiers and attractive as lovers, the blend of features makes them “handsome girl[s]” which is the “vocation” for women as “many of the best marriages had been made by such” (208). They internalise the tradition in a very different way from Kathleen Drover but are nevertheless dominated by the system. The sisters are, as Lassner notes, part of “a marriage market,” “obsessively driven by the dictum to marry at all costs” (69). They are trained to focus on the goal—that being, “Whom, and still more when did they mean to marry?” (“HG” 208). Their vision for themselves as wives is a vision inherited, parochial and regimented. Ethel’s obsession to marry and desperation to attract Lord Fred result in a tunnel vision which doggedly targets the pair of gloves that would eventually take her life. “Hand in Glove” dramatises the detrimental consequences women face from believing in the reigning ideology and its values.

For Ethel, the epiphany comes too late, at the expense of her life. In “Pink

May” and “The Demon Lover,” the women are paralysed and descend into darkness. The house has no “reassuring power” (“TDL” 84). The women are disenchanted; preset ideas of the domestic home fall away. Haunted space challenges perceptual faith, the foremost belief in a unifying something that standardises appearance. It refuses to cohere with existing conceptions of the domestic abode and stands in the way of retrospection. Much like dream spaces, haunted space is found in the instantaneity of experience. It is shaped by “feeling that towards which our desire goes out, what our heart dreads, on what our lives depend,” situating the perceiver in the present place and moment (*POP* 333). In this sense we cannot pit the experience of the dream against that of the bedroom in which the dreamer sleeps in terms of how real each experience is. The experiences cannot be measured against a yardstick of reality. The crisscrossing of inner and outer spaces, haunted and homely spaces in Bowen’s stories advocates for the co-existence of spaces and truths, not separation. The point is not whether the house is haunted as experienced by the protagonist or if it is a figment of imagination as implied by the other character. “Pink May” is an example of co-existence: the haunted house experienced by the unnamed protagonist is as possible as the one supposed by the sceptical inquisitor.

Because belief is about truthfulness and not truth, it is not absolute and can exist alongside doubt. It follows that space perceived with the lenses of belief in Bowen’s haunted houses, as with Rhys’s rooms and Barnes’s world at night, is one of ambivalence. We cannot quite put our finger on it. Whilst memory and darkness obscure vision in *Good Morning*, *Midnight* and *Nightwood*, it is belief that muddles the narrative of place in Bowen’s ghost stories. The house is haunted because it is believed to be so. It is not quite ghosts that scare the women out of their wits but the prospect of ghostliness. In “Pink May” spectrality is hinted at or left out. Either way



the presence of the absence is enlarged by way of negatives including silence and omission as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

‘The queer thing is, though, I remember whistling but I can’t remember when I happened to stop. But I must *have* stopped, because it was then I heard.’

‘*Heard?*’

She lit up again, with a slight frown. ‘What was it I heard first, that first time? I suppose, the silence. So I must have stopped whistling, mustn’t I? ... (153)

Contrary to expectation as voiced by the inquisitor’s curiosity (“‘*Heard?*’”), it is what is unheard that startles the protagonist. What is heard is only alluded to: when the whistling stops, *it* is heard. The silence and non-events—the reiteration that “there’s nothing queer about *that*”—are chilling and suspenseful (154).

The lack of action and evidence of the supernatural is disappointing to the reasoning listener who lets out a doubting “Oh?” and “*Heard?*” (154). The question marks, capturing rising inflection, are cues for clarification, along with a list of directives such as “*Because of the...*” and “*I’d been going to say...*” in which ellipses encourage explication (152). Many times the inquiring character tries to predict the unfolding and steer the account in order to normalise the extraordinary. William James would reason that the rhetoric is fueled by “practical consequences” in which we ask “what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience’s demands, nothing being omitted” (*Pragmatism* 80). The secondary character needing coherence and reason asks questions as a psychologist would: “‘*What makes you think that?*’” (158). S/he does not “look on [answers] as closing [one’s] quest” but aims to “bring out of each word

its practical cash-value” (James 53).<sup>88</sup> The protagonist, however, is uncooperative. She constantly digresses. Her narrative is littered with dashes: some interject with parenthetical information and reflections whilst others break the flow of sentences. Content aside, her speech is jerky and rambling.

