Verbal Diversion: Modernist Modes of Making Meaning in Dylan Thomas's

Under Milk Wood

University of Tampere

School of Modern Languages and Translation Studies

English Department

Pro Gradu Thesis

Spring 2009

Anne Päivärinta

PÄIVÄRINTA, ANNE: Verbal Diversion: Modernist Modes of Making Meaning in Dylan
Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*

Tutkielma tarkastelee Dylan Thomasin kuunnelmaa *Under Milk Wood* (1954) konstruktiiviselta kannalta: työn tarkoituksena on osoittaa, että teksti yhdistyy rakentumisperiaatteiltaan modernistiseen traditioon. Keskeisin modernistinen piirre on kielen *etualaistuminen* niin, että poeettisuus on mahdotonta tulkinnassa sivuuttaa, vaikka kuunnelmaa ei voikaan lukea lyriikan genreen. Tähän etualaistumiseen linkittyvät olennaisella tavalla tekstin temporaalinen kehys sekä varsin kokeileva, realismin konventioilla ja luonnollisuudella leikittelevä (kertova) rakenne. Keskeinen tulkintaa ohjaava seikka on näin tekstin selkeä itserefleksiivisyys: kuunnelman kertojanäänet manipuloivat tapahtumien kulkua samalla kun eksplisiittisesti ohjaavat lukijaa/kuulijaa.

Lähtökohtana tarkastelulle toimii siis modernistisen kirjallisuuden itserefleksiivisyyden ja konventioiden kommentoimisen ajatus. Tekstin rakentumisperiaatteita lähestytään *kirjallisuudellisuuden* kautta: venäläisten formalistien kirjallisuusteoriassa keskeistä on juuri konventioiden ja etualaistuneiden piirteiden tai keinojen rooli tekstintulkinnassa. Samoin formalistien merkittävin työ ajoittuu yksiin modernistisen kirjallisuuden keskeisimmän ajanjakson kanssa.

Tekstin korostuneen tekstuaalisuuden tarkastelussa hyödynnetään *kognitiivisen jatketun metaforan* kautta avautuvaa *tekstimaailman* käsitettä. Kuunnelman kertojanäänet kuljettavat tekstiä eteenpäin erittäin poeettisin äänenpainoin ja siten ohjaavat käsitykseen, että tekstin maailmassa tapahtuva on alisteista tällaiselle hyvin tietoiselle, kirjalliselle järjestämiselle. Kertojat rakentavatkin erittäin epäkonventionaalisia ja todellisen rajoja koettelevia tilanteita tekstin maailmaan, jolloin lukijan on tulkittava ne luonnollistamisen sijaan metaforisesti. Erityisen keskeinen yksittäinen metaforinen kehys on unen tarjoamat (tajunnan) esittämisen mahdollisuudet, ja tulkinnaksi hahmottuukin irrationaalis-humorististen sanaleikkien takaa eräänlainen modernin ihmisen ja maailmankuvan kyyninen ruotiminen. Tekstissä esiintyy lisäksi jatkuvasti konventionaalisia vastapareja sekä päällekkäisyyttä ja kahtalaisuutta, joilla alleviivataan nimenomaan tulkinnan merkitystä.

Näkemisen ja kuulemisen tematisoinnit ovat myös olennainen osa tekstin rakentumista, ja tekstin äänelle ja kuuloaistille rakentuvaa luonnetta ei voi täysin sivuuttaa tulkinnassa. Kuitenkin kun tutkielman keskeinen tavoite on tutkia Thomasin kuunnelman tekstuaalisuutta, lähteenä on ainoastaan itse teksti.

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1. Introduction

Dylan Thomas (1914–1953) is perhaps best known for his obscure, language-oriented poetry. Thomas's publications include seven poetry books, a novel and several shorter stories. He was also a famous perfomer and known for his analytical approach to writing. Even though he is usually described as a Welsh poet, he wrote solely in English. In my pro gradu thesis I aim to prove that the linguistic techniques present in Thomas's poetry can also be found in the broadcast *Under Milk Wood* (1954): although this is a text that obviously does not belong to the genre of poetry, it can nevertheless be characterised as highly *poetic*. The text depicts a unique world that seems to be determined by exaggeration and excess: using metaphorically charged language heavy with word play, the text introduces a host of stereotypical characters living in a rural village in Wales. But, at the same time, the depiction of the setting and the characters has very dark undertones to it, in contrast to the humour in the text. At times these techniques are so prevalent that there seems to be a parodic element to the text: not of any particular genre or way of writing about rural life, but of *literary conventions*. Chris Wigginton has argued that "Modernism itself can be read as literary parody"[1], and this notion is key to my hypothesis: I intend to show how *Under Milk Wood* is a typically modernist text because of its very much highlighted literary qualities (cf. 'the 'literary' of the Russian Formalists, 2.1.). I am going to argue that there are three main techniques Thomas uses that can be placed under the main term 'literary', and they form a sort of hierarchy as well:

1) Cyclical progression of the text: 'day-in-the-life-of' structure and explicit time imagery in relation to the stereotypical characters and the idea of a conventional rural setting.

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1 Wigginton 2001, 93.

2) Poetic techniques that create a sense of locality and pastoral setting, but *also* introduce darker elements to the scene (in contrast to the idyllic qualities), especially *extended metaphor.*

3) Word play and syntactical devices that create humour, mostly based on the stereotypical qualities of the characters.

I will explain what I mean by these three techniques and where they come from, but first let me motivate the choice of focusing on these techniques. In terms of genre, *Under Milk Wood* can be called a broadcast or a radio play, but Thomas's own subtitle is "a play for voices". John Goodby suggests that it might as well be called a play *of* voices, as the text is so heavily focused on sound and word *play.*[2] Indeed, the play is meant to be heard, and it certainly makes the most of the medium: through sound-oriented associative word play and imagery the text creates its characters, its setting and ultimately, its humour and meaning. It rests on the auditive power of language to reach its audience.

However, my aim is not to focus on sound *per se*, but to trace the ways in which this text is typically modernist, even a sort of parody of 'the literary'. This is why I have chosen to look at the three different levels mentioned, although sound certainly is a part of all of these levels. All of the levels/techniques contribute to the bigger picture: the village might seem idyllic and the characters silly and one-dimensional, but an inexplicable melancholy underlies the pastoral setting. The temporal structure and especially its self-reflexive qualities isolate the village and also invite the reader to see the 'patterns' that govern the characters. The poetic language (mainly basic, extended metaphors that are elaborated in different ways) paints idyllic pictures but also darkens those pictures through sinister imagery. The same word play

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2   Goodby 2001, 210.

that makes the characters so hilariously funny also makes them seem somehow sad and 'lacking' in their stereotype roles. All of this is made possible by the fact that we hear the characters speak and characterise themselves, but more importantly, we also hear the narrative comments of two 'narrators' called "First voice" and "Second voice". The setting for the reader, then, is that he or she is invited to look in and is let in on a secret of some sort: "Time passes. Listen. Time passes. Come closer now. Only you can hear the houses sleeping. . ."[3] The very 'doubleness' of the use of language (idyllic but dark, humorous but melancholy) is at the heart of the modernist techniques Thomas uses.

