# INNER AND OUTER SPACES AND THE CREATION OF IDENTITY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *JACOB'S ROOM, MRS. DALLOWAY,* AND *THE YEARS*[1]

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**Abstract**:
*Space plays an important part in all of Virginia Woolf's writings, whether we are speaking about her novelistic output or her essays. Space becomes an interstitial realm between modernity and tradition. Solitude, privacy, become the key ingredients of successful artistic creation, with creativity being described as a privilege of the solitary, of those capable, and allowed, to function outside the pressure of larger social groups or even outside the close family circle. Space is never just space in Woolf's novels – instead it becomes an engine that drives creativity, identity, and one could almost argue that space becomes a deeply political reality in all of her writings. Nowhere is this more evident than in her urban novels, where the cityscape takes on various roles and functions. Space in her fiction is both external and internal, with the two being in constant interaction. Whether we are speaking about the distinction between male and female spaces, spaces meant for creation and spaces meant for work, shared or individual spaces, real or imaginary borders, movement across such borders, mental and internal spaces, space always fulfils important narrative and metaphorical functions in Woolf's texts.*
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*identity from the field of architecture, urban design and renewal, and political studies. Thereby we will attempt to prove that the creation of space equals the creation of identity across the wide spectrum of meaning of the term. Public and private spaces become antithetic, with the public realm mirroring the established cultural and social stereotypes, whereas private spaces are associated with artistic creativity and individual freedom. Public spaces, being the spaces of established social norms, are usually "male" spaces, whereas private ones are perceived as predominantly "female". Because of this "male", "traditional" component, urban public spaces are described in distinctive ways which will be analyzed in the novels "Jacob's Room", "Mrs. Dalloway", and "The Years".*
**Keywords**: Virginia Woolf; space; modernity; identity; politics of space; public space; private space.

## 1. A space of one's own

Space plays a vital role in all of Virginia Woolf's writings, whether we are speaking about her novels or her essays, becoming an interstitial realm between modernity and tradition. In her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the writer established a connection between the ability and the privilege of artistic creation and the presence of a personal space. Solitude, privacy, thus become the key ingredients of successful artistic creation, with creativity being described as a privilege of the solitary, of those capable, and allowed, to function outside the pressure of larger social groups or even outside the close family circle. Space is never just space in Woolf's novels – instead it becomes an engine that drives creativity, identity, and one could almost argue that space becomes a deeply political reality in all of her writings. Nowhere is this more evident than in her urban novels, where the cityscape takes on various roles and functions. Space in her fiction is both external and internal, with the two being in constant interaction. Whether we are speaking about the distinction between male and female

spaces, spaces meant for creation and spaces meant for work, shared or individual spaces, real or imaginary borders, movement across such borders, mental and internal spaces, space always fulfils important narrative and metaphorical functions in the female writer's texts.

In what follows we will try to relate Virginia Woolf's creation of urban landscapes to several theories regarding the creation of space identity from the field of architecture, urban design and renewal, and political studies. Thereby we will attempt to prove that the creation of space equals the creation of identity across the wide spectrum of meaning of the term. How space is socially constructed, usually through the reinforcement of gender and political stereotypes, was one of Woolf's chief preoccupations and central to her overall feminist ideal of deconstructing patriarchal and imperial values. Public and private spaces thus become antithetic, with the public realm mirroring the established cultural and social stereotypes, whereas private spaces are associated with artistic creativity and individual freedom. Public spaces, being the spaces of established social norms, are usually "male" spaces, whereas private ones are perceived as predominantly "female". Because of this "male", "traditional" component, urban public spaces are described in distinctive ways which will be analyzed in the novels *Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway,* and *The Years*.

Our arguments regarding Woolf's fictional creation of space will be backed up by three theoretical texts from the sphere of urban design, architecture, and political studies: Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal's *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture,* Sadeq Rahimi's *Meaning, Madness and Political Subjectivity* and Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. In relating the three aforementioned texts to Woolf's works of fiction, we attempt to showcase the manner in which space in the female writer's novels is always

politicized and takes on the role of creating or destroying identity.

