Alexandra Roxana Mărginean[1]

GRAHAM SWIFT'S *THE SWEET-SHOP OWNER* – MAKING DO WITH PATTERNED REALITY

Abstract: *As Richard Jenkins, Stuart Hall, Althusser and many others have contended, identity is never defined in a void, but always social, resulting from an interplay of variables and power, through similarity and difference. Interpellated in his social positions and roles not so much as a result of his own plans, but at the mercy of those made by others, the protagonist in The Sweet-Shop Owner is the epitome of an ordinary individual. Nevertheless, he has a strategy to (ab)use the roles he is assigned, meaning that he accepts performing in them, but at the same time struggles with existentialist questions. In the examination of social interaction, the approach used is that of cultural studies. We discuss its main aspects in each of the sections. To support our points of view, we resort to concepts from sociology, psychology, anthropology and identity studies. Particularly useful is Erving Goffman's theory of performance as part of people's everyday existence, especially since characters feel burdened by the theatricality of life.*

Key words**:** *identity, (ab)use, pattern, performance, gift*

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the characters' interactions in the social environment in the novel *The Sweet-Shop Owner* by Graham Swift. The objective is to show how their identity is built, bearing in mind that, according to a great number of sociologists, identity is always socially constructed. To some extent, the characters, especially the protagonist, are the typical average people, as they live in a banal space (the suburb), earn an average income with their small business of shopkeepers, like many others living between the 1930s and the 1970s, and have ordinary lives. Moreover, Will is mediocre by attitude, being afraid to fulfil his military duty and hiding from it in the suburb and in a marriage that serves social convenience and his wife's wish to cover up a rape that she has suffered.

In relation to the roles that the characters dress into, a particularity stands out, namely the way they use and abuse them. The analysis explains what this attitude means and follows the manner in which they act in their social roles and in relation to one another. Then, it interprets this behaviour relative to the idea of mediocrity, seeking to establish if it is part of it, as yet another failure to be outstanding in something one does, or, on the contrary, atypical to it. The conclusions offer some perspective as to the protagonist-narrator's hidden reasons for humbling himself into the position of plainness.

Patterns as performances and routines

Will Chapman is appalled at the possibility of going to war and remains to live in a suburb of South London. He sees the front as a place of "action" – an obsessively recurrent word that Will uses to describe it – whereas the suburb is like a protective cocoon sheltering him from danger. It is obvious, both from the context and the periodic return to the word "action" in the story, that what Will is afraid of is not only war but also life itself, characterised primarily by dynamism, which in turn entails risk, responsibility and decision-making – things that Will is desperate to escape. Thus, he gives up manliness, heroism and

[1] Romanian-American University

duty in order to remain at home, where he prefers to become the obedient husband of a rich young woman and do what is required of him.

Chapman displays a marked feeling of alienation from his personal and social identities. He is convinced that history randomly places people into certain positions: “He had planned nothing. Not for himself. And yet he knew: plans emerged. You stepped into them.” (Swift 24) In his opinion, all that one can do in such a situation is to try to function in the context where one has ended up: “He would play his part: What was easier? To step inside it like a bubble.” (44)

Remarks that describe people’s condition in the world and their roles as printing patterns become a leitmotif. For a while, Will worked at Ellis’s printing house. In his opinion, the same things that apply to print works apply to people’s lives – “spacing” i.e. appearance and “patterns” are important, not the “content”: “The content was unimportant. It was the layout that mattered.” (24). The same happens to people everywhere, at any point in time. They are merely thrown into contexts by history, whether they make efforts to actively control their lives or remain passive: “Henry VIII and his wives were like characters in costume. They weren’t real, but they didn’t know it. History fitted them into patterns.” (24).

The motif of the world as a stage derives from this outlook on existence. The day Chapman meets Irene, his future wife, at Ellis’s, they leave together to watch children on a playground. When Will confesses he would sometimes like to join the kids on the slide, and she asks why he doesn’t, he becomes “the man from the audience taking the stage” (27). He enters both the playground and the role of her future life partner. By accepting to entertain her, by entering the frame of reality that she was watching, he assumes the figurative role of a child in relation to her. He accepts to be manipulated and ordered around: “as he did so he knew he would be hers” (27). He is interpellated in his future positions by Irene, and he becomes her property and puppet.