Let me now elaborate on the techniques mentioned above. First of all, in John Goodby's view, the structure of *Under Milk Wood* is "consciously static", allowing isolation from social contexts.[4] In the same way, the text's temporal progression is somehow very artificial, highlighting the 'literariness' of the text, as opposed to more realistic, natural 'narratives'. The events take place on one day, and everything is left unresolved at the end – the structure is, then, like a brief, *mediated* look at life in this socially and historically isolated village. The reader is invited to consider the constructed nature of the temporal frame: "From where you are, you can hear their dreams."[5] The reader is not only given this 'privilege' through the words of the narrator(s), but he or she in fact *does* hear the dreams of the characters a bit further on, and there is no attempt from the narrators' part to naturalise this highly unlikely scenario.

Second of all, as I already mentioned, language is so strikingly foregrounded in this text that it seems to become the message itself at times. Imagery is used to describe the setting and the people living in this setting, and at times these two *merge* in the language: the place

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3   *Under Milk Wood*, 1962, 3. From now on I will refer to the primary source as *UMW.*
4   Goodby 2001, 210.
5   *UMW*, 3.

becomes its inhabitants, and this is when darker imagery emerges. For instance, the images (hightened through sound patterns) in this description of the town and its inhabitants are esthetically pleasing, but at the same time sinister in meaning: "Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night."[6] The images bring out the melancholy in this small village that is identified with its inhabitants.

Furthermore, language is at times so self-indulgent that it is almost parodic. Goodby notes that this can be linked to surrealist and Freudian ideas: ". . .as Freud explained, connections are made through transference and trivial associationism; alliteration and pun bulk more centrally than causal logic. In this world, comedy acts as a continual rebuke to moralism, at times in an almost surrealist manner."[7] I intend to look at the word play in the text as something that *seems* trivial but has the logic of foregrounding behind it; in my view, Thomas cannot be called a surrealist as his writing is never *automatic* even if his language has a sort of *autonomy*. This is also the main reason I will not be analysing the use of sound as such, as I do not think it is meaningful in the sense of nonsense poetry, for instance. The focus is going to be on how word play is used by the characters themselves, how they are given their *voice* in the text, but more importantly on how word play is used to describe them - I will analyse the ways in which these two levels differ textually.

In terms of poetic language, my main (conceptual) tool is metaphor, and more specifically, extended metaphor, as defined in *cognitive metaphorics*. This is a relatively recent theoretical framework, focusing on how metaphor is an everyday phenomenon and how cognitive models of categorisation help us make sense of things. In this case extended metaphor is like an umbrella concept that makes the highly complex language of the text

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6   *UMW*, 3.
7   Goodby 2001, 212.

cohere. My main argument, as defined in detail in 2.2., is that the artificial world of *Under Milk Wood* is most centrally a *metaphoric world*. With the cognitive approach, the theoretical discussion relies heavily on Paul Werth's *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* (1999), but I will also refer to the pioneer studies of this field, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff and Turner (1989).

Before discussing the frame for the world of *Under Milk Wood*, the theoretical basis for the modernist techniques has to be defined. For work economical reasons the field of modernist texts and theories cannot be discussed in detail, but in 2.1. I will contextualise the idea of language-oriented writing and commentary of 'the literary'. More specifically, I will be following the ideas of John Goodby and Chris Wigginton in *Dylan Thomas. Contemporary Critical Essays* (2001). These include the idea of excess in Thomas's language-oriented writing (Wigginton) and the building of verbal caricatures and humour in *Under Milk Wood* (Goodby). Of the three techniques described above, the first and the third I have adapted from Goodby's article "'Very Profound and Very Box Office': the Later Poems and *Under Milk Wood*". However, my intention is to take these ideas further and systematically use them in my analysis (that adds the idea of extended metaphor to the techniques as well). With the discussion of voice and word play (3.3.)

Finally, there is the question of genre as well. I will not treat the text primarily as a radio *play*, but a text that is focused on language (and sound as part of it). I will touch on the theory of broadcast, but it is not an integral part of my analysis of the text. In the same way, I will not go into any depth with the narratological concepts (character, plot, narration). Poetic construction is the key term, however it is not my intention to claim that this text is essentially poetry. Rather, my argument is that the text uses poetic language to achieve its constructed

nature and 'parodic' element. Here the emphasis is on the word 'constructed', not 'parodic'. This is because the text is not a parody in the sense of making fun of a certain text or genre, but parodic only in the sense of being 'over the top'.

2. In between form and meaning: the logic of foregrounding

Foregrounding, in the sense that the Russian formalists used the term, is defined as the way in which poetic language draws attention to itself, as opposed to the orientation towards communication in everyday language.[8] Roman Jakobson's famous theory of the functions of language (1958) sets the *poetic function*, the text or discourse itself, as the main focus of literary study: "Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality."[9] This is also what is meant by the earlier term 'the literary': the highlighted, literary qualities of a text. Mick Short links this classic idea to interpretative activity by referring to Geoffrey Leech's concept *cohesion of foregrounding*, which refers to the ability to ". . .describe and categorise the various kinds of deviation and parallelism which give rise to foregrounding."[10] Therefore, interpreting a literary text as a coherent entity (in order to say something about its theme and meaning) requires the capability to see patterns in a text, not just isolated metaphors or puns. This is the assumption from which my interpretation of Thomas's modernism in *Under Milk Wood* arises. In what follows I attempt to shape a historical and generic framework for the text.