## 2. The creation of architectural as individual space in *Jacob's Room* (1922)

In *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture,* Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal hold that we inhabit an era pf post-capitalism, an era which is confronted with an unprecedented crisis of production and re-production alike[3], mainly due to changes in climate which affect the very groundwork on which the production of objects necessary for life is based. In times of policies based on austerity, of growing unemployment and mass migration, re-production, or the manner in which we manage to sustain the existence of the world and by extension our own existence, have become pressing questions giving rise to complex political and ideological conflicts. We are going through obvious times of transition, but precisely what we are transitioning into is still unclear, and perspectives are rather sombre. In his *PostCapitalism,* Paul Mason argues that if we wish to salvage neo-liberalism, a necessary prerequisite is the death of democracy (Mason, 2007: x-xx). The implications of this statement are serious in all domains and from all sorts of existential perspectives. Mason's perspective points towards the necessity of a more powerful standardization than the one we can already observe. We should, however, look upon such statements with some scepticism. The present-day world is in decline precisely because of its excessive standardization, the only solution for this being the return to a greater degree of democratization. Analyzing the statements made by Mason, Petrescu and Trogal opine that there is an imperative need of change, of identifying new forms of organization and existence. This also implies

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[3] See also Mason, 2007 *PostCapitalism*, or Rifkin, 1996 *The End of Work*.

the creation of new collective policies, value systems and plans for action, as part of which notions such as space and architecture must play a central role. The two authors hold that such changes are already visible under the form of grass-root movements which give rise to new typologies of re-production, from the agriculture practiced by micro-communities to common action on issues of energy supplies, water consumption or environmental issues, all of these representing a new way of life taking shape before our very eyes. The main idea consequently expressed by Petrescu and Trogal is that space can and should be actively created by humans, as well as re-imagined and re-designed. Space both creates and reflects identity. Especially in cases when identity is diluted or questioned, space can help build, or re-build it.

This is also the case in Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room* (1922), where the main protagonist fails to gain a definitive shape, dissolving into a sea of ambiguity and lack of identity. Maxwell Bodenheim argues that in the novel „the commonplace details and motives of ordinary people are divided and subdivided until they form a series of atoms, and the author's speculations upon these atoms have the volubility of conversation in a drawing-room" (Bodenheimer, 2007: 222). This almost elemental dissolution into atoms corresponds to a dissolution of outer into inner space, which reduces the characters to the status of mere chimeras. The only thing that brings them back into "reality" is the architectural space, the "rooms" they inhabit and move through. Even Woolf's own appraisal of the novel echoes architecture and the almost "airy" nature of the novel's structure, as expressed in the author's *Diaries*: "My doubt is how far it will enclose the human heart–Am I sufficiently mistress of my dialogue to net it there? For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding, scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the

passion, humor, everything as bright as fire in the mist"
(Oliver Bell, 1982: 13).

*Jacob's Room*, however, is not only a novel about
closed spaces – it is just as much a novel about London, as
noted by Robert Todd, who argues that.

> The London of *Jacob's Room* was a young
> man's world of hopes, dreams and pleasure, before
> responsibility is assumed. It was also a young woman's
> world, Virginia Woolf's, after she moved to
> Bloomsbury in 1904. Living in successive squares in
> the Bloomsbury area (Gordon, Fitzroy, and Brunswick
> Squares) and rubbing shoulders with Cambridge-
> educated talents (a John Maynard Keynes or a Clive
> Bell), and innovative artists (Roger Fry, Duncan
> Grant, her sister Vanessa), she slowly became a
> writer. A decade later in *Jacob's Room* she offered
> her fictional version of that era, a homage to an
> earlier London of hope and pleasure, of culture and
> adventure, and to places she knew well in a city she
> loved, conveyed imaginatively through Jacob
> Flanders's life – a life abruptly ended by war. (Todd,
> 2016)