In the novel’s last scene, Chapman hints again at his view of life as a theatre, by calling his shop a “stage” (215). As he leaves it, we understand that the role of a shopkeeper has always felt foreign to him and can therefore be easily taken off, like a piece of clothing. The shop has been “the cage of some unobliging pet” – an opportunity for self-display, but at the same time a constraining space (213-4). Will Chapman’s exit is also a preamble to his nearing death, and an omen in this respect. It represents the rejection of gazes from the outside, in an attempt to hide away. He hides quite a number of things: the pain of feeling alien to his own existence; not being loved by his wife; missing his daughter; shame and sorrow that Dorry no longer wants to see him. These feelings have grown in intensity to the point of becoming ob-scene, i.e. impossible to display.

The realization that roles are unnatural interpretations of actors is accompanied by the feeling that one is an impostor in one’s own life. There is subsequent anxiety not to be de-conspired as a fraud. Will wonders about the fact that “not one […] doubted that he was the sweetshop owner” (44). His other feelings are lack of freedom and unsuitability in his roles, which are caricatures of normal situations. At his own wedding, Will seems a dummy sitting for an act: “He’d do for a bride-groom. To have a wedding you needed a bride-groom. He felt like someone borrowed for the occasion.” (23).

The existence of patterns never triggers violent feelings in him. The only negative ones are helplessness and low self-esteem. In fact, he does not dislike patterns. The mention of details of his activity at the publishing house shows that he is passionate about the printing models at work (which stand for the symbolical ones in reality). For each book, he sets a certain type of mould, so that there should be “correctness of spacing” (23). He also establishes the letter size of each fragment, according to its importance. Getting ink on his fingers is something that he overlooks with a casual remark: “There was always a little mess, if there were patterns.” (24). He implies that creating a patterned reality entails something unclean, figuratively speaking. By this, he means neglect of people’s individualities, and denial of their free choice. He wonders at the existence of patterns, at the idea that things should be this way, but inasmuch as they offer a surrogate order, he likes them.

He is passive, obedient, trying to fit in the identity that has been attributed to him. He feels content when he is asked to do nothing, as he has no particular or high goals of his own: “But he didn’t mind.” (23). His speech at the wedding, despite all “that condescension”, (which, surprisingly, he does not resent so much), sums up this attitude: “[he] said simply, gawping: "Thank you, thank you…thank you really,

thank you all."" (23). He cherishes what he receives and mourns the loss of it when it is taken away. Weak and helpless as the sweet-shop owner may be, he is not deprived of an almost pathological sensitivity, which gives him insight and roundness as a character.

Another meaning of the word pattern is habit, or daily activity (Malcolm 41). Habits have three main functions: to create imprinted or "inscribed" space (Low, Lawrence-Zúñiga 13) (a space that bears the markers of its inhabitant's personality), and thus identity for the individual; to enable bonds, which make up one's identity; to help the person block anxiety. Anthony Steinbock defines habit as the "power" to adapt and to create "new norms", "dilating our being in the world" (186). It is a process of acquiring identity.

Will Chapman needs routine to enact the roles that make up his identity. In the routine of the shop, he is the man who brings smiles to kids' faces, giving them candy and juggling ice-cream like a clown. Gestures are identity markers. The comparison with a clown subtly indicates a significant aspect of his personality. Will is like a jester, because all that he does is to *entertain* the others and their wishes. He is what someone else – Irene – has made him: a candy seller, her husband, and Dorry's father. A candy dealer resembles a clown because he cannot be taken seriously. He is bound to be perceived as somebody who brings laughter, and also as a person who can be laughed at. He strikes one as an insignificant individual, a familiar small person, (figuratively speaking), and never as a hero. These may be preconceptions, but they are part of the stereotype associated with this (kind of) job(s).