The juxtaposition of the main character’s experience of ghostliness against the secondary character’s expectation of a ghost story is not to validate one and void the other, but to show how beliefs can spin different perceptual accounts. Thinking like a phenomenologist, our concern with belief is how it orientates the body and drives it to perceive the enviroing world in a certain way. A belief powerful enough contributes to the natural attitude—what Kelly calls the “attitude of belief” (“Merleau-Ponty on the Body” 387). But recognising belief is not the same as addressing the engineering of belief: how is it socially conditioned, gendered, and appropriated for the believer? Phenomenology and pragmatism are interested in belief only if “a belief is what it is only by virtue of its position in a web” (Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* 98). Merleau-Ponty would probably say together with Rorty, “Do not ask where the new beliefs and desires come from” (93).

Pragmatism stays away from absolutism. Rorty describes the pragmatist:

He wants us to give up the notion that God, or evolution, or some other underwriter of our present world-picture, has programmed us as machines for accurate verbal picturing, and that philosophy brings self-knowledge by letting us read our own program. (*Consequences of Pragmatism* 165)

We are discouraged from a life ordered by the dominant structure of perception that takes the guise of “an unclouded mental eye” (165). Rorty’s persuasion is reminiscent

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<sup>88</sup> James’s *cash-value* refers to the practical fulfillment of sensations that words and ideas promise.

of Merleau-Ponty's idea of the omniscient eye, the God-like perspective we think we have of the world. Both the phenomenologist and pragmatist want us to turn away from—and here I quote James—

abstract and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins... towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. (51)

James invites us to turn from a priori arguments and towards what is present and is to come. There is a nagging historical lack. In comparison, Merleau-Ponty's work has more historical leanings in his affirmation of a world that is already there. Both views attempt to reconnect human beings and the world by beginning with facticity, a brute facticity that is given and always already there. The pragmatist sees no need to dwell on the truth of the matter. The phenomenologist focuses by veering from the matter, by way of “re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world” (*POP* viii). The two varying approaches have the same implication for belief: that is, seeing and believing are practically one and the same.

“To believe is to see”; the pragmatist professes the possibilities of faith. “Seeing is believing”; the phenomenologist rejoins with perceptual faith in mind. The first speaks of the relation between belief and desire, the second of motive and decision. Pragmatism has shown us how believing can be conceived as seeing, how beliefs constitute perceptual experience. However, where pragmatism intersects with phenomenology is also a gap, a non-address of the engendering of beliefs. The two schools of thought, one anti-essentialist and the other non-dualist, do not consider how beliefs may be engineered to the disadvantage of women and tend to ignore the experiential specificities of women's circumstances. It is also this jarring absence of

discourse on the feminine experience that makes it clear, I think, that pragmatism with its levelling impulse and phenomenology with its androcentric body are ill-equipped to address women's situation for her experience is always indiscriminately located within the theories. There is a pressing need to particularise the phenomenological framework to address women's experience, which in context has to do with how women naturalise beliefs and practice them.

### ***Committing to A View of the World***

To attend to experiential particularities related to women's being in the world, we must acknowledge that feminine experience has not been adequately addressed in philosophic and pragmatic discourses and that the woman is commonly regarded as "the negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible" (Irigaray 26). She has a lower vantage point and receives beliefs differently. Whilst it is against the principles of French post-structuralist and some Anglo-American feminisms to ascribe women's experience to essentialism in the sense of biological determinism, I think it is careless to render the female an equal to the male caught up in "webs of desires and beliefs" where according to Rorty we are equally free to "simply drop an old belief or desire" or "create a whole host of new beliefs and desires" (*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* 93). Rorty is right in his views as a pragmatist, as Merleau-Ponty is astute in his observations about the general lived body. But their vantage point is high up and they speak from an unsilenced male privilege.

Phenomenology and pragmatism have shown us the power of belief but the radially complex web architectures of Rorty and Merleau-Ponty's experiential theories do not draw out vertical levels of perception. There are orders and hierarchies governing the world and along with them are varying vantage points and perceptual

levels, depending on where one sits on the socio-political ladder. The truth is that many women experience the world from the bottom. This is not to lump experiences together and claim all are equally subjugated, but women's experience, or feminine experience in the looser sense, needs a more thorough examination of nature and essence. What I bring attention to in this final section of the chapter is how women see with a limited point of view and how places appear to them because of the beliefs they have inherited. The view from the bottom is not that bad; Haraway believes that "vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful" (59). The point of view, I will argue, is spatially expansive, characterising feminine experience. This section reinforces what has been discussed on feminine seeing and examines how women's situations shape an alternative mode of perception.