As early as the first pages of the novel, space
appears as dissolved and unstable, setting the time for the
subsequent quest for rebuilding and reshaping it: ""So of
course," wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather
deeper in the sand, "there was nothing for it but to leave."
Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink
dissolved the full stop; for their her pen stuck; her eyes fixed,
and tears slowly filled them. The entire bay quivered; the
lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast
of Mr. Connor's little yacht was bending like a wax candle in
the sun" (Woolf, 2007: 3). In the midst of this sea of
dissolution the only element holding space, and identity,

together is, as the novel's title suggests, the room, the individual, private space. Architectural space becomes a symbol of how built spaces (rooms, walls, doors, etc.) work to both separate people from each other and bring them together. They are simultaneously elements of public and private space, of intimacy and the lack thereof, and thereby they can help or hinder the proper understanding of those who surround us. This is perfectly epitomized by the unreliable narrator Woolf employs, who is often incapable of properly understanding Jacob (or, to put it in a more symbolic way, to gain access to "his room"), thus pointing to the painfully limited understanding one can have of one's fellow beings. Jacob is shown as permanently fluctuating between public and private spaces, between his academic life and personal desires, between hetero- and homosexuality, the result being a hard to grasp identity that mirrors the wobbling lighthouse and the bending mast previously mentioned (both obvious symbols of patriarchy and the male-dominated societal model). As Jacob is followed through the meanders of his official academic relationships with his male colleagues and his apparent homoerotic desires, through his subsequent self-exploration prompted by his trip to Greece, and finally his death, it becomes clear that what Woolf aims to construct in this novel is a fluid space, which embodies the essential unknowability of all human beings. The novel thus documents the many empty spaces that exist between the individuals who make up society. This is also perfectly illustrated by the novel's opening pages which we have previously referred to: in the opening lines, Jacob's mother is writing a letter to her lover Captain Barfoot, pondering on the distance between Cornwall and Scarborough. The inherent discussion of spatial distance versus emotional proximity will become a leitmotif of the entire subsequent narration. In the same opening passages, another character, Mrs. Jarvis,

symbolically connects marriage and widowhood to the concept of space: "marriage is a fortress and widows stray solitary in the open fields, picking up stones, gleaning a few golden straws" (Woolf, 2007: 3). Architectural terminology ("fortress") serves here to differentiate civilization, organized patriarchal society, from the perceived perils of raw, unprotected survival ("open fields"). Another symbolic distinction with architectural undertones here is the one between stones and straws, again pointing to the perceived safety of built environment versus nature, of organized societal structures versus anarchy. The fact that both Jacob and his mother are portrayed in the opening pages of the novel as not only away from the security of their (built) home, but also in a natural setting made up of sands and sea waves (both obvious symbols of instability and uncertainty) is telling of the elements which will make up the remainder of the narration. Lacking both a physical and an emotional home, Jacob will spend his life searching for a security and stability which will remain forever out of his reach. In the same scene, child-Jacob finds a crab coming out from underneath a rock and traps it in his bucket. This symbolically loaded scene prefigures the novel's idea that architectural, built, closed spaces offer at least a relative security, while the openness of the societal jungle can only bring about destruction and ultimately death. The crab leaves its natural closed space and is trapped in an "unnatural" one, the child's bucket. Similarly, as we go through life, leaving the security of our childhood homes, we become engulfed in other people's "spaces", in their expectations, ideas and requirements, which are suffocating and nauseating.

Another important architectural landmark in the novel is Jacob's childhood room, that proves to be just as unstable as the sands he is initially pictured walking on. The room is not tight, closed, it does not provide a feeling

of safety and security: the wind coming from the outside "stirred the cloth on the chest of drawers", while the curtains "let in a little light, so that the sharp edge of the chest of drawers was visible, running straight up, until a white shape bulged out; a silver streak showed in the looking glass" (Woolf, 2007: 8). Both Jacob and his brother perceive the home as unsafe: they constantly hear water gurgling and running down its windows and walls. Their house is not a home, it is not shielding them from the outside, open space. Consequently, the lack of a properly connoted architectural space leads to the two boys' feeling as "widowed" as their mother, helplessly wandering the fields of uncertainty and lack of identity. The theme of enclosure thus surfaces again here, recalling the image of the trapped crab: while no enclosure results in threat and helplessness, too much or the wrong type of enclosure ends up suffocating and killing identity. The crab perfectly symbolizes Jacob's own development in the novel: trying simultaneously to gain the security of a closed space and to escape the narrow spaces others have confined him to, as well as his own "shell" he most often retrieves to when overwhelmed by the outside world, Jacob ironically ends up being killed by a real-life shell on a battlefield. We can thus notice the leitmotif of too much versus not enough enclosure (individual space) running like a red thread throughout the entire novel.