An equally significant part of Will's habits are connected with the space of the house. He religiously enacts a specific morning routine before leaving for work. Every day, for breakfast, he has two soft-boiled eggs prepared by Irene Chapman. He keeps her company while she is reading the newspapers. Irene pours him tea in the little china cups on saucers, and brings his briefcase to the table when he has finished the meal. These apparently insignificant activities reveal him as a husband, and Irene as a wife. Every evening, Will puts his baby girl to sleep in her cot, and makes puppets and dolls walk its rail. These gestures give him the awareness of being a father, create and enact a love bond, as well as reveal him as a better parent than Irene.

In order to see how habits are also relievers of anxiety, we should first analyze anxiety in the context of Swift's world. As Z. Bauman explained, in modern times of optimism with respect to the power of rationality, "regimentation" replaced the "fear of uncertainty" with that of "deviation" from norms (Bauman 112). Uniformity and conformity were the canon, and not to deviate supposedly depended on the individual (112). Late modernity, which witnessed de-institutionalization, brought about a "frenzy of self-forming and self-asserting efforts" (113). This frenzy replaced the fear of deviation with that of "*inadequacy*" – i.e. not being able to master one's destiny successfully (113). There were no guiding lines in an age that had survived not only the death of God, but also that of Reason. This anxiety was not about being unable to follow a prescription, but about not having any prescription to follow. It derived from ontological and epistemological barrenness. There was an exchange of types of dependence – responsibility replaced conformity, but the liberation that came with being responsible for oneself brought more anxiety than the previous lack of freedom (114).

Consequently, anxiety arises from the insecurity brought about by the aspects mentioned above. For Will, it appears partly from a crisis of individuality that combines the two cases presented by Bauman. Will does not understand the meaning of existence in a time of war horror, when British war heroism cracks to reveal itself as a construct, so he has unanswered ontological and epistemological questions, but ultimately makes do with conformity in his received roles. For Chapman, even more anxiety arises from the absence of the loved ones – Irene, his wife, who has passed away, and Dorothy, his daughter, who has run away with a history teacher. After Irene's death, he keeps the habits that he used to have in common with his wife. He also spends time in a rocking armchair in the marital bedroom, as the space is imbued with Irene's presence. The perpetration of these habits is an attempt to somehow symbolically become the absent other (Giddens 46), who is thus possessed in a way. This helps Will compensate for the absence of his wife, and thus cope with missing her.

Anxiety caused by the absence of the loved one(s) is rooted in "fear of separation" from the caretaker, "usually the mother" (45-6). In Chapman's case, the source of anxiety is double, as the two

emotional interests in his life are gone. To Will, the two women were a prop, his source of love and trust, and his reason and courage to go on. Their absence worsens his already pathological fear of living. In this context, the habits that he preserves function as "coping mechanisms" (46), which are meant to guide him through his remaining days by making the surrounding space familiar. By showing him what needs to be done step by step, they allow Chapman to avoid a symbolic paralysis. The shop, the money left by Irene, the armchair he keeps rocking in, and the china she liked may all be considered "transitional objects" (Winnicot qtd. in Giddens 39), or bridges with the absent object of his affection and with the world. They are ""not-me" objects" that, along with the corresponding "routines", bracket anxiety (39). They help him deal with reality, not by "omnipotent control", but by "manipulation" (Giddens 39). They form the equivalent of the childhood "average expectable environment" – the familiar space that eases anxiety (Winnicot qtd. in Giddens 41). Will is even ready to trade a transitional object, namely the inheritance money that links him with Irene, and is crucial for his survival, if it can bring his daughter closer to him. He gives it up in the hope that Dorry will no longer be upset with him and return home, which she does not do.

Dramatic representations

Some of Goffman's concepts will be useful at this point, to connect in more detail the notions of stage, role(s), and habits. The "front" refers to the setting of the interaction (Goffman 32). It is usually fixed, but it may also be relatively mobile, as in the case of funeral processions or parades (33). "Personal front" includes characteristics like: "insignia of office or rank; clothing, sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures" (34). Not all these are permanent, and they are divided into "appearance" and "manner", the latter being more flexible (34). Consistency is expected between "setting, appearance, and manner" (35). A social role comes with an already-established front (37), so fronts are not created by the performer, but rather selected from a set (38).