2.1. Modernism and convention

Modernism as a style and a period in literary history is by no means a straightforward

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8   Stockwell 2000, 14.
9   Jakobson 1994, 378.
10 Short 1996, 36.

concept, but to simplify things a little at this point, it can be defined as a general name for the literature and art produced from the 1890s and up to the 1940s, the war years.[11] Now, Thomas's career began in the 1930s when modernism was already well established, and as some critics might argue, on its way out in Great Britain. *Under Milk Wood*, on the other hand, was not published until 1954 (though performed in 1953, just before Thomas's death). But for the purposes of stylistic analysis my argument is that the text can nevertheless be called modernist, as the style Thomas adopted in the 1930s did not undergo very significant changes towards the end of his career. At most, it can be said to have reached its full bloom by the end of World War II. However, it must be noted here that critics do not entirely agree on the issue of when modernism ended and postmodernism began. In fact, this problematic question is at the heart of the definition of modernism: avant-garde is typically defined as being *against* something, a traditional view of things or way of creating art, which leads to the problem of defining when exactly a discourse is *post-* something, meaning somehow belated.[12]

The period of modernism was a period of reaction and counter-reaction: the changes in the political, social and economical situation in Europe led to modes of artistic expression that both reflected *and* criticised the situation. According to Tim Armstrong, alongside the typical artistic placing of the self outside of the masses there were opposite ideas as well: more conservative modes of writing also existed in ". . .numerous ways with the scientific, technological, and political shifts which characterize the modern era."[13] The key word, here, is consciousness: whatever the mode of 'reacting', it seems that there was no room for art that was *not* aware of the surrounding reality. Modernist art is often called 'inevitable' in its form;

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11 Perloff 2002, 3.
12 Ibid., 2.
13 Armstrong 1998, 4.

for example for Gertrude Stein it was "the only 'composition' appropriate to the new composition in which we live".[14] It follows that this focus on composition must be somehow explicit in art as well: according to Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The search for a style and a typology becomes a self-conscious element in the modernist's literary production".[15]Thus form and meaning are fundamentally intertwined in modernist writing, which, as it happens, is also one of the main arguments of the Russian formalists in their formal literary analyses.

As regards the difficulty of expression, Thomas's poetry is a perfect example. But even more illustrative is the case of T. S. Eliot, who famously stated that "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*."[16] (The word "poet" can be understood in the widest sense here.) And furthermore: "Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results."[17] Indeed, Eliot's most famous work, *The Waste Land* (1922), epitomises the fragmented and difficult writing of modernism. According to Marjorie Perloff, among others, it also marks the significance of a historical event, World War I: ". . .after *The Waste Land*, what we know as modernism was to lose its utopian edge and become much darker, its face no longer turned toward the 'new' in the same way."[18] In my view, the same is true of Thomas's poetry and writing after World War II, including *Under Milk Wood*.[19] Even though the text is humorous and entertaining, the dark undercurrent in it suggests a more unflattering image of the 'modern man'. Obviously, as the text does not connect to any actual historical context, it does not refer to war or politics in a way *The Waste Land* does, but nevertheless it

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14 Bradbury & McFarlane 1976, 24.
15 Ibid., 29.
16 Eliot 1921, "The Metaphysical Poets", cited in Bradbury & McFarlane 1976. Italics original.
17 Bradbury & McFarlane 1976, 29.
18 Perloff 2002, 39.
19 Ralph Maud (2003), for example, has pointed out relevant aspects in a few of Thomas's later poems.

expresses an attitude that is somehow very modern: behind the joking and laughter quite a cynical view of the world can be traced, rather like in many Charles Chaplin films, especially *Modern Times* (1936).

David Holbrook (1966) analyses this cynical element in *Under Milk Wood* by pointing out links between the text and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), a characteristically modernist text. Holbrook's analysis compares and contrasts Joyce's stream of consciousness narrative with Thomas's dramatic use of multiple voices in *Under Milk Wood*. The links Holbrook makes seem relevant and the influence of Joyce on Thomas's writing is undeniable, but in my opinion Holbrook misses the mark with the evaluative comments he makes about Thomas's verbal exaggerration. Holbrook's detailed analysis of the style of *Under Milk Wood* is apt, but the judgment he makes about the function and purpose of the techniques seems rather one-eyed:

> The effect of the stylization of the piece is to make the world a pretend-place, with pretend-relationships. . .with no morality or reality to impinge. . . .it [the immorality of *Under Milk Wood*] is really dangerous, because it flatters and reinforces the resistance to those deeper insights we need. . . .the total effect of this "vitality" of language is in fact deadness. It simply cannot be taken in: the impression it leaves is of no essential atmosphere. . .but an occasional felicity of caricature, a sense of ebullience, and an impression of "clever" writing.[20]

The modernist mode of merely showing this kind of 'immorality' to the reader, as in avoiding to bring in obvious sentiment that would create a sort of a catharsis for the reader, clearly does not fit into Holbrook's view of artistic technique (compare with Goodby's ideas on page 4). And indeed, from such a point of view the foregrounded language most definitely must seem

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20 Holbrook 1966, 100, 103, 108.

like the author's attempt to come across as 'clever', in other words rather pointless. Furthermore, as there are no characters in *Under Milk Wood* comparable to Joyce's novel (i.e. characters the reader could clearly identify with), the lack of sentiment offered to the reader is not a particularly fair criticism. The structure and form of the text is fundamentally different from *Ulysses*, and other modernist novels, and it is precisely the structure of the text that justifies the unconventional use of language in my view.

Let me illustrate this point through an example, even though the (temporal) frame of the text is discussed in more detail in 3.1. Although the focus of my point of view is not on sound or the theory of broadcast as such, this definition of radio drama by Tim Crook serves as a relevant characterisation of the issue: "By giving the listener the opportunity to create an individual filmic narrative and experience through the imaginative spectacle the listener becomes an active participant and 'dramaturgist' in the process of communication and listening."[21] This is exactly what happens with the carefully constructed progression of *Under Milk Wood*, even if the word 'listener' is replaced with 'reader'. The pattern in which the text functions is as follows: the narrators explicitly invite the reader in, then comment on the characters' thoughts and emotions and *then* let the characters speak, creating a clearly 'manipulative' spectacle, a situation into which the reader is thrown in order to 'see' certain things. Consider this passage:

> SECOND VOICE: Nogood Boyo goes out. . .and. . .looks up at the spring sky. . . .
> FIRST VOICE: He turns his head and looks up at the Llaregyp Hill, and sees, among green lathered trees, the white houses of the strewn away farms, where farmboys whistle, dogs shout, cows low, but all too far away from him, or you, to hear. And in the town, the shops squeak open. Mr Edwards, in butterfly-collar and straw-hat at the doorway of Manchester House, measures with his eye the dawdlers-by for striped flannel shirts and shrouds and flowery blouses, and bellows to himself in the darkness

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21 Crook 1999, 66.

behind his eye
MR EDWARDS: (*Whispers*) I love Miss Price.
FIRST VOICE: Syrup is sold in the post-office. A car drives to market. . .[22]

This kind of 'cruelty' Holbrook accuses Thomas of is typical of the way the narration and language in the text function. The reader is an active participant in the process in that he or she 'shadows' the characters as guided by the narrators, and often laughs at their expense. There is, then, no real opportunity for the reader to see these characters like traditional, naturalist characters of narrative fiction – and identify with their emotional state, which was what Holbrook insisted on. This is clearly a question of genre and of new modes of commenting on the world we know:

