

MAY SINCLAIR'S *THE THREE SISTERS* AS AN EARLY EXAMPLE OF MODERNIST FICTION



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1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1910 and 1920 May Sinclair (1863-1946) was considered by many as the most important English woman writer alive and her novels were compared to those of the best practitioners of the art in the past. After this period of splendour, her reputation was eclipsed by other writers and, since then, her pioneering contribution to English modernist fiction has been generally ignored.

May Sinclair played an active role in the new literary movements of her time. Among her friends were well-known writers such as Henry James, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Ford Madox Ford. From 1911 until 1920, she enjoyed the company of the young Imagist poets and was an active member of other groups that were promoting new ideas in literature such as the Tagorephiles and the Vorticists. Thus, Kaplan (1975: 47) has defined Sinclair as "a popularizer of themes and techniques which belonged to the avant-garde". (1975: 47).

In 1913, Sinclair was a founding member of the Medico-Psychological Clinic of London, the first one to use concepts and techniques of psychoanalysis in treating mental diseases.¹ She wrote an article on psychoanalysis entitled "Clinical Lecture on Symbolism and Sublimation", published in 1916 in *The Medical Press* (in Boll 1970: 463). Her familiarity

with psychoanalysis as well as with theories of philosophy was soon to be noticed in her novels. Another contribution to the evolution of her novels from Victorianism to a more modern stance came from Imagism. Several articles written by May Sinclair on Imagist poets like Richard Aldington, F.S. Flint, Ezra Pound and, especially, H.D. reveal Sinclair's awareness of and sympathy for the Imagist movement. In these articles, Sinclair defended the Imagist poets against criticism and showed a sympathetic attitude towards their principles, which she considered to be guided by Romantic doctrines. Thus, for her, "Wordsworth's aim and the Imagists' is to restore the innocence of memory as Gauguin restored the "innocence of the eye". She (1921a: 7) highlighted Flint's decisive and final break with tradition and the effectiveness of his *vers libre*. She (1921b: 398) also compared Aldington to a Romantic poet: "Richard Aldington is possessed by the sense of beauty, the desire of beauty, the absolute emotion, as no single poet since Shelley has been possessed, with the solitary exception of H.D.". Finally, in another of these articles dedicated to Imagist poets, Sinclair (1920b: 663) praised Ezra Pound for his "discovery" of the old literatures of China and Japan and the "clearness", "vividness", "precision" and "concentration" that resulted from their influence.

Sinclair was also a literary critic of notable perception and generosity. Her most famous article, "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson", expresses her critical appreciation of the aims and methods of what she epochally calls stream-of-consciousness novel. Despite the evident influence Richardson had on Sinclair, critics have usually agreed that Sinclair has a value of her own. Thus, in his early review of 1920, Dawson Scott (1919: 8) argues that Sinclair does not owe her merit as an innovative writer to Richardson's influence:

[...] to say that Miss Sinclair derives from this writer [Dorothy Richardson] would be doing her less than justice. For one thing, Miss Sinclair was experimenting with this method before Miss Richardson began to write, and for another, their work has nothing else in common. Miss Richardson's is monumental. [...] Miss Sinclair, on the contrary, is selective.

Kaplan (1975) also considers that it would do May Sinclair an injustice to give the impression that feminine consciousness was something that appeared only after she became acquainted with *Pilgrimage*. She (1975: 48-49) argues that Sinclair's stream of consciousness was the outgrowth of her own ideas and development as a novelist. Thus, when she read *Pointed*

Roofs, she would have recognized something in Dorothy Richardson that was also within herself.

As Zegger (1976: 143) points out, by reading Sinclair's novels, one gains a better perspective on the genesis of the modern novel. The influence of Henry James, Thomas Hardy, and the Brontës on the modern novel, frequently mentioned but actually difficult to trace in the works of other writers, is apparent in her novels.

In the words of Miller (1994: 164), Sinclair's Edwardian novels are the "struggle of putting new wine into old bottles", and her change to modernism is the acknowledgement of "the inevitable necessity of creating new bottles". Sinclair was one of the few Edwardian novelists who tried formal experimentation in her novels and sought new narrative structures and styles. For Miller (1994: 163-202), Sinclair sought new fictional forms with which to tell the stories of women's lives and in doing so, "she moved from a content-driven modernism to the modernism of form".

The aim of this study is twofold: first of all, the paper offers an analysis and evaluation of Sinclair's first novel as an early example of the transition from the classic realist to the modernist text narratives. Furthermore, *The Three Sisters* (1914) —Sinclair's first psychological novel— is considered in the light of some of the formal and thematic principles as well as the prototypes of female heroine that she would later use in other modernist novels such as *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919) and *Life and Death of Harriett Freaux* (1920). These three psychological novels form the core of Sinclair's fiction and should be considered an invaluable link between Edwardian and modernist fiction.

Sinclair's restless experimentalism made her change from one technique to another, never keeping long in one direction. Sinclair was, thus, continually fitting the experiences she wrote about into progressively changing formulas and abstract frames such as the theories of philosophical idealism, naturalism and psychoanalysis. However, eventually she would only maintain her idealistic point of view in her later fiction because of her criticism of the psychoanalysts' lack of concern for absolute truth and for a metaphysically comprehensive view of the world.