"Dramatic realization" makes the individual visible to people around; it refers to the acting out of oneself, or of one's version of oneself, in order to become noticeable (40). There is the danger of overdoing this, in which case the result is an impairment of essence: the example given by Goffman (quoting Sartre) is that of the student who tries so hard to show by mimicry that he is paying attention in class, that this performance ruins his attention (42). This example points to "the dilemma of expression versus action": it is uncertain whether one is sacrificed for the other, or if a compromise can be reached (43).

There are various locations in the novel that function as fronts: Will's shop; the children's playground (mentioned earlier); Dorothea's bedroom, where he acts out his role as a father, tucking her in; the living-room, where the couple has breakfast, etc. On these stages, Will Chapman plays different roles, by assuming certain demeanours, gestures, actions, and habitual activities that are part of his "dramatic realizations". As we have seen above, he plays his part consistently. When it comes to playing the part of a candy shopkeeper before the children, Will perhaps sometimes overdoes the routine, focusing too much on appearance, like Goffman's student. This happens because he is eager to please and do his job well. At the end of the novel, he leaves the shop, i.e. his main front stage, and walks home – the "backstage" – in order to prepare for the ob-scene act of dying. It might be quite interesting to dwell a little on the contrast between the front and back regions, and on their significance.

Performance in the front region is an effort to prove that the individual's activity is in agreement with certain "standards" (110). Direct engagement standards are "the way in which the performer treats the audience" verbally, in terms of "politeness" and behaviour; indirect engagement, or "decorum", refers to one's conduct while in the "visual or aural range" of the others (110). Decorum has, in its turn, two subgroups of requirements, namely the "moral" ones, which are "ends in themselves", and the "instrumental" requirements, which are "not ends", but "duties" (110). An example of decorum would be the "make-work", which refers to both the amount of work that one is expected to do, and the appearance of being engaged in work (112). Make-work has its own standards, connected with: "mode of dress; permissible sound levels; proscribed diversions, indulgences, and affective expressions" (113).

In the “"back region" or "backstage"”, all the repressed aspects that “discredit the fostered impression” in the front region are allowed to manifest freely (114). It may be the area of “offending expressions”, where the performer relaxes (115). The moments in-between the front stage and the backstage should be carefully concealed by the performer, who should not be seen going from one to the other, which is a strategy of “impression management” (116). This in-betweenness materialises in a “putting on and taking off of character” in the passage between the two sites (123). This change of site literally means change of identity or identity facets.

All Will’s gestures on various front stages are compliant with the expected standards of direct and indirect engagement linked with the respective roles. The moral decorum requirements are manifest in his morality as a person, and his love towards his wife and children. His parental love for his daughter is greater than her mother’s. Will’s lack of injurious or licentious expression, even during his off-stage moments, is due to his moral integrity. Although he is far from being a man of action, he does not fail at any time to be a man of character. In connection with this, he is also what Goffman calls a “sincere” performer, (in opposition to a “cynical” one) (29), because he is “fully taken in by his own act” (28). The reason why he questions any given aspect of his life is not cynicism, but a desire to find evidence that it may indeed represent something meaningful. In his case, there seems to be lack of “communication out of character” (166). Chapman’s interior monologues are the expression of his innermost thoughts and feelings. No trace of cynicism or coarseness appears in their extreme tenderness and lyricism, which suggests honesty. Regarding “make-work”, he is consistent in his behaviour at the shop. Besides being an entertainer for children, Chapman arranges his counter as if it were the most significant activity in the world, keeps his hours, and works hard, returning home only in the evening.

Faulty relationships

In *The Sweet-Shop Owner*, love is not a “pure” relationship (Giddens 88), i.e. a relationship “valued for its own sake” (90) in which partners stay together for no other interests. Nevertheless, to some extent it involves “being-for” the other (Bauman 51), which is a form of dedicated togetherness in which reason has no say, but emotions come to the fore (Lévinas 105-6). A first reason why Chapman’s relation with Irene fails to be “pure” is that both are maimed in their sense of self. Irene is affected in her ability to trust people, because of the rape and of her family’s attitude, whereas Will has difficulties in conceptualising his identity as an individual. He is struggling with insecurities, low self-esteem, and an inferiority complex in relation to Irene.