> The idea of the play for voices. . .is one of many attempts to make a new convention in which the necessary explicitness is preserved, yet without limitation to a single dimension of reality. . . .The craft of dialogue, in modern drama, has been ordinarily so much practised in terms of naturalism, that to a poet, or a writer with similar intentions, it has come the hardest and most baffling part of drama. . .Narrative, in comparison, is free. . .[23]

The question of genre, then, is linked to the relationship of tradition and modernist expression in more than one way. Among literary theorists, the Russian formalists were very much concerned with genre: they came up with the idea of the evolution of literature and the 'immanent laws' of a genre. Literature was, most centrally, an organic, changing system to the formalists.[24] The theory of genre laws, or conventions, has since then been developed further

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22 *UMW*, 37-38.
23 Williams 1966, 91.
24 Jakobson & Tynjanov 1980 (1928).

by critics such as René Wellek and Austin Warren (1949) and Jonathan Culler (1975); for example, Culler highlights the significance of knowledge of genre traits in interpreting a text within a certain tradition.[25] This means that the reader has certain expectations that are either met or challenged, although obviously it is not as clear-cut as that: in texts like *Under Milk Wood* that are very 'aware' of conventions, so to speak, *both* of these things happen. This, of course, is true of many typically modernist texts. This kind of challenging can, in the long run, lead to the reformation of tradition, and thus the evolution of literature is an on-going process. *Under Milk Wood* challenges both the realist tradition of (narrative) dramatic fiction and the reader's expectations of how a literary text functions, in being very poetic and literary in style while at the same time being, judging by naming and general genre traits, a piece of drama (a very unorthodox one).

2.2. Metaphoric worlds and the question of genre

The highly poetic nature of *Under Milk Wood* combined with the notion of foregrounding leads us into considering the way in which the text works as a whole: if we rely on Thomas's own commentary and the idea of the modernist work of art, then we should not take the poetic language *just* as a means of artistic expression. Instead, we need to assume that there is a logic behind the use of language, and that the text forms a coherent whole. Thus the microlevel of the text, the word play, sound patterns and metaphors, must be mapped onto a larger scale. As the subject matter of the text is very 'conventional' or traditional, even realistic, but the language occasionally extremely abstract and ambiguous, it is necessary to see how these two

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25 Even if a lot of innovative criticism on genre was written in the 20th century, the origin of the discussion, as
    is the case with many other discussions, lies in Aristotle's writing (1968).

levels interact, or 'collide', within the text. In order to do this, I will utilise the idea of *metaphoric world*. This idea combines two (overlapping) fields of literary study: *possible worlds theory* and *cognitive metaphorics*. The latter of these two is my focus here, as my aim is to look at the surface of the text, but I will also try analyse the world that is created through the language.

Traditionally, metaphor is a linguistic method of combining ideas in a new way, and as such deviant from everyday efficient language[26], as it requires in interpretation.[27] In cognitive metaphorics, metaphor is an everyday phenomenon: we use basic metaphors in normal communication without aspiring to create new ways of seeing things. For cognitive theorists, metaphors are conventional expressions that *can* be fresh and creative when elaborated, extended or even negated.[28] Familiar metaphors can be *defamiliarised*[29], and indeed in modernist writing this process is often made visible by self-reflexive properties in a text.

George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and Mark Turner are pioneers of this relatively new field of study. They have listed a whole host of *basic metaphors* used in everyday language. The term *cognitive* here refers to human cognition: we conseptualise things, the world surrounding us, through metaphors. Thus, as Lakoff and Turner's examples show, abstract things are often made comprehensible by using concrete referents in metaphoric expressions. For instance, one of the basic metaphors that Lakoff and Turner discuss is LIFE IS A JOURNEY. Thus we make sense of life, an abstract entity, by creating a beginning and an end to it as if life were a journey. The metaphor is so conventional that we understand without any significant interpretative effort the meaning of the sentence "He reached the end of his path",

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26 Cf. the basic conversational maxims of *quality*, *quantity*, *manner* and *relevance* (Grice 1975).
27 See for example Eco 1984.
28 Lakoff & Turner 1989, 67.
29 Rus. *ostranenie*, a term coined by formalist Viktor Shklovsky, see for example Sherwood 1973, 28.

for example: the person in question has died or in some other way come to an end of a phase in life. Indeed, basic metaphors for death are very common: as it is a delicate subject, there is a need to talk about it "in other words", or in euphemisms, if you will. Basic metaphors for death are also central to my discussion of *Under Milk Wood,* as is conventionality such as this in general, and we shall return to this topic later on.

At this point, however, we need to see how cognitive metaphors link to the 'world' in a text. Here we encounter the issue of genre again: novels and narrative fiction in general create 'worlds' in reasonably straightforward ways, whereas the 'worlds' of drama, and lyric drama in particular, are a bit more problematic. James Phelan argues that as opposed to the way in which we analyse and judge characters when reading narrative fiction, with lyric texts we rarely can identify with characters in a similar way.[30] Instead, we are more concerned with evaluating the 'message' that is mediated by the speaker(s) of the text.[31] However, this juxtaposition of lyric and narrative texts is rather simplifying and does not help to describe the lyric 'narration' and speech in *Under Milk Wood* very well: the text is not poetry, nor does it contain clear narrative structures. Thus the term 'narration' is not used in the usual way in the present discussion, and *voice*, as in characters' speech, is treated as a highly problematic concept (more about this particular problem in 3.3.). All this links to the extremely constructed nature of the text, as we will see later on.

As a sort of an intermediary solution to the problems of the traditional generic model presented by Phelan, Brian McHale has coined the term *weak narrative* in relation to remotely narrative lyric texts. According to McHale, it is typical of postmodernist poetry to allude to narrative modes of writing in a very fragmented way, without committing to any clear

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30 Phelan 1996, 33.
31 Ibid.

narrative structure.[32] This alluding refers to the use of 'lesser' narrative modes within a lyric text, for example anecdotes, jokes and dreams. As regards modernist poetry, McHale emphasises the goal of structural coherence mentioned earlier on – he calls this the *master-narrative* of a lyric text. This term does not refer to narrativity in any concrete terms: it is a mental construction that can be interpreted when reading a text, rather like the cognitive metaphor (I will return to this point shortly).[33] McHale suggests as an overall analytical solution to the problem of lyric narrative that narrativity should be seen as *a quality with a scale*, meaning that a text can be *more* or *less* narrative.[34] This idea is very fruitful in terms of the structure of *Under Milk Wood*, however the division of modernist master-narrative and postmodernist weak narrative is not directly applicable to the text. Certainly, if we see the text as a part of the modernist tradition, then there should be an obvious (poetic) coherence in the text. This could be called the overall *structure* of the text, but then again this label does not cover the actual *weak narrative patterns* in the text. I will return to this point in the analysis, but at this point it would be important to bear in mind that, as has been said previously, *Under Milk Wood* is *not* a long poem and thus does not directly fall under McHale's definitions of lyric texts.