To recap, feminine seeing sets into motion a *mise en abyme* effect where *presence* films over surrounding space, opening up one spatial detail after another.<sup>89</sup> In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha's angst saturates the room and her tendency towards the past brings in other rooms she once lived in. In Bowen's stories there is a similar opening up of spaces even though the heroines' are more privileged than Rhys's wandering women. In "The Demon Lover," Kathleen Drover enters the house with apprehension. The feelings affect her perception. Her perceptual experience is suffused with a sense of angst that is spatially projected in the "unwilling lock," increases in proportion in the "warped" door, and culminates in the pervasive "dead air" (80). Ghostliness increases in magnitude as one spatial element connects to the other. Kathleen Drover quite literally meets her doom in the opening paragraph of the story. The *mise en abyme* is more obvious in "Pink May," particularly how it unveils underlying social and gender issues.

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<sup>89</sup> A woman's presence is "her own attitude to herself" (Berger 46).

When asked if she is frightened, the female character in “Pink May” instead describes the view from the bedroom:

And the room at times I’m talking about used to be full of daylight—sunset. It had two French windows, and they were on a level with the tops of may trees out in the square. Then may was in flower that month, and it was pink. In that sticky sunshine you have in the evenings the may looked sort of theatrical. It used to be part of my feeling of going out. (151)

The attempt to get the protagonist to take inventory of her feelings and frame her account of the haunted house within what it means to be frightened (“*You were frightened?*”) backfires as she digresses. Still, there is something amiss and vaguely dreadful in her reply. The idiomatic phrase “used to” is repeated twice, signalling the lack of something which is no longer present. The emptiness inside the house sharply contrasts with the picturesque view outside. The open windows, the cheerful coupling of pink and yellow, sunshine, and flowers set up a hopeful and bright atmosphere that accentuates the interior lack. Though she does not speak specifically about her fear, the spatial details reveal her mood and angst. Her account of the room gives a sense of her feelings. As Berger reminds us, “there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence” (46).

What we have is a mapping of space that begins from a parochial point and branches out into other spaces, a point that begins from who she perceives herself to be. To feminists eager to get away from foundationalist thought, this is prevarication. Working within phallogentric tradition is not enough. Radical feminism, which began with the 1960s second-wave feminism, would in theory prefer Gilman’s *Herland* to *Lysistrata*, favouring revolutionary changes over reforms. In the same way, queer is

framed in terms of homosociality as being rather than homosexuality as identity. Such feminism, I think, is unsustainable. As Waugh points out, it ends up “fatally undermining itself as an emancipatory politics” (“Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism” 190). Separatist approaches lead nowhere. For emancipatory goals we must focus on our situatedness in a world of self and other selves. In and of the world, we are part of it, of other selves, and they are parts of us.

Though it sounds foolish to think we can converse with tradition and its keeper, to see the light in oppressive darkness, without remaining marginalised, I think the encounter between feminism and phenomenology can mediate the relations between the oppressed and the oppressor. Feminist phenomenology can qualify the essence of feminine experience without approaching women’s situations as compromise and negation of autonomous existence. To rephrase Haraway, a limited point of view is still a unique vantage point. Stein for one was a phenomenologist who wrote as a Jewish woman in academia; she did not shy away from her vantage point. Her phenomenology is women-centric and is conscious of limitation. Also known by her religious name, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Stein saw human being as a “finite” image of God (*Essays on Women* 73). She avows that woman must “seek to *know* within the form and limits ordained by God” (73). To seek within the form is to seek within what has been prescribed. Women have to turn to our limited position in the world to understand ourselves even if “life itself has made our existence problematic” (45). Through our situations we learn to become. Our maturity is not synonymous with autonomy or transcendence. Essence is not metaphysical but “a being in the state of becoming” (46). For Stein, it is not Truth but “forms” that “participate in existence” (Haney, “Edith Stein: Woman and Essence” 221). These forms show in our body and bearing, in our lived experiences. Our sufferings and

subjugation are a part of finite existence. They are manifestations of essence, of what it means to be a woman, of the difficulty of being woman. Stein's writings elucidate how circumstances are part of the embodied experience. Limitations, in the form of disadvantages and challenges, shape how we see the world.