However, like most characters, Chapman is looking for a context to acquire meaning and self-respect. Such a context involves morality and duty. This is why he is capable of selflessness and a being-for attitude. He puts up with Irene’s refusal to give herself to him, with her whims and authoritarian personality, allowing himself to be like a “slave” for his wife. Also, he gives his daughter Irene’s legacy money, even though Dorry abandons him never to come back. He proves his true love to both women, although neither does the same in relation to him. He is also changed by his genuine love. On the one hand, he sacrifices himself, and thus becomes a nobler human being. On the other hand, his socioeconomic status changes. He marries up the social ladder, receiving a shop and a spacious house as wedding gifts.

Although Will is capable of being-for the other, and of genuine affection in his relationship with Irene, there are interests alien to love in it, which prevent it from being “pure”. To Will, marriage also represents an escape from coping with the world alone. Also, Irene enters their relationship out of spite. Since her family offered her no support after having been raped by Hancock, and since she has been feeling like a beautiful object that they took pride in, she marries the dullest man she can find. To her, marriage to Will is a form of getting back at fate and her parents: “I was a beauty. I had no life. That is why I chose you – with no talent, no initiative – for the justice of it.” (Swift 28). Her family is grateful for the marriage for equally wrong reasons. Irene’s union keeps their reputation untarnished, spotless like the clothes washed at the laundry they own. Irene often refers to the marriage as a contract, a business. During the war, the spouses collaborate to make ends meet, and their “contract” comes in handy to help them get

by. In other words, they experience a sort of "co-dependency" (Giddens 93) and "convenience" (95) in their married life.

According to various critics and to the novelist himself, an obsessive aspect in Swift's work is the father-daughter relationship. In most cases, this one included, the daughter is presented as more intelligent than the father, who needs to cope with an overwhelming feeling of inferiority. Opinionated Dorothea studies history, reads materials on Kennedy, and gets involved in arguments about politics. Will wonders if all these might not be done on purpose on her part, in order to make him feel "slow" – the possessor of a "plodding brain": "What was the point of all that study, Dorry, all those books? Was it to spite me?" (Swift 144) As a schoolgirl, she chooses a smaller part than that of the female protagonist in one of Shakespeare's plays, and asks her father what he thinks about it. Although Will does not know anything about Shakespeare, he goes to see her perform because he loves her:

> What did I know about Shakespeare, Dorry? I'd sat in an uncomfortable wooden chair after a hard day at the shop, while on the stage schoolchildren in costume played the parts of grown-ups and spoke lines I did not understand. (145)

Dorothea studies in a room filled with "history books", poetry, "postcards from art galleries", and "Latin texts" – a universe to which Will has no access (147). He experiences awe upon entering it on tip-toes to bring his daughter coffee: "over your shoulder I read lines of verse (did you know, Dorry, how I peeped into those books when you weren't there?) which I didn't understand" (147). She does not even look at him while he sets the mug on the table, a gesture that he notices, and because of which he feels hurt.

As Giddens points out, in parent-child relationships the material and biological issues involved prevent the realization of the "pure" component (Giddens 98). However, this may change if the ties that function as exterior connectors are eliminated, or if their importance decreases (98). Will's gesture of giving the inheritance money away to his daughter may be perceived from this angle. He is cutting financial dependency in view of ensuring the quality and honesty of the relationship. He wants to see whether his daughter really loves him, and ends up being disappointed.

The function of gifts

A recurrent motif in *The Sweet-Shop Owner* is the gift. Based on an ethnological study of various populations from the Pacific Melanesian isles, Marcel Mauss drew some conclusions as to the implications of gifts. At the beginning of chapter four of his study, he claims that his observations bear universal relevance and may be extended to modern societies (Mauss 169). His basic assumption is that, despite its apparently unbinding nature, the gift is in fact contractual. The explanation for this would be that a gift is imbued with a "spirit of things", called by the ancient "*hau*", which preserves the gift's connection with the donor, and consequently connects the receiver with him/her as well (50). To accept a gift is the equivalent of accepting the donor's "spiritual essence" or "soul" (53). Mauss goes as far as stating that a gift involves the formation of a bond based on constant spiritual exchange (57).