Last but not least, the rooms Jacob inhabits at Cambridge are also symbolical and stand for the opinions and discussions others have of him throughout the novel. Jacob becomes trapped in the room's others create for him, a symbolical reiteration of the crab trapped in the bucket image in the novel's opening pages. This reality is expressed also during the train trip Jacob takes from his home to Cambridge, where he sits opposite an elderly lady: "Nobody sees anyone as he is, let alone an elderly

lady sitting opposite a strange young man in a railway carriage. They see a whole–they see all sorts of things–they see themselves" (Woolf, 2007: 36). This passage sets the tone for the subsequent discussion of Jacob's life as a young adult, and of his many failed human relationships, which are the result of people trying to cram him into their own narrow drawers of perception and expectations. The conclusion of the novel is thus that one can never escape the confinement of the spaces created by the others' perception, and that true identity remains essentially unknowable and unexplorable. Architectural space clashes with individual/emotional space in *Jacob's Room*, showcasing the eternal conflict between certainty and uncertainty, identity and conformity, safety, and the lack thereof.

### 3. Spatial schizophrenia and the oscillation between public and private in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)

What happens when the inhabitant of a space no longer identifies him- or herself with that space? Or when cultural, social, political, affective discrepancies start to surface, creating a gap between our own inner world and the external one? Can one in this case speak about a certain type of schizophrenia, of a process of disrupting identity? Let us commence our interpretative journey in this sense by referring to one of the statements made by Sadeq Rahimi in *Meaning, Madness and Political Subjectivity*:

> Schizophrenia psychosis, in other words, is generally identified with an alteration of associative patterns and meaning systems – an alteration of such depth that it affects not simply the individual's interpretation of the external world but indeed his or her very sense of selfhood and being in the world. Such 'associative' level of impact can be observed in the fact, for instance, that in schizophrenia two basic and intensely related

aspects of the 'mind' are commonly altered: the sense of self and self-identity and the sense of meaning or 'reality' we normally conceive to lie 'outside 'the self. (Rahimi, 2016: 29)

Schizophrenia is defined by Rahimi as a cataclysmic change within the individual's consciousness in what associate patterns and systems of significance are concerned, with these changes impacting not only the individual's perception of the outside world, but also, and perhaps primarily, the individual perception of the self and the perception of the positioning of the individual in the outside world. Self-perception and identity are thus inevitably dependent on that "reality" which we usually perceive as existing outside our own self. In short, and to put in less medical terms, what and who we are is inextricably linked to that which exists or is located outside of ourselves. This reasoning is of central importance for the understanding of the impact that spaces bereft of identity and coherence have on both the individual and the collective consciousness and imaginary. The one who will inhabit a space is the one who will transform that space into a "place", who will confer an identity to it, which has to be aligned with the one of the individuals whose home it is. If this does not happen, the effect can be one of cultural schizophrenia, of a splitting of identity in an internal and external sense. In the case of profoundly impersonal spaces, the inherently human desire for identity and diversity will always be in conflict with the impersonal nature and the triviality of the inhabited space, which is often projected (especially in case of public spaces) so as to annihilate any trace of individuality. When the individual is imprisoned in such a space, what results is an internal conflict, which may be individual in nature at first, but will most probably become collective in time, gradually extending to the entire

community. A community that does not identify with the space it inhabits, and whose identity does not align with the one of this space, will be schizophrenic from a cultural, social and political point of view.

Culture can be described as the combination of values, creeds, symbolical systems, schemes and any other elements which make up the common heritage of a group of individuals who internalize and pass on this heritage within a community by means of social interactions (Yilmaz, 2006: 140). Cultural landscapes reflect such interactions among individuals and their natural habitat along temporal and spatial axes. This is a highly complex phenomenon that creates tangible and intangible realities. The intangible component, which is not connected to the characteristics of physical space, arises out of ideas and interactions that have a major impact on the perception and structure of space. Cultural spaces are always the reflection of the cultures that they arose out of. Thus, culture creates a complex network of rules and traditions reflected in people's ways of life general human attitudes, perceptions, but also in the spaces that particular culture creates.