Emplaced in a fixed location like the haunted house in Bowen's short stories, women see the world from a limited perspective that makes room for stories, myths, dreams, and the like. Finitude extends to the place in which they are situated. As Haraway tells us, gender is "extreme localization" (63). This means to be gendered is also to be part of practiced space. Space is existential in this sense because it affords "a particular terrain of possibilities in which [one's] agential actions and decisions can take hold" (Telaro, "Perception, Normativity, and Selfhood in Merleau-Ponty" 351). It emplaces women and makes space where essence is existent. Tuan likens existential space to finite worlds like isolated villages that are held together by sufficiency, or at least possibilities of sufficiency. Inhabitants may own very specific knowledge of life unique to their worlds, but their experiences do not come in handy outside the finitude of space, for "knowledge of terrain becomes hazy and inaccurate" when they leave their homes (Tuan 87). Along similar lines, Merleau-Ponty draws parallels between existential space and the "world of myth" inhabited by "primitive people" (*POP* 332). This world has its own habitus and structure of perception, sustained by myths which are sufficient for its people. "Primitive people," Merleau-Ponty claims, "do not overstep this existential space" (332). Both the geographer and philosopher, despite different approaches to space, seem to suggest that finitude affirms existence, even if the people of finite worlds live by beliefs that keep them within a particular order.

Finitude, according to Stein, has to do with limit. Casey explains that to say a place is limited means "there is nothing beyond the place of an actual occasion—



except another place for another occasion” (*Getting Back Into Place* 15). Meaning is produced and enclosed within. This way finite place guarantees a fixed location and a limited point of view. According to Haraway, women can find objectivity in “limited location” because precision “allows [them] to become answerable for what [they] learn how to see” (59). There is hope of gaining some form of re-cognition since “partial perspective promises objective vision” (59). The point is, I am placed, therefore I am. “I” is dependent on how deeply rooted one is to beliefs in and of place. This rootedness, Merleau-Ponty explicates, is the reason for our “significant” lives: “this certain significance of nature and history which I am, does not limit my access to the world, but on the contrary is my means of entering into communication with it” (*POP* 529). Significance, however parochial, gives freedom which “does not conjure away our finitude” (528). Merleau-Ponty tells it plainly, “It is by being unrestrictedly and unreservedly what I am at present that I have a chance at moving forward” (529).

Maria Telaro, too, agrees that we draw strength to live from “a particular level of commitment to, or implantation in, a concrete existential situation” (451). The odd pairing of commitment with implantation suggests that existential space is not a space of delimitation but of spatial commitment. Being in place, situated and committed, offers a different kind of freedom. This is freedom that coexists with limitation. As Merleau-Ponty warns, if we try to escape commitments, “to bypass [our] natural and social situation by refusing to take it up,” we risk being free at all (*POP* 529). The choices and actions we make as a result of commitments do not “restrict our liberty, since choice and action alone cut us loose from our anchorage” (530). To be is to be committed; to be committed is to be to be free. For Stein, it is Catholic faith that preserves her world. For Merleau-Ponty, the promise of Being rubs out possibilities of becoming. When asked by de Beauvoir how he reconciled God with existentialism, he

simply riposted, "It is better to sacrifice becoming than being."<sup>90</sup>

In Bowen's stories, the houses, finite and haunted, mirror the women's limited perspectives and fateful situations. Their demises are tragic; the lack of some form of transcendence is frustrating. Still, I think, by taking emphasis away from the traumatic endings and focusing on the ordinary lived experience, a feminist phenomenology can bring out a potentially positive reading of the texts. Its perspective accentuates lived experiences and situations, the evanescent spatio-temporal moments of being in the world. To quote Bowen: "Nothing can happen nowhere" ("Notes on Writing a Novel" 39). Put differently, as long as there is place, there is potential for transformation, a change in mind, and possibility of action. There are no big moments of liberation, epiphanies, or gasping revelations in Bowen's ghost stories. If there are, they come too late. The women have given up the ghost. Still what we do find in these stories is an unyielding commitment to presenting the world as it has been given to the women, as they perceive it from their limited vantage points. We cannot judge their decisions, but we are haunted by their perseverance and commitment. Kathleen Drover may be trapped in a taxi driving to nowhere but her unheard scream reverberates. Ethel Trevor is dead but her struggle is etched on her sister's heart. The haunting carries on long after the haunted is gone.