The appropriate attitudes linked with gifts are ultimately threefold: to make a gift, to receive it, and to return the gift (54). Refusal of a gift equals the rejection of an alliance (55). The acceptance of a gift entails being in debt to the donor. Failure to return the gift sometimes requires the punishment of becoming the donor's "slave" (either literally or symbolically) (114). A comprehensive word to designate the contracted party, (the receiver of the gift), is that of "*reus*", which means three things: an individual "possessed by an object", an individual "involved in business" or transactions "determined by an […] object", and, thirdly, an individual who is "guilty" or "responsible" (143-4). The receiver's identity and actions are under the sign of the obligations that come along with the gift. Failure to return gifts may endow them with destructive powers (49). Gift-giving also signifies the bestowment and acknowledgement of status (111). Hence, the link between gifts and identity creation goes very far.

There are various types of gifts, according to criteria such as: the symbolical weight they bear, the occasion, the relationship between partners of exchange etc. There may be "opening gifts", which bring along the obligation to return them, or "clinching gifts" (Malinowski's term), which close transactions

(81). A child may be considered a "uterine good", as well as the object of an exchange of maternal goods of stability for paternal goods of protection (47).

Virtually everything that Will Chapman is and has is a result of a gift from his wife, Irene. The gifts that he receives are not only objects. Chapman sees his roles as gifts as well, along with some other things that do not normally fall under this description, like, for instance, his own wife and daughter. The shop is the first material present. It changes him into a shopkeeper – his core identity. Irene, the donor, states it very clearly:

> I will buy you a shop, I'll get you a shop. I will install you in it and see that you have all you need. Then I'll watch. I'll see what you can do. That will content me. I'll send you out each morning and watch you come back each night and I shall want to know how you are doing. I shall want return on my investment. (Swift 21)

The shop is both an "opening" gift for the beginning of a married life together, and a "clinching" one, as it seals a contract between them. The gift ties Will to Irene under a twofold obligation – besides making the shop bring profit, he should not expect love from her: "And all I ask in return for this is that there be no question of love." (22) Will functions here as a *reus*, as his actions, manifestations and individuality depend on this transaction. The house contains valuables that he can use and consider his under the same obligations: "So many presents" (22). Irene acknowledges herself as a gift: "she undressed deliberately, slowly, as if she were unwrapping a gift" (30). She is a "reward", "one of the terms of the agreement", and love is "not part of the bargain" (31). Chapman's little girl is introduced as a gift (a "uterine good") from her first day of life: "There was a little thing, wrapped like a gift in a shawl beside her" (10). Irene also considers the child as payment in her transactions with Will: "There, I have done it, paid you: that is my side of the bargain." (10)

The rationale of these gifts from Irene is that she is in debt to Will too, because she cannot or will not give him love: "Willy, I'm sorry. I'm not – all I should be." (30) She is trying to both counterbalance this, and escape being figuratively possessed by Will, offering him surrogates of herself in exchange. These surrogates are "spaces", such as the shop, the house, and the child, which are metonymically herself. Irene's gifts create obligations for Will, which he needs to fulfil in his turn. It is also his duty to "save" her from sorrow, which he cannot do, and for that he is in debt as well: "He owed her eternal service, for he couldn't save her…" (31) He will pay by losing everything he has ever loved: he watches his wife die and his daughter leave him.

Will's gesture of giving his daughter the money that Irene had left him is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a release from an obligation, and a renunciation to leverage. He does not want to lure his daughter to visit him only on account of the money, in order to recuperate it. In this respect, the gesture is selfless. On the other hand, Irene's expressed wish before passing away was that Dorry should not be given her mother's legacy. In this respect, as a gift *from him*, the money ties his daughter to him under a new series of obligations: "You've got the money now. You're paid. And today, Dorry, is your birthday. He could almost smile at the neatness of it." (11)