2. *THE THREE SISTERS* AS A LYRICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVEL

Sinclair's crucial position as a link between literary movements has to be understood in the diachronic context of established genres that are deeply rooted in the history of literature. Thus, the poetic element in her narrative

prose can be identified as a characteristic of what is called the lyrical novel. Some of the characters in Sinclair's psychological novels undergo complex and subtle mental processes that are adequately expressed through a poetic medium. This poetic release is typical of *Bildungsroman* novels such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. In this way, Sinclair's novels resemble poetry in both their contents and language. Language in Sinclair's psychological novels calls attention to itself and turns into a medium of poetic expression.

The Three Sisters (1914) has been seen as a powerful novel, structured around scenes of intensely realized moments that are presented by means of epiphanical moments. Images and symbols are used in it to suggest themes, so that the materials of fiction are transformed into patterns of imagery that give the novel a lyric quality. Thus, metaphorical suggestiveness is increased and the mind is rendered more effectively. Miller considers that this novel's characteristic features —“the concentrated poetic style, the narrative comprised of moments, the emphasis on consciousness, the symbolism, the psychology”— are typical of modernist fiction. (198-199)

Unlike *Mary Olivier* and *Harriett Frean*—which start *in medias res*— the first chapter of *The Three Sisters* gives the reader a traditional introduction to the setting where the action is going to take place. The second chapter descends from the general introduction provided in the first chapter to the more particular setting of the house and the presentation of the characters. There are three paragraphs devoted to an individual account of each sister that begin with a set formula.² “Mary, the eldest, sat in a low chair [...]” (3); “Alice, the youngest girl [...] lay stretched out in the sofa” and “Gwendolen, the second sister, sat leaning over the table [...]” (4).

Boll (1973: 228) situates in this novel the appearance of pointillism in Sinclair's fiction. Its influence is apparent in broadly spaced sections within the chapters, in paragraphs of a single sentence, and in the separation of the last paragraph in a chapter from the rest. These spaces help to keep the musical beat going. To balance the pointillism, there are repetitions and similar or contrasting images that create an impression of continuous movement. (1973: 228) Special arrangements of paragraphs and chapters give the novel a poetic rhythm that differentiates it from Sinclair's previous novels. Sometimes, a cluster of chapters is used to develop a single scene and present it through several points of view. A remarkable case is the group formed by chapters 6-10. Chapter six starts with Alice sliding into the drawing room before prayers to play the piano and concludes with her still continuing her boisterous performance of the Chopin Grande Polonaise:

And she played. She played the Chopin Grande Polonaise, or as much of it as her fingers, tempestuous and inexpert, could clutch and reach. She played neither with her hands nor with her brain, but with her temperament, febrile and frustrate, seeking its outlet in exultant and violent sound. [...]

And as she played the excitement gathered; it swung in more and more vehement vibrations; it went warm and flooding through her brain like wine. All the life of her bloodless body swam there, poised and thinned, but urgent, aspiring to some great climax of the soul. (13-14)

This passage characterizes Alice's piano performance as a means of sublimating her sexuality. Some words like “frustrate” and “outlet” in the first paragraph are clearly derived from Sinclair's knowledge of psychoanalytical concepts. The second paragraph seems to present Alice's playing as a substitute for sexual fulfilment, which culminates with an allusion to a sublimated orgasm: “aspiring to some great climax of the soul”. However, the reference to the soul in this last phrase also neutralizes and spiritualizes the too physical connotations of the preceding sentences. The reference to physical sensations in the description of Alice's rapturous performances will progressively become more open in its revelation of Alice's sexuality. Her enjoyment of the physical aspect of music has a clear effect on her body, mentioned twice as a receptacle of pleasurable sensations: “She enjoyed the massive, voluptuous vibrations that made her body a vehicle for the organ's surging and tremendous soul, Ally's body had become a more and more tremulous, a more sensitive and perfect medium for vibrations” (95). Alice's attempts to pass her ecstasy off as something spiritual are finally unmasked when she plays the organ with Jim Greatorex:

On both faces there was a look of ecstasy. It was essentially the same ecstasy; only, on Alice's face it was more luminous, more conscious, and at the same time more abandoned, as if all subterfuge had ceased in her and she gave herself up, willing and exulting, to the unspiritual sense that flooded her (227).

Chapter seven describes the effects of Alice's music on the house, her sisters, the vicar and Essy. This is a preparation for the climax of the vicar's expected violent reaction: “It raged like a demon. Tortured out of all knowledge, the

and writhed in its agony. [...] To let it loose thus
se and her revenge" (15).