Coming back to the definition of schizophrenia formulated by Rahimi and perceived as a lack of concordance between inner and outer reality. Starting out from this reasoning we can state that generally identification implies perceiving one's surroundings as being entirely significant. Identification on a general human level means significant relation with the space one inhabits, which is made up of a multitude of sensations and effects. In other words, the spatial elements surrounding the individual become objects of the human identification process as they encompass elements of essential significance, providing structure and stability to the surrounding world. People own the world through identification (Yilmaz, 2006: 141), and by means of this process of identification human

identity itself is created. The theory of identification is based on the internalization of perceived significations and of one's surrounding environment. Even if the outside world represents a tangible reality, it must be understood and interpreted, and even if humans are part of this world, they must nevertheless envisage their own space and determine their place inside it. When humans are no longer capable of finding their place in the world, schizophrenia appears, be it medical, social, or cultural.

In Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), modernity is the disruptive element which contributes to spatial dissolution and the consequent dissolution of the self. Telling the story of its protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, and her space-time journey through a changing London over the course of 24 hours, Woolf seeks the opportunity to impart an impression of a world hurrying and hustling towards modernity, transforming everything in its path. Clarissa's journey is essential the journey of modern man, desperately trying to cling to some sense of stability in an ocean of change. In *Mrs. Dalloway* this point of stability is provided by the Big Ben, a landmark which has remained unchanged, a symbol of traditional male public spaces, of tradition and heritage in an ever-changing world. The image (and acoustic) of the Big Ben appears in the novel whenever it is necessary to bring the characters back into the "real" space, to transport them from the land of their reveries to the concrete realm, to the here and now. It acts like a lighthouse guiding the protagonists back from the personal to the public space. Other elements which serve the same function are the noises of cars and planes, and basically all technological aspects of the modern world: they create a public space which aims to counterbalance the private, individual one, and even to annihilate it. The noise of the modern world is inescapable – and by extension so is the public sphere, as much as one would like to retreat into a private realm. The public, male

element always ends up disrupting the private, predominantly female one.

Modernity is gaining more and more ground in England and the world, with space suffering dramatic transformations: planes and cars change the face of transportation and thus also of the surrounding space. Just as the new modern elements change external space, Woolf's experiments with form change the shape of the novel. In this sense, the frequent flashbacks and the use of memory create an inner, personal space-time, which both disrupts and splits the narration, and raises questions regarding the existence of „real" spaces. It is quite obvious that in *Mrs. Dalloway*, inner space is perceived as being more "real" than the external one, to which the characters have to be violently returned by means of noises and other distractions. Along the spatial axis, time also suffers important and obvious transformations and disruptions. Traditional time measurement in seconds, minutes, hours and years is replaced by the fluidity of internal space-time, where huge leaps can be undertaken at ease, making a 24-hour time span seem like a century. From this perspective, little is happening within the 24 hour "real" time span the novel covers – however, from the point of view of internal space-time, a degree of complexity is reached that challenges our traditional understanding of spatial and temporal coordinates. The few real-life happenings which do occur in the 24-hour time span serve the role of grounding the narrative in the mundane and of offering a sense of stability and certainty, moving the characters back and forth between interior and exterior spaces and places.

The individual isolation typical for modern man, his island-like existence, is broken in *Mrs. Dalloway* by means of the so-called "tunnelling process" that Woolf talked about in a diary entry from 1923, two years prior to the publication of the novel. In this diary entry she speaks

about creating cave-like structures behind her characters ("beautiful caves"), which connect with each other and reveal themselves at a certain point in the narration (Oliver Bell, 1982: 60). Nowhere is this technique more obvious than in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the aforementioned caves are represented by the protagonists' past lives, which connect them both to the present and to their fellow protagonists, in a network of spatial and temporal pathways. The individual caves end up intertwining and leading the protagonists into the same impersonal public space, where even speech is homogenized by means of its uninterrupted flow. Each character has his own personal timeline, and thus his own personal space – however, the modern chaos ultimately brings all of them together into a shared (public) space. Their common heritage (also a part of the public space they collectively inhabit) is yet another element that brings them together: they all recite from Shakespeare, thus creating those pathways linking each of their personal "caves" with those of the others, thereby creating a shared space-time. The cave-technique allows the writer to connect inner and outer spaces, while memory acts as a link between the past and the present. Finally, all pathways meet in the central space-time event represented by the party.