Moving on to define the 'world' of a text, the theory of possible worlds is not applicable as such as it is too much linked with the novel and narrative fiction. More suitable is the cognitive idea of a *text world*, as discussed by Paul Werth. Werth distinguishes three levels present in reading a text: *discourse world*, text world and *sub-world*. All of the levels are part of interpretation: discourse world is the actual world that the author and the reader share. Text world, on the other hand, is a mental construction, a static 'stage' on which the

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32 McHale 2001, 162.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 165.

fictional events take place (this can be linked with the schemas in metaphor mapping). Events or occurrences that are somehow in conflict with the text world can be regarded to form a sub-world/sub-worlds, even though there is no clear hierarchy involved. The text world is a tool with which the discourse (the visible text) is organised in the reader's mind.[35] There are two categories into which all of the 'material' in the text world can be divided: *world-building* and *function-advancing.* The latter is more to do with events and actions, whereas the former accommodates everything else.[36]

Furthermore, with regard to the world of *Under Milk Wood*, the world-building discourse is characterised by *deixis* and referentiality, deictic information meaning the ambiguous spatial and temporal relationships within a text and referentiality the relationships of the existing beings within a text.[37] Elena Semino (1997) also analyses the function of deixis in the world of a lyric text in her book *Language and World Creation in Poems and Other Texts*. Semino points out that deictic expressions are characterised by a certain definiteness: they refer to things the reader should be able to pick up from the text or, based on their knowledge of conventions, from somewhere else.[38] Often in lyric texts this kind of ambiguity is unanchored, and creates the effect of being drawn in the middle of events.[39] Even though *Under Milk Wood* is not poetry, this definition characterises quite aptly the situation the reader faces when reading the text. In Werth's analysis, elements of this kind are combined with the reader's knowledge of conventions in forming a *common ground*, which is a mental construction governed by the reader's aim to build coherence into text.[40] This building of coherence is perhaps easiest understood by its limitation: the reader consideres the

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35 Werth 1999, 7, 213–214.
36 Ibid., 181, 190.
37 Ibid., 51–52.
38 Semino 1997, 15.
39 Ibid., 16, 23.
40 Werth 1999, 51.

discourse he or she encounters against the common ground and defines certain elements either world-building or *non*-world-building.[41] Joanna Gavins (2003) adds something she calls modal worlds as sub-type of the sub-worlds in Werth's model: these are mental representations of wishful thinking or hypothetical events, for instance.[42] This is an important addition with the structure of *Under Milk Wood*: the logic of dreams is brought into consideration in the play (see 3.1.). Werth highlights the role of the term *event* in the interpretation of a text world: it is a concept that can be linked to time but it is not necessarily tied to a plot or causal logic.[43] For instance, the time frame in *Under Milk Wood* is quite 'natural' in its basic structure, but it is complicated through metaphoric narration: "And, sitting at the open window of Schooner House, blind Captain Cat hears all the morning of the town."[44] This is followed by examples of the actual morning sounds of the town, and the reader assumes Captain Cat's place in seeing the town *without* actually seeing it:

> [*Postman's rat-a-tat on door, distant*]
> CAPTAIN CAT (*Softly, to himself*): That's Willy Nilly knocking at Bay View. . .The knocker's got a kid glove on. Who's sent a letter to Mrs Ogmore Pritchard?
> [*Rat-a-tat, distant again*]
> CAPTAIN CAT: Careful now, she swabs the front glassy. Every step's like a bar of soap. . . .[45]

This is precisely the effect *in medias res*, being drawn into the middle of things, but through complex layers of perception and the reader's "individual filmic narrative" - ultimately through an interpretative activity.

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41 Ibid., 129–130.
42 Gavins 2003, 97.
43 Werth 1999, 202.
44 *UMW*, 38.
45 Ibid.

Werth's text world theory is closely linked with cognitive metaphorics. Werth defines something he calls *sustained metaphor* through the coherence of a text world: ". . .it [sustained metaphor] works by opening up an area of experience in terms of which the discourse topic can be (partially) interpreted. . . . [It is] an overarching structure, just as the function-advancing propositions in a world indirectly reveal the 'macro-structure' of a text".[46] Thus metaphor is no longer simply a verbal ornament but a thematic element closely linked to the structure and coherence of a text. However, it must be noted that this type of metaphor does not replace the verbal elements that *are* actually present in the text: rather, it can in a way justify the occurrence of certain verbal devices. This is something I would link with the master-narrative defined by McHale, which was a distinctively modernist property.

The two metaphoric levels, the verbal play and the underlying thematic metaphor, are thus complementary, not mutually exclusive. Werth analyses the relationship of these two levels using an extract from *Under Milk Wood*. The extract is from the very beginning of the play and is as follows:

> FIRST VOICE: To begin at the beginning. It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched, courters'-and-rabbits' wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea. The houses are blind as moles (though moles see fine tonight in the snouting, velvet dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there in the muffled middle by the pump and the town clock, the shops in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows' weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now.[47]

The sustained metaphor Werth finds in this extract can be summarised as A PLACE IS ITS

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46 Ibid., 323–324.
47 *UMW*, 1.

INHABITANTS.[48] According to Werth, all of the words and expressions describing nature and the milieu, the town, through personification can be placed under this metaphor – these include expressions of deformity and disability ("the cobblestreets silent and hunched", "courters'-and-rabbits' wood limping", "the houses are blind") as well as expressions suggesting mental impairment ("blind as moles", "dumbfound town").[49] These 'dark' expressions, in turn, can be linked to the conventional metaphor DEATH IS SLEEP, as suggested by "starless and bible-black" and reference to mourning ("the shops in mourning").[50] Through these metaphors the country milieu is shadowed by an ominous atmosphere: the narrator ("First voice") uses personification to set the mood to the text. The sustained metaphor thus works as an aid for interpretation, and as the cognitive metaphor is not the same as metaphor in the stylistic sense, we need not worry too much about the range of verbal devices used to achieve this:

> In extended metaphors, the main non-literal concept is not modified within the utterance, as is the case with complex metaphors, but outside the utterance. . . . The more extended they are, in terms of additional clauses and even sentences, the more important they become as the local semantic baseline for the interpretative activities of the reader.[51]

Thus the implicit nature of sustained metaphor, or *extended metaphor* as Gerard Steen calls it, allows all kinds of realisations for the main idea: ". . .for implicit metaphor, the focus of the non-literal proposition occurs in a frame that has nothing to do with the proposition, as the

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48 To be exact, the metaphor Werth defines is in fact a *metonymy*. This does not however have any impact on the interpretation process, as in the cognitive model metaphor is not synonymous with the traditional definition of metaphor.
49 Werth 1999, 319.
50 Ibid., 320.
51 Steen 1999, 510, 518.

literal part of the metaphorical proposition is unexpressed."[52] Werth's interpretation of the extract from *Under Milk Wood* illustrates the coherence built via an implicit, sustained metaphor very well: the extract is highly poetic, which would seem somehow 'pointless' without the underlying ideas justifying them. That is, in a strictly narrative context the language would be striking up to a point of being overtly pompous, but here it serves the purpose of establishing the narrator's position as someone who knows more than the inhabitants of the town. More importantly, the narrator invites the reader to join in on the 'secret', to find out more. This disposition could be then called very modernist as it establishes a highly 'artificial', or literary, frame for the text. Werth's analysis is thus highly useful for my purposes, but what Werth's brief exemplifying discussion does not take into consideration is what follows after the self-reflexive disposition. This is then, the focus of my analysis in the next section.