Chapter eight is directly linked to the end of the
sentence of chapter seven is "Through the
y listened for the opening of the study door"
ter eight is "The study door did not open at
ues with the vicar's reaction of repeating to
d patience, wisdom and patience" (17) and the
ings to the narrative. The vicar is presented
deceived person. The narrator highlights the
reactions — "He was unaware that he was
l at the same time his temper and his
emphasizes his sense of self-importance: "To
aret appeared as the image of righteousness
place" (19). However, the narrator sees the
prisoned in a cell" (18). His unacknowledged
s of psycho-narration:³ "And all the time he
it, that, [...] evidences might be a little
wisdom and patience, of austerity and dignity,
ther comic statements about the vicar make
onality. Thus, the narrator characterizes his
s an act of "superhuman clemency" (52).
asizes the vicar's meanness: "Now, by the
ers were allowed to use his bedroom twice in
nd in the autumn, for the purpose of trying

on of rage by conjuring up the refrain that
ience. Wisdom and patience. [...] It was a
with Alice starting to play again, and this is
to the following. Thus, the end of chapter
hoben, the Pathetic Sonata" (22) and the
: "Mr Cartaret sat in his study, manfully
(23). The vicar finally commands Alice to
at chapter eight ends with the beginning of
ch continues throughout chapters nine and
pter ten marks the end of this cluster of
sed. [...] And, in the sudden ceasing of the
heard the sound of wheels and the clank of

This group of chapters (6-10), linked by means of Alice's piano performances, centre the characters' attention around a single motif. The reader is aware of their unity because they divide a single scene into separate parts that form a thematic whole. This phenomenon can also be found within paragraphs and sentences. Clusters of paragraphs, formed usually by groups of three, also comprise a thematic unity. The common element that bonds them is usually a character and they are responsible for the peculiar layout of the page that suggests poetry rather than prose. A paragraph separated off from the others — formed by one or more sentence — at the end of a chapter is another example of the unusual layout to be found. Thus, for instance, chapter ten ends with an isolated sentence: "The three sisters waited without a word for the striking of the church clock" (29).

The Three Sisters also marks a break from Sinclair's pre-war novels and opens her group of psychological novels. With this novel, she moved from the world of external environment to the inner world of feelings and the subconscious, from the world of Wells to the world of D. H. Lawrence. Zegger (1976: 74) considers *The Three Sisters* a transitional novel in the history of English literature, because its source is Charlotte Brontë and its influence leads to D. H. Lawrence. It offers a rich social history of late Victorian and Edwardian society and, at the same time, it provides a vivid account of the inner life of its protagonists. The parallelisms between Sinclair's and Lawrence's novels studied by Zegger (1976: 73-74) would include similarities in the plot and in the relationships between the characters, the representation of the moon as a symbol of the antagonism between men and women, and the contrast between an asexual, conventional sterile life and a fruitful sexual life (1976: 73-74). Miller (1994) also highlights the striking stylistic and thematic similarities between *The Three Sisters* and D. H. Lawrence's early fiction. She (1994: 199) points out that, like Sinclair, Lawrence was strongly influenced by the combination of feminism and realism in the new fiction of the 1890s, and that he also strove to shift the focus of his fiction to the unconscious. Likewise, Lawrence also showed interest in the sexual forces that motivate apparently sophisticated people.

For Phillips (1993: 22), *The Three Sisters* is an example of Sinclair's transition from traditional to experimental fiction. She (1993) explores the representation of consciousness in Sinclair's novels, employing a close formal analysis of voice and viewpoint, and demonstrating that even in her single consciousness novels, the consciousness of her characters is dialogic. Phillips (1993: 21-22) explains Sinclair's transitional role in English fiction

ious techniques in the portrayal of mind

g of a character's thought is, of course, a used by nineteenth-century novelists, ... and, for Sinclair, Henry James. The difference in s novels is simply one of emphasis. One way in ghts the thoughts of her characters is by as parallel to, and often in contrast with, their [never] this representation of thought depends of authorial presence within the novel, in the [narrator, whose presence may nevertheless be ng divisions between spoken and unspoken

alance between thought and conversation in a ner and outer conversation—in *The Three* enda and Rowcliffe meet for the first time. s an example of the unsystematic use of tor that expresses the characters' thoughts: hy am I always meeting you? What do you l. I've done it ever since we came here'. (It re you came'") (67). initiates Sinclair's group of psychological elaborate and sophisticated mental processes ns of a poetic language.

7 IMAGISM

uence of H. D.'s Imagistic poems and the ion of images like the flowering thorn-tree, e novel. Its physical presence conveys its of an emotion that speaks to her directly, ous reflection. Its function is, thus, similar inclair's (1922: 203) account of Imagist lid to describe her own aims in *The Three*

s poems] passion, emotion, reflection, and ivid image that does the work of description the burning unity of beauty. [...] H. D.

invariably presents her subtlest, most metaphysical idea under some living sensuous image solid enough to carry the emotion.

This fusion of qualities typical of the observer—"passion, emotion, reflection"—and of the image that is perceived recalls Bergson's idea of *durée* as a unification of the multiplicities perceived by the subject. The individual's "reflection" is simultaneous with that flux of the image he is perceiving and it includes it.⁴ The theory Sinclair expresses in this review of H.D.'s poems appears in Gwenda's moments of communion with nature, when she is contemplating a group of thorn-trees. In *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) Sinclair (in Boll 1973: 259) describes these moments of heightened psychic intensity, in which one perceives reality as

moments when things that we have seen all our lives without truly seeing them, the flowers in the garden, the trees in the field, the hawthorn on the hillside, change to us in an instant of time, and show the secret and imperishable life they harbour ...