(Ab)using roles

We shall consider first the protagonist's ambivalent attitude towards religious faith and the existence of universal order. The discussion on patterns is interpretable as both distrust of a master plan, and proof of its existence. On the one hand, Will complains that randomness is the underlying principle of existence. However, the way he finds unexpected connections between the smallest incidents points to the other extreme, namely a belief that life excludes coincidence. A preoccupation with interpreting apparently unimportant events gives away his tendency to second guess himself as a cynic, revealing Will as a disguised believer. An example is the almost karmic implications that Chapman thinks of starting from an incident that occurs while putting up his advertising plate above the shop entrance. He falls off while climbing the ladder and breaks his leg, which leaves him with a permanent limp. Trying to make his new identity visible costs him his only previous accomplishment, namely being good at running. Fast running

was not something bestowed on Will by the others. It was the only thing that gave him pride and a sense of self-worth, and it gets sacrificed in the process of acquiring the new status of an owner. Ownership is ironically not even his to keep or dispose of as he wishes, but a facade. After the fall he needs nursing, which is done by his wife. Irene will later need him to take care of her too, in the advanced stages of her asthma – an ironic reversal of roles that Will notices. For a person who asserts that everything is the result of an accident, to try to apply this type of causality is contradictory. The character proves to be (ab)using both his position of (non-)believer and that of a(n) (ir)rational human being.

As a father, Will feels unfit, because his intelligence is inferior to that of his daughter, which he believes prevents him from really being her protector and guide. However, he buffers the child's encounters with her mother Irene. This attitude helps the development of Dorry's self-esteem. The way Dorothea is able to express and defend her opinions, in spite of her mother constantly putting her down, may partly be Will's merit. On the one hand, as a father, Will is supposed to teach her things, but ends up being taught by her about the reality of war. On the other hand, he teaches her to trust herself, by the trust that he shows in her attitudes and opinions.

Will is apparently a dowry hunter. However, he takes no other pleasure in his marriage "gifts" than the connection that they represent and ensure with Irene. Will does not seem a suitable husband (due to all the reasons mentioned above), but in the end turns out to have in fact been the ideal one. He helps her to get back at her family and to have a family of her own. Also, he satisfies her need for power and authority by being a faithful servant. Moreover, Will gives her true love, which Irene has not received from either her family or more superficial suitors, who just admired her beauty.

In relation to Will, Irene has a power position that does not satisfy her. She wanted power only out of spite, as compensation because she felt a victim. Irene is both a provider and a thief of Chapman's potential happiness: "she both moulds and destroys a likable, if weak, young man" (Malcolm 45). She performs the two roles simultaneously. By giving herself to Will, she makes him happy, and takes care of his well-being. By refusing to give him her love, she is also the source of his greatest sorrow.

She is afraid of living, and avoids it as much as possible. She dislikes feeling good about her own looks, marital physical encounters, or motherhood. From this point of view, Irene seems to cope badly with being-in-the-world. Her asthmatic condition is suggestive of a symbolic refusal or incapacity to breathe. Nevertheless, for somebody who cannot seem to harmonise with the ways of the world, she appears to be an excellent administrator of her business and manages to make her husband a wealthy man. Asthma may be viewed as caused by too much air rather than too little: "Or was it that air assailed her?" (Swift 218), a point made by David Malcolm (34). Irene is both empowered and a victim at the same time, and thus (ab)uses both positions.

Other roles that she inhabits are equally ambivalent. Irene is considered lucky because of her beauty, but ends up getting less, precisely because she is beautiful. Her out-of-the-ordinariness effaces itself in an ordinary existence. Also, she is both a neurotic woman, and more rational than anybody else, because she seeks meaning beyond the superficiality of keeping up appearances, unlike her parents. Irene's conduct towards her daughter may be considered loveless, an abuse, and traumatic for Dorry. However, it is at the same time a method to make Dorothea a stronger person. It is a use and abuse of the position of a (good) mother. As a wife, Irene is committed to the relationship to the end, but will not give herself emotionally to her husband entirely, thus compromising the role of a good spouse. In reference to this last point, there is a strong possibility that she may truthfully repent for her abuse of Will, and consider it a handicap which she cannot help, despite her efforts. On the other hand, she may be doing it out of some kind of revenge against fate, in cold blood.