Memory is the shared element which brings the characters together in a common, real-life space. For example, the pistol shoot heard in the street startles Clarissa and Septimus, who is a war veteran and is suddenly returned to his own personal place of trauma by the sound of the gun being fired. The two characters who run parallel in the novel, like two lines that never meet, are brought together by this shared experience, which places both of them on the same spatial axis: a place of fear, anguish, and trauma – characteristic of modern man's existence: "The violent explosion which made Mrs Dalloway jump and Miss Pym go to the window and apologize came from a motor car....

Passers-by who, of course, stopped and stared, had just time
to see a face of the very greatest importance against the
dove-grey upholstery... Septimus Warren Smith ... found
himself unable to pass" (Woolf, 1996: 11). The same real-life
event triggers the description of the two separate individual
spaces the characters belong to. In the end of the novel
however, all personal spaces (caves) converge into the shared
public space represented by the party. Clarissa is introduced
to the news of Septimus' death by suicide, making the shared
public space diverge again into personal, individual universes
which do not touch. When she hears about the sad news, her
first reaction is to retreat to another room, away from the
other revelers – again, a shift away from exterior to interior
space. We find an echo here of the ideas expressed in *A
Room of One's Own*: that in the truly important moments of
introspection in life, one needs personal space. However, in
the end the sound of the Big Ben pulls things yet again into
the sphere of the public, established world order. The
individual "cave" dissolves and life is forced back into the
shared space of modern chaos. The only one able to escape
this wicked circle is Septimus, who retreats for eternity
into his personal space, from which he can never be
brought back. His decision most probably mirrors Woolf's
own one, and by linking it to the ideas expressed in *A
Room of One's Own*, we might argue that death is seen as
the only escape from a public, shared space which can
only bring about turmoil and suffering. To return to
Rahimi's statements discussed in the opening of this section,
cultural schizophrenia, and the state of being constantly torn
between the inner and outer space can only be avoided by
death. We find an echo here of the same idea expressed also
in *Jacob's Room*, where the main protagonist has to die in
order to escape both the shell of his own inner confinement,
and the one of societal expectations.

## 4. Social and national spaces in *The Years* (1937)

As noted by Henri Lefebvre in his seminal work *The Production of Space* (1974), published several years after *The Years*, but echoing in a theoretical manner many of the ideas expressed by Woolf in her novel, the idea of representing space as immobile is partially indebted to the thinking of Kant, who defined space simultaneously as a primordial void which gains sense and meaning through human activity, and as a concrete, "real" object (Lefebvre, 1991: 2-3). By contrast, Lefebvre introduced an entirely different approach, stating that space is culturally and historically created and built and that it is consequently characterized by a profound ideological dimension. Lefebvre claimed that space is a social product and that "any space implies, contains, and dissimulates social relationships" (Lefebvre, 1991: 82-83). One direct consequence of this is that in capitalist societies space is almost always perceived as "owned" by someone, whether we are referring to private or public spaces. Echoing the same reasoning, Sheilds noted that "a privatized notion of space anchors the understanding of property" (Sheilds, 2004: 210). What follows if we are to accept this reasoning is that all spaces are simultaneously public and private, as they are both owned by their individual proprietor and collectively owned by the social group they belong to. A similar idea is echoed by the statements of Julie Solomon, who argues that in Woolf's writings "the room serves as a potent political metaphor for women because it concretizes visually, tactilely the politicization of the personal and the personalization of the political" (Solomon, 1989: 331-2).

*The Years* follows Woolf's literary obsession with the distinction and delimitation between public and private spaces, thematizing the complex relationships between the microcosm of the family and the wider social context of the British nation. It is maybe Woolf's novel that focuses most

on the vital importance of public spaces in creating human identity. While, as we have previously seen, *Jacob's Room* focuses almost exclusively on private space as a creator of the sense of security and belonging, and *Mrs. Dalloway* traces the constant movement between inner and outer spaces, but with an obvious preference for the inner realm, *The Years* marks a shift in authorial and narrative perspective, choosing to focus on public spaces as a sine qua non element in human identity construction. Thematically, the novel centres around the manifold political and social transformations characterizing the England of the late 1880s to the mid-1930s, following the destinies of the Pargiters, a family who witnesses and is directly affected by the cultural transformations paving the way from Victorianism to modernity. The novel is, as one would expect of Woolf's writings, focusing on the movement of middle-class women out of the restrictive, oppressive environment and enclosures of their private homes towards the public sphere, while simultaneously discussing and analyzing the political and social dissolution of Britain as a world power, and the subsequent creation of new possible British identities that can embody differences in race, class and gender. We could thus argue that *The Years* follows the shift in the public realm brought about by the series of shifts in the private worlds of individuals, which end up changing the bigger picture and creating a "new world." The focus in this novel is on the private space's effect(s) on the public space and the on the ways in which the public/ social can be transformed by the private/ individual. Being one of the novels produced towards the end of Woolf's career, it can be regarded as one of the most complex treatments of the theme of social space and of the critique thereof.