In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Morris Beja (1971: 17) writes:

As men have found themselves putting less and less trust in the truths and absolutes of the past, they have more and more come to stress the *trivia* of existence. They have sought meaning in what they could see, all around them, in the apparently inconsequential objects and events of everyday life. Epiphanies have tended to be attached to certain recurrent attitudes toward the meaning of experience, the nature of reality, and the means of salvation—or at least of enlightenment.

These sudden spiritual manifestations in Sinclair's novels point towards the use of epiphany in a significant—modernist—way that links her to modern novelists like Joyce and Woolf and separates her from the more traditional techniques of her contemporaries—H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett—. The use of epiphany also makes *The Three Sisters* approach the characteristics and standards of poetry. It functions as a structural device that marks climaxes in the novel and gives unity to it.

The selection of objects that convey a transcendental meaning implied by an epiphany seems to be anticipated in Sinclair's (1915: 88) previous description of Imagism as "the naked representation of a thing [...] in no case is the Image a symbol of reality [...] it is reality [...] itself. You cannot distinguish between the thing and its image". (1915: 88) Thus, it seems

likely that *The Three Sisters* (1914) was the germ of some of Sinclair's subsequent theories on Imagism —presented in her article on H.D. and Imagism (1915) and her review of H.D.'s *Hymen* (1922)— and on philosophical idealism—*A Defence of Idealism* (1917).

Passion is the link that Sinclair discovers between Imagist poetry and the Brontës. Mary, Gwenda and Alice, the three protagonists of this novel, are modelled partly on the early Victorian Brontës and also illuminated by Freud's psychoanalysis. Phillips (1993: 167) has identified a variety of psychoanalytic concepts that are alluded to in *The Three Sisters*: repression, sublimation, association, symbolisation and displacement. Jean Radford (1981) finds the parallel with the Brontës' situation and setting striking and deliberate. She (1981: v) points out that Sinclair had written a series of introductions to some Brontë novels re-issued between 1907-1914, and that in 1912 she had published a study on them entitled *The Three Brontës*. Radford also points out that D. H. Lawrence's story "Daughters of the Vicar", published in 1914, also deals with the situation of Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women.

Sinclair's reflections in her book *The Three Brontës* give the reader an insight on the influence the Brontës had into her: "In *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Brontë comes for the first time into the kingdom of the inner life. She grasps the secret, unseen springs; in her narrow range she is master of the psychology of passion and of suffering [...]" (*The Three Brontës*, 124) "Passion" and "suffering" are, indeed, central in *The Three Sisters*, which also presents "the kingdom of the inner life" and its "secret, unseen springs". The innovation that Sinclair introduces is the psychoanalytical explanation of these hitherto unexplained forces.

4. THE NEW HEROINES

Sinclair's first modernist and psychological novel introduced prototypes of heroines that she would develop more fully in her later fiction, placing them in different situations and analysing their behaviour. Therefore, *Mary Olivier* (1919) and *Harriett Freen* (1920) can be understood as variations on *The Three Sisters*. Gwenda is the model on which Mary Olivier will be moulded, although some of Alice's features —like the sublimation of her passion in her piano playing— will also help to fashion her. *Mary Olivier* represents, thus, Sinclair's decision to select one type of woman from those she had introduced in *The Three Sisters*. By dedicating a whole novel to Mary's evolution from a

the possibilities of development that could be open to a woman similar to Gwenda. Harriett Freen, on the other hand, encapsulates all the negative characteristics of the Cartaret sisters.

Gwenda, Mary and Alice Cartaret live under the tyranny of their father, the vicar of Garth. All of them can be considered stereotypes of women: Gwenda is the independent one, Mary the feminine type and Alice the personification of passion. Gwenda's rebellious nature is able to attenuate her father's domination. She wins over the two characteristics that define the vicar's personality throughout the novel, namely "wisdom and patience": "Patience failed before her will and wisdom before the deadly thrust of her intelligence" (168). Alice is not able to oppose her father in such an effective way, and her rebellion consists in playing the piano without his consent and taking a morbid pleasure in her illness. Harriett Freen will also have the same attitude towards illness, the same as Prissie, who makes herself ill to attract her husband's attention. Alice's masochistic enjoyment of her illness is described as "a half-voluptuous pleasure" (32). She uses it as a device to become the focus of her family's attention and also as an excuse to meet Rowcliffe. Prissie's delight at her self-provoked illness —also intended to attract her husband's attention— is characterized in a remarkably similar manner as "voluptuous content".⁵

Alice's performance of Chopin's Grande Polonaise epitomizes her struggle to achieve self-fulfilment and the sublimation of her sexuality. As for Mary Olivier and Dorothy Richardson's Miriam, music is for Alice a way of releasing her oppressed inner life. By playing the piano, they all give vent to their unacknowledged feelings and have a semi-epiphanical revelation of transcendence.⁶ However, Gwenda finds no release in music, but in intellectual activity: "Her passion found no outlet in creating violent and voluptuous sounds. It was passive, rather, and attentive" (340). Despite Gwenda's independent nature, she will eventually end up taking care of her father, just as Mary Olivier has to renounce her own freedom to nurse her mother. Under the pressure of her isolated state, Gwenda sees herself dangling between her former desire of freedom, of wanting to earn her own living, and her present imprisonment: "There were moments when she saw herself as two women. One had still the passion and the memory of freedom. The other was a cowed and captive creature who had forgotten" (337).