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<sup>90</sup> As recorded by de Beauvoir in her July 1927 diary entry from *Diary of a Philosophy Student: Volume I, 1926-1927* (44).

## Conclusion

Phenomenology, feminism, and literature expound on lived experience. They are concerned with direct experience, exploring how and why we see the world in certain ways. Each account of their subject's experience—be it the amputee, the subjugated woman, Clarissa Dalloway, or Sasha Jenson—reveals something more about the world we share regardless of our differences. Sometimes abstract and vast, other times oppressive and insufferable, the worlds which phenomenology, feminism, and literature explore are nonetheless the same small world. We belong to what Merleau-Ponty calls a “circuit” in which one “connects” to the other (*TVTI* 269). Connection is paramount to existence: “the other is a relief as I am, not absolute vertical existence” (269). The term, “relief,” is intentional: it is a reminder that before connecting with other selves, we must first connect with the material world. This also means taking into account that certain reliefs are gentler and others steeper, just as some existences come with higher vantage points and others lower. Such is the landscape of humanity.

In the *fin de siècle* world, the irregularities in this landscape of humanity, that gap between men and women's experiences, between subject and object, positive and negative, dominant and other became increasingly difficult to turn a blind eye to. The consciousness of difference, of individuality can be attributed to the spatial changes that were brought about with the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth. The texts chosen for this thesis were written in a time of spatial crisis, in which new and improved machines of transport like the aeroplane and electric motor car destabilised absolute space and “argued for its heterogeneity” (Kern 132), “located within the movements between and across multiple sorts of space” (Thacker 8). Clarissa contemplates the vicissitudes of life whilst ambling through the busy streets and quiet parks of London; Sasha slips into the past as she traipses around Paris; Kathleen

relives the memory of the demon lover when she enters the haunted house. The women crisscross ambivalent spaces and blur boundaries. This mobility, spurred by a restive and wandering spirit, is an outward symptom of the irregular landscape, of the fracturing sense of identity and reality as traditional paradigms of self and society are shaken in light of new epistemologies. The select narratives of being situated in certain cities and rooms reveal how the changing spatiality of the early twentieth century shaped the imaginations of writers.

Modernity set in motion “a chaos of imperfection, discord” which, according to Wyndham Lewis, freed “art and imagination” from “the lump of compressed life” (“Manifesto II” 33; 32). The early twentieth century was truly “a time of excitement and new freedoms” (Scott 6). Especially for women who stayed home, modernity along with its spatial flux opened the door to a life beyond the common sitting-room. It promised movement, literally and symbolically. There is a sure connection between mutable space and the hubbub of modern life, one reflected in many literary works of the time, wherein geography is a pivotal fixture. In Woolf’s earlier work, “The Mark on the Wall,” the protagonist mulls over the frenetic pace of life: “Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one’s hair!” (84). Bowen’s characters are also “in transit *consciously*”: they move “from room to room or floor to floor of the same house, or one to another portion of its surroundings” (*Pictures and Conversations* 41). In their fiction the line between interior and exterior wears thin: the mind segues from thought to thought as the body moves from space to space.

As noted in Gerald Bullett’s review of *Mrs Dalloway*, such modernist work has a “continuous effect,” connecting “external drama” and “the life of the mind”:

The sensation of seeing and feeling the very stream of life, the undeviating tide of time, flowing luminously by, with all the material phenomena, streets and stars, bicycles and human bodies, floating like straws upon its surface. (164)

The experience of places and people cannot be separated from the expansive mind. So instead of vain attempts to access the dark recesses of inner life, the trope of spatiality enabled a physical mapping of consciousness in which the workings of the mind are corporealised and manifested in one's traverses. Given the evanescent and mercurial nature of thoughts, the only viable way to "catch" life as it is vague and escaping is, as Woolf instructs, to "trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" ("Modern Fiction" 159; 161). This pattern, as I have argued in this thesis, has a spatial aspect. It can be found in women's experiences of places: why they behave the way they do in certain spaces; where they feel comfortable or uneasy in; what they do to remain still or leave their positions. Significantly, how places are inhabited and experienced gives insight into women's relation to the world and describes an inclusive but nonetheless particularised modality of experience sympathetic to delimited perspectives, restricted mobility, and constrained space.