Snaith and Whitworth note that "Woolf's fictional and non-fictional writing is consistently concerned with the politics of spaces: national spaces, civic spaces, private spaces

... The psychology of space resonates through her autobiographical writing, from the claustrophobic, Victorian rooms ..., heavy with tangled emotions, to ... airy, liberating rooms ... While private, domestic space, the woman's room, is at the hub of her feminist politics, it is from this room that she became one of the key writers of urban modernity" (Snaith and Whitworth, 2007: 1). What is obvious in this remark is that for Woolf space was always political and politicized, apart from being marked by the constant shifting duality between public and private. This aspect is also noted by Evans, who speaks about the two central themes in *The Years*: firstly, the depiction of indoor/outdoor spaces as an essential dichotomy; and secondly the creation of complex social relationships which are inextricably linked to the existence of an urban space (Evans, 2006: 112). Woolf looks upon urban landscapes as centres providing women with "a vehicle for thought, contrasting the freedom women experience in the city streets with the constraints of domestic life" (Evans, 2006: 113). Thus, according to Evans, "(the novel) links the politics of home and nation through its exploration of the interconnections of space, gender, and the social system" (Evans, 2006: 112).

In the novel, the Pargiters move from single family houses to flats. The move bears not only spatial, but also symbolical significances. It is a move from the internal, individual, towards a more shared, public type of space, from individualism towards a new, shared, type of nationalism, that can encompass various seemingly divergent identities. We also have to bear in mind here that while working on the novel, Woolf thought of alternative titles for it, like *Here and Now* and *Other People's Houses*, which is further proof for the author's profound preoccupation with space, place, and space-time. The novel's two main female protagonists, Eleanor Pargiter and Kitty Malone, are always moving through spaces and places which are always politically

connoted. Changes in space-time are thus traced not only inside the family, but also in the external, public space. When the novel opens, we are introduced to the two fractions of the Pargiter family, depicted (also) according to their places of residence: one fraction resides in Abercorn Terrace, while the second lives in the fashionable and glamorous Westminster. Thus, from the very beginning space is used as a tool to signal and symbolize social status, social separation and social identity. Private and public spaces do not intersect, moreover, they exclude each other. Further on in the novel, when the family moves from the single house to the flat living model, Woolf suggests that space is fluid and can change in order to accommodate the ever-changing plethora of human identities. Space is therefore no longer something fixed and predetermined, but something produced – consequently, changes in space reflect changes in the individual and social realms. Ultimately, changes in individual spaces bring about change on a national level.

In the novel's opening pages, we are introduced to the Pargiter daughters caught up in their daily monotonous routine of boiling water in order to make tea. Space here is individual, domestic, reclusive, and isolating, symbolizing traditional patriarchal family values. While women are confined to their homes, men enjoy the privilege of experiencing external space. Nowhere is this more evident than in the passage where Eleanor writes a letter to her brother Edward, a letter which is then taken outside to the mailbox not by her, but by her other brother, Morris. The only thing Eleanor does in this scene is to walk with Morris until the house door and to hold it open for him. Women are thus portrayed as standing at the threshold between the two spaces (private and public), an image will be recurrent throughout the entire novel. Peach argues that Woolf's main concern was to showcase "the way in which the material

parameters of people's lives and their individual psychologies are ... concentrated and interleaved in the spaces in which they live" (Peach, 2007: 68). The only time Eleanor is allowed to leave the relative safety of her home is to make a charitable visit to the poor at Canning Place. Returning from her outing, "so many different things were going on in her head at the same time: Canning Place; Abercorn Terrace; this room; that room" (Woolf, 2008: 29). We witness here a first frail attempt at leaving individual spaces and moving towards a more vast, inclusive space, which can provide a better, more complex understanding of life and of one's own identity. Eleanor is forced to confront her own secure middle-class home to the lodgings of the impoverished. Thus, she is forced to acknowledge the existence of other private spaces very different from her own, which also contribute to the creation of a vast public space.