Gwenda's conception of her inner life is similar to Mary Olivier's. Both of them think that their inner lives are impregnable against the worries of the world and they assert the superiority of their solitary selves over the outside

nothing moved" (339-340). The sentence "Outside nothing happened" has a striking similarity with Sinclair's (1918: 58) statement about the first three instalments of *Pilgrimage* in her article "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson": "Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on". This could suggest that when May Sinclair was reviewing Dorothy Richardson's novels, she was recognizing, perhaps unawares, something that she had already experienced in *The Three Sisters*. Her admission that "nothing happens" in Richardson's novels seems to refer to the lack of emphasis on the external world and the extreme importance of the internal world of the mind, the "plunge in" she (1918: 57) refers to in her article. Zegger (1976: 67) points out that Gwenda's love of the moors, together with her independence and courage, make her resemble Emily Brontë as depicted in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and in Mrs Gaskell's biography.

Another feature shared by the inner lives of Mary Olivier and Gwenda is that they cannot verbalize their epiphanical moments. Thus, we are told that Gwenda's experience of fusion with the landscape she contemplates cannot be expressed with language: "There were no words for this experience. [...] It seemed to her that she *was* what she contemplated, as if all her senses were fused together in the sense of seeing and what her eyes saw they heard and touched and felt" (340). This account of Gwenda's perception shows the influence of Henri Bergson's theory of *durée* as the individual's power to unify several multiplicities. Gwenda's thought is simultaneous with the fluxes of the natural landscape she is contemplating and it comprises them all. This simultaneity of fluxes refers to her inner duration, that is, real duration.⁷ Gwenda's moments of communion with nature are sometimes related to her contemplation of some thorn-trees and they could be seen as a precedent of Mary Olivier's more elaborate epiphanical moments. Gwenda's moments of mystical communion with nature could also be considered as a precedent of Mary Olivier's pantheism. In *The Three Brontës*, Sinclair's comments of Emily Brontë that "her passionate pantheism was not derived; it was established in her own soul. She was a mystic, not by religious vocation, but by temperament and by ultimate vision" (*The Three Brontës*, 171). Moonlit thorn-trees in flower have an unearthly quality for Gwenda and they are interpreted as the fruit of her suffering. The final reference to the thorn-trees closes the novel with a poetic note: "On Greffington Edge, under the risen moon, the white thorn-trees flowered in their glory". (*The Three Sisters*, 388)

Dedication to intellectual concerns is another way of escaping reality for Gwenda. After her renunciation of D. [unclear]

way of reading books is a symptom of her attempts to dominate her passion: "She had become a furious reader. She liked hard stuff that her brain could bite on. It fell on a book and gutted it, throwing away the trash. [...] She must have strong, heavy stuff that drugged her brain. And when she found that she could trust her intellect she set it deliberately to fight her passion" (351-352). In her attempts to dominate passion by means of intellectual concerns, she is similar to Mary Olivier, who writes poems to forget "desire": "The poem would be made of many poems. It would last a long time, through the winter and on into the spring. As long as it lasted she would be happy. She would be free from the restlessness and the endless idiotic reverie of desire". (*Mary Olivier*, 234) Mental activity is paradoxically characterized in this passage with images of physical violence—implied by the words "furious", "gutted" and "fight"—and the resistance opposed by the books she reads—described by the adjectives "hard", "strong" and "heavy". This portrayal of intellectual activity as a physical struggle suggests Gwenda's efforts to sublimate her sexuality. Radford (1981: vi) mentions Sinclair's use of "psychoanalytic theory to dramatise the tension between conscious and unconscious motives in her characters, between the social rationalizations and the irrational forces of their sexual drives". However, she (1981: vi) also points out that Sinclair had also treated women's sexuality in a previous novel, *The Helpmate*, published in 1907.

The reader of *The Helpmate* may notice several levels of awareness in the characters. From the beginning of the novel, irony provides the reader with a point of view that differs from the idea the characters have of themselves. Phillips's (1993) analysis of the problematic area of the unconscious in *The Three Sisters* demonstrates the variety of methods employed by Sinclair, and her success in leaving open to the reader the interpretation of her characters' unconscious minds. She (1993: 157) distinguishes three levels of thought: "conscious articulated thought, [...] pre-verbal thought which is not articulated, [...] and finally, the deepest of the three levels, the one that is incapable of articulation because it is below [...] [the] level of awareness". Radford (1981: ix) is also aware of difficulties in the representation of unconscious life in *The Three Sisters*, such as the parenthetical authorial interventions to tell the reader about the discrepancies between conscious and unconscious mind. An instance of the discrepancy between the conscious and the unconscious mind can be found in Gwenda's renunciation of Rowcliffe, so that her sister Alice can marry him. Gwenda's renunciation is parallel to Harriett's refusal to acknowledge her love for Robin, her friend's fiancé.