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52 Steen 1999, 511.

3. The constructed world of *Under Milk Wood*

In this section I will look at how the general structure, the imagery and the way the characters are presented in *Under Milk Wood* contribute to metaphoric world creation. My intention is to link this discussion to modernist techniques on all levels. I will investigate *how*, on the textual level, John Goodby's view of (Thomas's) modernism relates to the techniques discussed: according to Goodby, "for authors like Joyce and Thomas, writing is not representation so much as an investigation of the ways in which language signifies, according to the revolutionary formal demands of modernist practice."[53] My aim, then, is to sketch the world that this kind of writing, beyond mere representation, can create.

3.1. Temporal frame

As Paul Werth's discussion (as presented above) showed, the disposition of *Under Milk Wood* establishes the mood and tone for the rest of the text in a very complex manner. To summarise, the narrators' introductory speech highlights the narrators' and the reader's role as being somehow above the characters, and the use of poetic language is a sort of a signification of this: the narrators know 'more' and invite the reader to learn more, too, about the town and its inhabitants. Most centrally, the role of the language is to create textual coherence that tells the reader who is in charge of the telling and thus holds the power.

The general temporal structure of the text is rather simple; the events take place on one day, as is the case in such modernist texts as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs*

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[53] 2001, 198.

Dalloway (1925). In fact, David Holbrook links many aspects of *Under Milk Wood* (not just the temporal structure) to *Ulysses*.[54] Holbrook even goes so far as to say that whereas Joyce's use of language and irony is an example of great modernist writing, *Under Milk Wood* is less successful.[55] Even if this judgment is not entirely just, Holbrook manages to point out interesting parallels between *Ulysses* and *Under Milk Wood*: both display a control over language to achieve certain effects (although in Holbrook's view only Joyce succeeds in this), both contain the theme of sexuality and lust in connection to the moral deprivation of the 'modern man' (or indeed of man in general), both make use of the 'unreal' in their writing techniques (*Ulysses* particularly with the hallucinatory brothel scene, *Under Milk Wood* with the unconventional depiction of dreams). Both use different registers like songs and children's rhymes within the text and in both texts the sea has certain symbolic value. All of these parallels are interesting and arguably significant in interpreting the thematic progression of the texts, but for the present discussion the most important one is the link between the theme of moral deprivation and techniques like stream of consciousness narrative, complex language use and multiple 'voices' or layers within the text.[56]

To begin with the day-in-the-life-of structure of *Under Milk Wood*, it is only seemingly clear-cut: the actual references to time and the narrative frame make the day-in-the-life-of cycle in the text more complicated. Significantly, *Under Milk Wood* does not progress from morning to evening, but from night to evening, and the centrality of night time brings more than just temporal references to the text. Night equals sleep and dreaming, and the text begins with 'eavesdropping' to the town people's dreams. This frame is very artificial and constructed, as the dreams are not described but heard: the characters speak their dreams

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54 1966, 100.
55 Ibid., 103.
56 Ibid., 104-113.

while they sleep, and the narrators on their part manipulate this 'telling' in a highly unnatural textual progression. The frames of seeing and hearing are made explicit, and they overlap in interesting ways:

> Only *your* eyes are unclosed to see the black and folded town fast, and slow, asleep. . . .Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the combs and petticoats over the chairs, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall, and the yellowing dickybird-watching pictures of the dead. Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers, the movements and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams.[57]

The reader is given access to the characters' minds in a way, there are many expressions here that link to seeing and *not* seeing, respectively: there is a clear division between those who can see (the narrators and the reader/listener) and those who cannot (the sleeping characters). Metaphoric puns like "bedrooms" (referring to both actual blinds in the windows and to the fact that the people are "blind", they cannot see) and "fast, and slow, asleep" ("asleep" being an idiom that is complemented with metaphoric "slow", dumb) highlight the idea of the characters being somehow ignorant. Of course, this "seeing" becomes (more clearly) metaphoric when the narrator moves on from the descriptive list-like images of the sleeping people to the idea of seeing *and* hearing their dreams, their "and wishes and flight. . .". Right after this passage the dreams *are* actually heard. For instance:

> FIRST VOICE: Captain Cat, the retired blind seacaptain, . . .dreams of…
> SECOND VOICE: never such seas as any that swamped the decks of his S.S. *Kidwelly* bellying over the bedclothes and jellyfish-slippery sucking him down salt deep into the Davy dark where the fish come biting out and nibble him down to his wishbone, and the long drowned nuzzle up to him.

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57 *UMW,* 2.

FIRST DROWNED: Remember me, Captain?
CAPTAIN CAT: You're Dancing Williams!
FIRST DROWNED: I lost my step in Nantucket.[58]

The telling/expressing of the dream has thus various layers: the first narrator instigates the depiction of the dream, then the second narrator gives a brief and very poetic summary, and then the reader is actually 'thrown' into Captain Cat's dream and hears a dead person speaking in it. This, then, means that the reader, having been invited to "hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers" the characters' dreams and thoughts, must accept the notion of a world where minds are as transparent as this. Thus a metaphoric world is created: one in which 'event' means (or can mean) unnatural reenacting of imagined things. The portrayal of these dreams could be categorised under modal worlds (within the text world): the text world itself is relatively realistic with a very imaginable setting and everyday incidents, but the frequency with which the frames of dreaming, seeing and hearing are intertwined in complex ways makes the modal world dominant and thus highlights the metaphoric nature of the text. As was noted above, this is done in a very self-aware manner: "Only you can *see*, in the *blinded* bedrooms. . .the yellowing *dickybird-watching pictures* of the dead. Only you can *hear and see*, *behind the eyes* of the sleepers. . .".[59] It is made apparent that the characters are being watched (by the reader from outside *and* their ancestors in the text world), but cannot themselves see the full picture: they sleep in their houses behind blinds, unaware of things. The characters are in fact "blind as Captain Cat", who is the first dreamer the reader 'hears' and also a central character in the play, as he (because of his blindness) can *hear* more than the others. I will return to Captain Cat's role in the narration of the text in 3.3.