Dorothea is a victim of her parents' closed circle, which proves to be too small for her, as she is a gifted individual. She apparently has a bright future ahead, as she graduates "First" (Swift 180). Nevertheless, the girl throws her career away, and follows her lover to Bristol. She is the clever, serious and studious daughter, who was never interested in cheap distractions, bringing her parents joy and pride. Yet, she compromises this image by having an affair with an older man, who is also her teacher. She thus appears as both rational and instinctual, profound and superficial, spiritual and adventurous. She also abandons her father, after having taken all his money in a heartless way. On the other hand, the money

may be viewed as a well-deserved reward for the long years spent with a loveless mother and a helpless, dull-brained father.

Conclusions

Taken as a group, the characters belong to the commercial middle class living in the small trading communities of the London suburbs, marked by "materialism, hard work, and emotional restraint" (Malcolm 45). Its members are typical representatives of the contract-and-negotiation mentality of the time – the economic life of the 1950s and the 1960s Great Britain (45). They also prefigure the 1970s Prime Minister, a small province shopkeeper's daughter herself (45). The same reality is contained in the "Napoleonic claim that the country is a nation of shopkeepers", of "pinched austerity", of "emotional self-containment that abhors excessive feeling", and of conservatism, all of which form an "island mentality" (Lea 17). In this last respect, the members of this class come to represent not only group, but also national identity.

Nevertheless, their apparently flawless typicality could not be more perfectly subverted than by their own explicit or implicit lamentations about this type of existence as superficial and deprived of any real meaning. Will Chapman carefully follows Irene's advice to hold on to material objects, but dies in his house noticing their futility, longing for human affection. The characters' mindset is rationality, but they have lost faith in it, in historical explanations and in progress.

The best description of roles is as "bubbles" (Swift 44), which are the equivalents of instances of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977). A bubble is a ready-made circumscription with its own rules, which are assumed by the one stepping into it. Stepping into bubbles, i.e. playing parts, is unavoidable, but roles do not "touch" one. They remain exterior and foreign to who one is: "Nothing touches you, you touch nothing." (Swift 44)

Both the novel and the protagonist in our analysis are illustrative of the concept of mediocrity, which covers a plurality of aspects in this fictional work. Firstly, Will lives in a suburb of England, where existence eludes the extraordinary. The suburb itself is a place situated, in terms of appearance and mentalities, between the outdated countryside and the emancipated city (as Williams and Thacker contend). The character has intentionally retired here, to avoid heroism on the battlefield and is the prototype of the antihero, of a plain, unexceptional individual. His occupation and living standards are economically middle class: he does what the average individual would do in those times – start a small business and obtain moderate or sometimes more significant profit. Moreover, Chapman's activities and typology are subsumed to a period of transition (another "middle" way) from the values of the welfare state towards a progressively manifest individualism that would reach its most extreme form during Thatcherism (Lea 177), hence a time when the older generation, accustomed to be taken care of, socially, needs to increasingly adapt to fending for themselves. Will is in-between being satisfied with filling up respectable positions without questioning them, and the adversity to conformism and uniformity manifested by the younger generation (Dorry's). Also, in his social interactions he tends, on the one hand, to get emotionally involved, needing affection and commitment, but, on the other, he feels isolated and keeps his torment to himself. To put it differently, he manages communion with others only half-way, within mediocrity.

The question remains whether the notion of use and abuse of roles is representative of mediocrity, or if it is, on the contrary, the prerogative of a brilliant mind. Will enters roles apparently without revolutionizing anything, so the mediocrity he adopts may be a shelter. Nevertheless, he has a discourse that subtly subverts these ways of being, even though just by wondering about their purpose, without any declared disgruntlement. Accepting a position and then discussing it from therein (use and abuse) is a perfect strategy to undermine its validity or taken-for-grantedness. It invites both social meditation, on the direction adopted by people towards progressive individualism, and philosophical meditation, on our purpose and meaning in the world in general. Being everyman as a narrator, he gets others to empathise with him and rally to his ideas and questions. Therefore, his shallowness may function as a cover for an incitement to reconsider givens, and may thus in fact be genius, from the point of view of this effect.

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