dependent personality and the unsublimated repression of her desires make her unable to accept her frustrated love and ruin her life completely. Like her sister Mary, Gwenda feels self-satisfied with the idea of her own goodness: "She [Gwenda] faced it [the fact that she would have to go away] with a strange courage and a sort of spiritual exaltation, as she would have faced [the discovery] that she was going to die" (184). Irony can be perceived in this passage, as Gwenda equates her sacrifice with a dramatic personal immolation of herself in the name of her sister. The narrator intervenes later with a comment that is intended to explain Gwenda's unconsciousness: "But it never occurred to her that this dying of hers was willed by her. It seemed foredoomed, inevitable" (185).

Chapter sixty-two is dedicated to unveil these unconscious feelings of Gwenda by means of what the narrator calls a "duologue". Her personality seems to be split into two sides each of which engages in an argument about her renunciation of Rowcliffe. This passage proves that, despite the differences between them, Gwenda is like Harriett Freen in her renunciation of her lover. They do it out of a sense of self-righteousness. Thus, whereas Harriett takes pride in having behaved "beautifully", Gwenda's "unconsoling voice" tells her she has done it for her soul: "And a dreadful duologue went on in her [...]. 'You should have taken. You had your chance'. 'I'd have died, rather'. 'Do you call this living?' [...] The unconsoling voice had the last word. For it was not in answer to it that a certain phrase came into her brooding mind" (370-371).

Whereas Gwenda and Harriett sacrifice their lovers' happiness for their own self-satisfied complacency, Mary Cartaret and Prissie are aware of their husbands' depression at not having married the women they loved, but they seem to take advantage of this knowledge to hurt their self-sacrificing sister and friend. Mary is pleased by her husband's depression because it gives her more control over him. In the following passage, the narrator gives an account of Mary's unacknowledged feelings for her husband: "Mary was unaware of the cause of his [Rowcliffe's] malady. If it had been suggested to her that he had got into this state because of Gwenda she would have dismissed the idea with contempt. [...] Rowcliffe's state was a consolation and a satisfaction to her [...] to Mary her sorrow and her tenderness were a voluptuous joy". (374)

Gwenda's unconscious feelings when she learns that Mary is going to have a baby recall Harriett Freen's similar reaction when her friend Prissie, also married to the man Harriett loves, tells her about her dead baby and her hope of having another:⁸ "And when she had told [...]"

be glad". She said to herself, "I will be glad. I want Mary to be happy. Why shouldn't I be glad? It's not as if it could make any difference" (343-344). Gwenda has to force herself to be "glad". The repetition of this adjective in this passage emphasizes her obsessive repression of her sexual jealousy. This unawareness of unconscious reasons is also shared by Mary Cartaret, who gives an image of "goodness and sweetness" typical of the "womanly woman" type she incarnates, and uses her pretended goodness as a shield to hide her manipulations. Mary's excellent idea of herself is also presented in an ironic key as her "exquisite sense of her own goodness" (334). While trying to meet Rowcliffe because she feels attracted to him, she keeps convincing herself that she is doing it for her sister Alice. This justification is sometimes enclosed in brackets without the intervention of a narrator and it highlights her self-deception and the intrigues hidden beneath Mary's "goodness and sweetness": "(She said to herself it would look better on Ally's account.)" (213).

Mary inadvertently unveils her unconscious thoughts in a conversation she has with Gwenda when she reproachfully reminds her that she has always been nice to her. Her obsession with "behaving beautifully" is shared by Harriett Freen:⁹ "[...] Mary believed in keeping up appearances, and the appearance she most desired to keep up was that of behaving beautifully to her sister. [...]" (378-379). Mary's thoughtless comment in her conversation with Gwenda allows her sister to see her true nature behind the veil of "sweetness and goodness" and the remorse she feels. Authorial comments also unmask other characters' real natures such as Rowcliffe's and the Vicar's.¹⁰ Rowcliffe, characterized by the expression "romantic youth" throughout the novel, is presented by the narrator as selfish and conceited. The phrase "romantic youth" represents Rowcliffe's high idea of himself and his self-deception. It is an identity he assumes before himself and the world: "He knew he would not really have liked it. But his romantic youth persuaded him in that moment that he would" (67). Rowcliffe's duplicity is seen in the inner and outer dialogue that he maintains when he is talking to Gwenda: "He said to himself: 'She doesn't take it [the hysterical nature of Alice's illness] in yet. [...]' To her he said: 'Well, I'll send the medicine along to-night'" (*The Three Sisters*, 77). In his thoughts, he rather cruelly refers to Alice as "a poor parson's hysterical daughter" (80).