Entering public space thus equals knowledge and a more profound understanding of life and of others. This is why when Colonel Pargiter finds out about Eleanor's "escapade", he is most displeased, the image chosen by Woolf to express this bearing architectural undertone: he is angrily stirring the sugar in his tea as if attempting to "demolish it" (Woolf, 2008: 13). Later on in the novel, the extension from private to public space becomes much more complex, largely due to the availability of technological advancements, which make it easier for Eleanor to move through London. She is shown moving from one place to another, and at some point, we are even told that she felt "herself expand ... It was as if something had broken loose – in her, in the world" (Woolf, 2008: 105). Not surprisingly, in the chapter focusing on the year 1911, after Colonel Pargiter's death, the middle-class home is up for sale, while Eleanor is pictured traveling to Greece, Spain and Italy. In the same section of the novel the reader is told that Eleanor refuses to purchase a home, and instead imagines a life that looks like a

boat floating on waters or a train-trip: "a ship padding softly through the waves; of a train swinging from side to side down a railway line" (Woolf, 2008: 202). Spatial mobility thus comes to symbolize the possibility of social and cultural change and the fluidity of identity. Another woman character in the novel who experiences this movement from the confinement of the private to the relative freedom of the public sphere is Kitty, who manages to escape her duties at the Lodge by visiting the house of her teacher, Miss Craddock, or the one of her less affluent friend Nelly Robson. The two female spaces she visits are much more open and fluid than the strict patriarchal structure of the male-dominated Lodge. Even later on in the novel when Kitty becomes Lady Lasswade, her dislike of traditional, patriarchal spaces is just as evident in her preference of her countryside home to the lavish London parties she is compelled to organize. Her countryside estate is the only space that offers her a sense of stability and identity. A very important element that contributes to this feeling of security is the one of ownership, as stated earlier on in this section. Kitty feels safe at her Northern estate because she is "on her own land now" (Woolf, 2008: 261). Even the elements of the surrounding nature are in their turn defined by ownership, an aspect suggested by their names: Keepers' Path, Lovers' Walk, Ladies' Mile, etc. Ultimately, however, the sense of ownership producing an apparent feeling of security is shattered when Kitty realizes that "All passes, all changes, she thought, as she climbed up the little path between the trees. Nothing of this place belonged to her; her son would inherit; his wife would walk here after her" (Woolf, 2008: 263).

Finally, in the novel's last chapter, where the remaining Pargiters gather again, the transformation of space becomes more than obvious. Delia, the one who hosts the party that brings the family together, rearranges an old

office to be used as a cloakroom. The fluidity of space here mirrors the fluidity of class and gender identities which had been depicted as fixed in the opening chapters, suggesting a more democratic and inclusive view of space. The narrator ends in a cyclical manner, describing Eleanor feeling "as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice" (Woolf, 2008: 404). This image recalls the one in the opening chapter, where the reader witnesses Eleanor standing in the open doorway while her brother takes her letter to the mailbox. This image suggests that even if England has become a more inclusive space, even if the restrictions placed on women by Victorian society are starting to wane, women still occupy interstitial spaces, intermediary realms between here and there, now and then, private and public.

## 5. Conclusions

The present paper has set out to prove the central role played by space and place in some of Virginia Woolf's major novels of the 20s and 30s: *Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway,* and *The Years*. Interest in questions of space and spatiality in Woolf studies has enjoyed unquestionable continuity and was triggered at least to a certain extent by the modernist studies' overall interest in matters of literary spatiality. Such literary analyses of space in Woolf's work have often focused on issues of domesticity, related to emergence of feminism and a new view on gender identity. Space in Woolf's novels of the 20s and 30s is inextricably connected to wider geographies, with the private and the public spheres constantly intertwining. Space is always political in Woolf's fiction, testifying to her constant preoccupation with issues such as class, gender, or the concept of the nation. The reading of space provided by this paper is based on Woolf's own combination of the manifold meanings of space as physical, emotional, and cultural.

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