Situated below, far from the positive and neutral, women are no strangers to disadvantage. It is this unique position, this view from the bottom that sparks curiosity for someplace larger than the sitting-room, higher than the attic. In the fin de siècle world the spaces to which women were confined were no longer well founded. Riding the wave of chaos, perhaps foreseeing an opportunity for change, the women writers let their female protagonist wander the streets and linger in dingy rooms so they may find a place of their own. As Ahmed argues, "Nothing is brought forth without

coming to reside somewhere, where the somewhere (say, the house, the room, or the skin) shapes the surface of ‘what’ it ‘is’ that is brought forth” (40). Whether it is the hotel or the home, public or domestic space, the narratives of places are stories of inhabitation, of how women come and go, inherit and dwell, in the world.

The literary feminist phenomenology developed in this thesis is a framework for examining the narratives of women’s experiences in and of the lived world, with emphasis on the material, working world. It calls for a politics that involves place, recognising that preconceived ideas and perceptions of places affect inhabitation and one’s involvement in the world. One’s relationship to place—how she perceives her environment, her movements and position in certain situations, for example—reveals much about her relationship to the dominant ideology and political institutions that propagate familiar narratives of experience. A literary feminist phenomenology of place is a means to illuminate and understand women’s relationship to the lived world and its history and politics so as to give meaning and expression to her experience on her own terms. Phenomenology, with its ideas on the thinking and emoting body, positionality, and orientation, provides the tools to describe direct experience, whilst feminism committed to “deconstructing both the subject and the ‘master narratives’ of history” provides the lens through which the negative and neglected experiential specificities may be examined and given an autonomous existence different from that of the hegemonic ideal (*Feminine Fictions* 16). Women’s writing, with its revisionary imperative, revises the implicitly male philosophy by confronting phenomenology’s experiential generalities and shifting the area of focus to queer and invisible modes of inhabitation. Approaching narratives of women’s experiences with the framework of a revised phenomenology, we gather snapshots of what feminine experience might look

like: that is, women in the midst of a spatial moment, exploring a certain room, caught in action and in position.

Although this thesis sets out to discover what constitutes feminine experience and posits that there are distinct ways in which women engage with the world, it must be emphasised again that *feminine experience* is not a blanket term for all women and only women. Femininity, as Toril Moi defines in Kristevan terms, is a “position” (126). It is “relational”: “men can also be constructed as marginal to the symbolic order” (126). What I hope to have shown in this thesis is how feminine experience, through phenomenological analyses of women’s inhabitations and interactions with place, is intricately bound with spatial consciousness which encompasses a sensitivity to the power of place, a mastery of its practices, and a proclivity to connect places. At the core of feminine experience is our relation to the *world* in the most material sense of the word. It is true—and I quote Woolf here—“that our relation is to the world of reality” (*A Room of One’s Own* 132). Not only that, this relation is a solitary one. We embark on a journey to find a room of our own in a world of many rooms. Escaping the sitting-room is both exciting and intimidating. The ground outside can be rosy, also shaky. The point I want to make is that feminine experience is an exploratory kind. It is personal and sometimes lonely, enlightening but also confusing. It is not exclusive to one gender, particular only because it is an individual endeavour. Its singleness means it cannot be essentialist, whilst its mess celebrates randomness and difference.

In September of 1925, when life got the better of her, Woolf noted to herself: “Arrange whatever pieces come your way” (*A Writer’s Diary* 80). Widely quoted, this has become a mantra to live by. I prefer to read it with a spatial consciousness, that one should arrange whatever *pièces*, or whatever rooms, come your way. So when a

literary feminist phenomenologist asks “Where are you coming from?” it is not a question of perspective per se. What we really want to know is where you have been and where are you heading. As Rhys would agree, let the *room* speak.



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