Alice is convinced that Rowcliffe is in love with her. The narrator presents her self-deception in a more sympathetic way, giving a comic account of Rowcliffe's visits from Alice's point of view. The vocabulary

destructive to the blessed state, which was pure passivity, untroubled contemplation in its early stages, before the oncoming of rapture" (91). The narrator's description of Alice's ecstatic contemplation of Rowcliffe with words such as "ecstasy", "blessed state" and "rapture" recalls the presentation of the mystical process of achieving direct intuitive experience of the divine. The technical precision of the vocabulary in this account of Alice's experience has a comic effect on the reader, who is made to realize how deep her infatuation is.

Rowcliffe's self-deception contributes to his being allured by Mary's "sweetness and goodness". He is aware of what lies behind these two qualities of good Victorian wives, but, later, he will deliberately forget them: "He was aware that Mary Cartaret was sweet and good. But he had found that sweet and good women were not invariably intelligent. As for honesty, if they were always honest they would not always be sweet and good" (74). Progressively, his idea of Mary becomes more acceptable because of the soothing tranquillity that he associates with her: "And it struck Rowcliffe, as it had frequently struck him before, how good her face was" (216). This effect has the result of modifying even his perception of her physical appearance: "His impression was that Mary had made herself beautiful. [...] Up till now it hadn't occurred to him that Mary could be beautiful" (237). From this moment, he will convince himself that she is perfect for him. The reason is that Mary is always doing domestic work and seems to enjoy it. Thus, when he sees her knitting he approvingly thinks: "How sweet she is. And how innocent. And good" (241). Mary finally achieves her goal of presenting herself as the only possible alternative for Rowcliffe. She has managed to do this by portraying her sisters in a poor light and by presenting herself as the saviour of the vicarage's household management.

Gwenda is also seen through Rowcliffe's eyes and judged in an erroneous way. First he assigns negative characteristics to her—egoism and conceit—which later prove to apply to himself too: "He said to himself that Gwenda was impossible. She was obstinate and conceited and wrong-headed. She was utterly selfish, a cold mass of egoism" (201). His dislike of Gwenda seems to be caused by her independent nature, which makes him think he cannot wholly control her. Zegger's (1976: 74) awareness of the true nature of the relationship between Gwenda and Rowcliffe is also apparent in her comment that "Gwenda has a core of individuality that she cannot submerge in her relationship with Steven, and her self-contained and aloof quality exasperates Steven" (1976: 74). Gwenda herself explains to Rowcliffe that she is neither feminine¹⁰ nor gentle, and these are precisely the qualities he will find in Mary: "... I am not so dependent on people. I am not gentle as Ally. I am

not as loving and I'm not as womanly. In fact, I'm not womanly at all" (198). Rowcliffe resents her having a life of her own, where he plays no part, and his progressive disenchantment with her is what makes him start to pay attention to Mary's "sweetness and goodness". Gwenda is given the privilege of unmasking Rowcliffe, and, significantly, she does it by disclosing the falseness of his "romantic youth". Now that the mask has fallen from his face, his selfishness—the sin he had charged her with—becomes apparent.

This section has analysed the complex interactions between the characters from *The Three Sisters* and those from *Mary Olivier* and *Harriett Freen*, showing that Gwenda not only has some positive traits that are similar to Mary Olivier's, but also shares some of the negative characteristics of Mary Cartaret and Harriett Freen.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Sinclair's *The Three Sisters*—together with the rest of her psychological fiction—is in need of being divulged and analysed as a major contribution to the transitional English fiction of the early twentieth century. This paper has attempted to contribute to this aim by analysing her first novel as the forerunner of much of her later modernist fiction, in which she fully developed her own views on contemporary theories such as Imagism and on philosophical idealism. *The Three Sisters* shows the influence of Imagism in its profusion of poetic images related to spiritual manifestations. The subject feels identified with the image in a process that can be likened to Bergson's idea of *durée*. These ecstatic moments of heightened intensity are recognisably related to the later modernist epiphany exemplified in the work of Joyce and Woolf, and bring the novel close to the lyrical standards of poetry, functioning both as a structural device that gives coherence and unity to the novel and marks its climaxes. *The Three Sisters* marks Sinclair's change to the typically modernist narrative, where there is an emphasis on the inner world of thought and the subconscious, unsystematically represented by means of parenthesis. Moreover, the poetic quality of Sinclair's narrative prose entitles it to be included in the category of the lyrical novel. The complex and elaborate mental processes expressed in Sinclair's psychological novels find a suitable medium of expression in poetic language. In *The Three Sisters*, epiphanical moments, images and symbols contribute to create a lyrical atmosphere that complements the poetic medium of expression, also highlighted by Sinclair's distinctive marking of paragraphs, chapters and sentences. Thus, a group of chapters can be focused on a single motif that makes them function as a thematic unity.