58 *UMW*, 3.
59 *UMW*, 3.

After the frame of dreaming has been established, it eventually fades into the background and becomes a sort of a given, which emphasises the role of the modal world as the prominent one in the text world: ". . .Mr Utah Watkins counts, all night, the wife-faced sheep as they leap the fences on the hill, smiling and knitting and bleating just like Mrs Utah Watkins. . . .Cherry Owen, next door, lifts a tankard to his lips but nothing flows out of it. He shakes the tankard. It turns into a fish. He drinks the fish."[60] Dreaming and actual present-tense action blend into one another here so that the reader 'sees' the dreaming and the dreams themselves. The latter 'blend' in particular would be incomprehensible against real-world based rules and principles, but the logic of dreams justifies the comic scenario.

The dream frame becomes even more artificial further on in the text, when explicit word play is used to underline the frame to the reader: "SECOND VOICE: Mr Beynon. . .Straightfaced in his cunning sleep he pulls the legs of his dreams and / BUTCHER BEYNON: hunting on pigback shoots down the wild giblets."[61] Butcher Beynon is characterised through a dream-related pun ("pulls the legs of his dreams"), and he is so "cunning" that he can even finish the narrator's sentence describing his dream. This kind of 'awareness' from the characters' part is prominent throughout the text. (However, as I will argue in 3.3., the characters are in fact controlled by the narrators and thus more like puppets – only Captain Cat has more of a say in things.) The narrators tell the reader what the characters see, or 'see', but not in a neutral, depicting manner, but through a very manipulative technique of bringing things into the focus of attention: "MRS PUGH: I want to look out. I want to see / SECOND VOICE: Lily Smalls the treasure down on her red knees washing the front step. / MRS PUGH: She's tucked her dress in her bloomers—oh, the baggage!"[62]

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60 *UMW*, 17.
61 *UMW*, 19-20.
62 *UMW*, 28.

Dreaming is the most obvious 'minor' narrative frame present in the text, as it defines the whole temporal structure of the text: the characters are asleep, the reader is invited in, the town awakes and the inhabitants go through a 'normal' day, and then go back to sleep. As was said before, this links to modernism through the day-in-the-life-of structure, but also because of the 'surrealist' way in which the dream frame is used to characterise the inhabitants of the town: dreams and the logic of dreams in writing point to Sigmund Freud, whose theories were very influential during the period of modernism. Even though I have argued that Thomas's writing cannot be called surrealist, he nevertheless explicitly expressed Freud's influence (Freud's *ideas*) on his writing. And even if the influence is clearer with Thomas's poetry, the metaphors in this statement by Thomas contain interesting parallels to the view on people in *Under Milk Wood*: "Poetry is the rhythmic, inevitably narrative, movement from an overclothed blindness to a naked vision. . .Poetry must drag further into the clear nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realize."[63] Furthermore, it is rather interesting that broadcast as a genre can be linked with the logic of dreams: its artistic form is rather intuitive because of the active visualising and processing that moves forward quite fast and associatively.[64]

However, there are other weak narrative patterns besides dreams present in the text as well, and these too have the effect of revealing/hiding and blurring the boundaries of reality and imagined things: the conventions of gossip and fantasising about/predicting the future are used. For example, Mrs Waldo is often worried about "what the neighbours will say", and indeed through a highly unnatural path of action and consequence the neighbours actually gossip in Mr Waldo's dream[65]. Even more unnatural is the scene where the two Mrs Dai

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63 Thomas 1985, 311.
64 See for example Vainio 1983, 52.
65 *UMW*, 9-13.

Breads (both ex-wives of Dai Bread) look into the future with a crystal ball and try to see which of them is the actual true love of Dai Bread, but without any success as they are doomed to live in the state of not knowing and only guessing what could have been, had Dai Bread not been foolish enough to divorce them[66].

John Goodby argues that the temporal frame of *Under Milk Wood* is consciously static (see Introduction), and this viewpoint is supported by actual temporal references in the text: "the sleepers are rung out of sleep this one morning *as every morning*", "The ship's clock in the bar says half past eleven. Half past eleven is opening time. The hands of the clock have stayed still at half past eleven for fifty years. It is always opening time in the Sailors Arms."[67] It is emphasised that the day described is a prototypical day in the village, and that nothing ever changes. In fact, the day-in-the-life-of structure can be seen as a technique used to highlight conventionality and thus show the reader the routine-bound restrictions of life: this links to modernism and the critique of the modern way of life, being a part of the 'machine' that is modern society (even if the text is set in the country). This critical view can be seen to manifest itself in the darker time related imagery in the text: the day is essentially surrounded by night, a notion that is highlighted with expressions like "all dead day long"[68]. At the end of the text the 'circle' is closed, but it is implicated that the cycle will begin again: "Dusk is drowned for ever until to-morrow. It is all at once night now."[69] Consequently, the wood surrounding Llaregyp becomes a living entity, something like the 'true' actor in the story, highlighting the dull 'deadness' of the people: "The thin night darkens. . . .the suddenly wind-shaken wood springs awake for the second dark time this one Spring day."[70] This, of course,

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66 *UMW*, 52-53.
67 *UMW*, 24, 36.
68 *UMW*, 77.
69 *UMW*, 81.
70 *UMW*, 86.

links (through a kind of negation) to the main metaphor A TOWN IS ITS INHABITANTS, which I will discuss next.

3.2. Pastoral idyll with a twist

The narrators of *Under Milk Wood* suggest that behind the routines and endlessly repeated habitual patterns (”the sleepers are rung out of sleep this one morning *as every morning*”) there is an age-old dichotomy of what is perceived as right or wrong, and they also hint towards a (arguably modernist) critical view of this conventionality. For example, the way in which the “purity” of the character of Mrs Ogmore-Pritchard is described becomes something completely opposite when contrasted with the fact that she actually talks to her two dead husbands as if they were present (and the reader/listener can actually hear them): “. . .in her iceberg-white, holily laundered crinoline nightgown, under virtuous polar sheets, in her spruced and scoured dust-defying bedroom. . . / MRS OGMORE-PRITCHARD: Soon it will be time to get up. Tell me your tasks, in order.”[71] Despite this unlikely (not very realistic) scenario Mrs Ogmore-Pritchard is caught up in everyday routines and bosses her dead husbands around: she even maintains that “before you let the sun in, mind it wipes its shoes.”[72] This implicates a very narrow frame of mind, and with its comic tone the passage in the text highlights the ridiculousness of such an attitude. Even though one of the central characters, reverend Eli Jenkins, claims in his evening sermon that “We are not wholly bad or good”[73], this either/or type thinking is nevertheless something frequently brought up in the text, as something the characters (the town) base their everyday lives on.