This paper has also studied how the play of mirrors generated by the different prototypes of heroines in *The Three Sisters* explains the ways in which Sinclair's later psychological novels reflect and distort those patterns of female characters. *Mary Olivier* and *Harriett Frean* can be understood as variations on *The Three Sisters*. Whereas Mary Olivier is presented as a positive character who is partly moulded on Gwenda and Alice, Harriett Frean encapsulates all the negative features of the Cartaret sisters. Alice, Harriett Frean and Prissie have the same morbid and masochistic enjoyment of illness, used as a device for making oneself the focus of attention. Alice and Mary Olivier enjoy playing the piano as a release for their repressed minds. Gwenda and Mary Olivier have a similar conception of their inner lives as being solitary and superior to the external world and they cannot verbalize their epiphanical experiences. Both Gwenda and Mary Olivier enjoy similar moments of communion with nature and they struggle to achieve independence by means of a progressive intellectualization. This dedication to intellectual issues puts their femininity at risk, as it does for Jane Holland, one of the protagonists of one of Sinclair's early novels, *The Creators* (1909). However, Gwenda also has some similarities with negative characters like Mary Cartaret. They are both self-satisfied with the idea of their goodness and because of their sense of self-righteousness they do not marry the men they love. On the other hand, Mary Cartaret and Prissie are similar in their awareness and enjoyment of their husbands' depression at having married the wrong women. The self-deception of some characters like Alice, Rowcliffe and the Vicar is presented in a sympathetic or ironic key. Thus, Rowcliffe's negative judgement of Gwenda as egoist and conceited adequately describes him. The unconscious feelings of the characters in *The Three Sisters* are represented by means of duologues and bracketed sentences that inform the reader of the characters' unacknowledged thoughts and motivations and show Sinclair's knowledge of psychoanalysis. The superiority of internal reality over external events is, thus, an essential modernist characteristic of *The Three Sisters*, something that Sinclair would also highlight in her review of Dorothy Richardson's novels with the sentence: "Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on". □

NOTES

¹ In "May Sinclair and the Medico-Psychological Clinic of London", Theophilus Boll (1962) gives a thoroughly documented history of the founding and dissolution for the clinic and of Sinclair's activities as a founder-member, her support of the clinic, and her authorship of the report of the clinic for 1918-1919. In passing, Boll (1962: 310-326) says of Sinclair as an author, "her disappearance from critical history is a silent witness against the narrowed perceptiveness of the contemporary critical world, and not a judgement against her works".

² Hereafter page numbers from *The Three Sisters* will be given in brackets.

² I am using Dorrit Cohn's terminology (1978).

³ See Deleuze (1987: 83-85).

⁴ Prissie has a masochistic pleasure similar to Harriett's and Ally's when she tells Harriett that the doctors find no reason for her illness. The narrator reveals Prissie's secret reasons by means of the ellipses, meant to represent repressed thoughts that cannot be voiced by the character.

In the morning Priscilla told her about her illness. [...] It seemed to give her pleasure to go over it, from her first turning round and round in the street (with helpless shaking laughter at the queerness of it), to the moment when Robin bought her the wheel-chair. ... Robin. ... Robin ... "I minded most because of Robin. [...] Robin's a perfect saint. He does everything for me". Prissie's voice and her face softened and thickened with voluptuous content. (*Harriett Frean*, 73-74) (Ellipses enclosed in square brackets are mine, the others belong to the text.)

⁵ Mary Olivier's inner happiness is closely related to her enjoyment of piano playing: "When Mary thought of the piano her heart beat faster, her fingers twitched, the full, sensitive fingers tingled and ached to play" (*Mary Olivier*, 183). This streak in Mary's personality could be seen, thus, as the result of the direct influence of Alice Cartaret, and also, possibly, of the first three instalments of *Pilgrimage* that Sinclair had reviewed in 1918. This would confirm the idea that Sinclair's *Mary Olivier* is not merely the result of Dorothy Richardson's influence.

⁷ "Harriett was aware of a sudden tightening of her heart, of a creeping depression that weighed on her brain and worried it. She thought this was her pity for Priscilla" (*Harriett Frean*, 75). The last sentence shows an ironic judgement of Harriett's behaviour on the part of the narrator, who shows a knowing complicity with the reader. Both are aware of Harriett's jealousy.

⁸ Harriett's self-deception is also expressed in the repeated references to her "beautiful behaviour". Her parents had always expected her "to behave beautifully" (*Harriett Frean*, 23). However, there are some paradoxical references to this adjective. Beauty is associated with goodness—"Being naughty was [...] doing ugly things. Being good was being beautiful like Mamma" (*Harriett Frean*, 15)—but red campion flowers, the symbol of sexuality, are also said to be beautiful: "Look Hatty, how beautiful they are" (*Harriett Frean*, 20).

⁹ Phillips conducts a detailed study of ironical ways of alluding to some of the characters in *The Three Sisters*. Thus, the vicar is referred to with the phrase "wisdom and patience", which develops into a much subtler and extensive exploration of his lack of charity and his repressed sexuality. Rowcliffe is called a "romantic youth", as he can be read alternatively as a glamorous hero figure or as an arrogant and deluded person. Mary's self-image is characterized also by the repeated phrase "goodness and sweetness", which suggests the legend of "the angel in the house" (194-293).

¹⁰ Gwenda's rejection of her femininity could be seen in relation to her independence—she even wants to earn her own living working as a secretary—and with her intellectualization. Jane Holland, one of the protagonists of *The Creators* (1909), is also said to have a masculine side because of her dedication to intellectual issues, in this case, literary creation.

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