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71 *UMW*, 14.
72 *UMW*, 16.
73 *UMW*, 79.

The conventional idea of something that is wrong is often linked, typically through sin, to darkness (according to the Bible God is light and so on). The basic conventional metaphors here would be something like LIGHT IS GOODNESS/DIVINE and DARKNESS IS EVIL/DEMONIC. Along the lines of this dichotomy, a conventional setting for a pastoral text would be a bright and joyful country setting, and in contrast wicked things often take place in the dark of the night. This dichotomy is both reinforced *and* challenged in *Under Milk Wood.* There are idyllic depictions of the countryside (and there are elements of the conventional genre as well, like strikingly flat and clichéd songs), and on the other hand the sinful (typically sexual, cf. *Ulysses*, and indeed other modernist texts like Lawrence's works) things are linked to night, as in, "Down in the dusking town, Mae Rose Cottage, still lying in clover, listens to the nannygoats chew, draws circles of lipstick round her nipples."[74] Both of these different poles of the same scale are typically mediated using basic metaphors. Significantly, the A TOWN IS ITS INHABINTANTS metaphor is more often used for the darker side, and the main message then is a generalisation of the characters, for example: "Now the town is dusk."[75] In contrast, the idyllic, pastoral depictions rely, more often than not, on very conventional imagery, and when the personification identifying the town with the characters is used here, it is individualised (linked to a certain character), typically alluding to the *repressed* sexual desires of the characters:

> FIRST VOICE: Outside, the sun springs down on the rough and tumbling town. It runs through the hedges of Goosegog Lane, cuffing the birds to sing. Spring whips green down Cockle Row, and the shells ring out. Llaregyb this snip of a morning is wildfruit and warm, the streets, fields, sands and waters springing in the young sun. . . .
> SECOND VOICE: Gossamer Beynon high-heels out of school. The sun hums down through the cotton flowers of her dress into the bell of her heart and buzzes in the

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74 *UMW,* 82.
75 *UMW,* 76.

honey there and couches and kisses, lazy-loving and boozed, in her red-berried breast.
. . .
GOSSAMER BEYNON: I don't care if he *is* common,
SECOND VOICE: she whispers to her salad-day deep self,
GOSSAMER BEYNON: I want to gobble him up. I don't care if he *does* drop his aitches,
SECOND VOICE: she tells the stripped and mother-of-the-world big-beamed and Eve-hipped spring of her self. . . [76]

In fact, the conventional metaphoric connection between joyous spring time and sexual awakening is denied through the main devices of personification and seeing/not seeing. According to Goodby, the refusal of sexual promise (most of the characters repress their desires) creates a tension in the text that is the major source of comedy, as well as subtle social critique.[77] There are also more general images describing the town's (seemingly concrete) awakening, like "rising and raising its blinds", "the dawn inches up", "The town ripples like a lake in the waking haze",[78] but when it comes to the dichotomy of good and bad, value judgments, the generalising metaphoric touch is reserved for the dark undercurrent.

The centrality of the dream frame is one piece in this 'dark metaphoric puzzle'. Dreams often carry connotations of death (cf. Lakoff and Turner's basic metaphor DEATH IS SLEEP), and these references occur throughout the text: ". . .Mr and Mrs Floyd, the cocklers, are sleeping as quiet as death", "Ocky Milkman, drowned asleep in Cockle street. . .and weeping like a funeral."[79] As was mentioned in the previous sub-section, this overall pattern of referring to dreaming becomes a sort of a given, a transparent frame, in the text, and the same applies here: "P.C. Attila Rees lumps out of bed, *dead to the dark* and still foghorning, and

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76 *UMW*, 60-61.
77 2001, 210.
78 *UMW*, 24.
79 *UMW*, 17.

drags out his helmet from under the bed; *but deep in the backyard lock-up of his sleep a mean voice murmurs / A VOICE (Murmuring): You'll be sorry for this in the morning".*[80] This kind of comic unnaturalness is the central method through which the text achieves its critical, constructed tone. It is not verbal play for its own sake; it is irrational (and consequently comic) only on the surface and meaningful when looked at more closely (as opposed to the irrationality of surrealist writing, for example). The passage cited here makes more sense with its multiple layers if we link it to Freudian ideas of the self: this kind of use of the voice apparatus seems to create a tongue-in-cheek interpretation of Freud's theory of the 'layered' self. In the passage these multiple layers of the self are voices "in the backyard lock-up" and they actually speak to the 'self', and at the same time to the reader. This tongue-in-cheek rendering of characteristically modern, Freudian ideas shifts the binary oppositions of good/bad and light/darkness into an ironic, critical light.

Furthermore, the dark undertone is not only reserved to night time, as in sleeping and dreaming. It is occasionally used in the more 'realist' daytime depiction as well, and this is where the basic dichotomy is actually broken:

> FIRST VOICE: In the *blind-drawn dark dining-room* of School House, *dusty* and *echoing* as a dining-room in a *vault*, Mr and Mrs Pugh are silent over *cold grey* cottage pie. . . .
> Alone in the hissing laboratory of his wishes, Mr Pugh minces among bad vats and jeroboams, tiptoes through spinneys of murdering herbs, *agony* dancing in his crucibles, and mixes especially for Mrs Pugh a venomous porridge unknown to toxicologists which will scald and viper through her until her ears fall off like figs, her toes grow big and black as balloons, and steam comes screaming out of her navel. . . .
> MR PUGH: You know best, dear. . .
> SECOND VOICE: Sly and silent, he foxes into his chemist's den and there, in a hiss and prussic circle of *cauldrons* and *phials brimful with pox and the Black Death*, cooks up a fricassee of *deadly nightshade*, nicotine, hot frog, cyanide and bat-spit for his

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80 *UMW*, 18.

needling stalactite hag and bednag of a pokerbacked nutcracker wife.[81]

The dark depictions of the narrators are contrasted with Mr Pugh's obedient discourse with his wife: his words hide the murderous intentions, revealed to the reader by the poetically charged language of the narrators. Significantly, even though the wife acts as if she does not know about her husband's true feelings, it is implicated that she does in fact know about them. This contradiction is left as it is and seems to signify the coexistence of both 'darkness' and 'light' at the same time. Similarly, in between the cited parts of the conversation, there is brighter commentary, very pastoral in tone ("The sunny slow lulling afternoon yawns and moons through the dozy town. . ."), and the narration actually shifts from Mr and Mrs Pugh's conversation to a conversation heard by Mrs Pugh earlier on: in the midst of this dark discussion there is an unnatural flashback, again *heard* as if it was in the present moment of the text. This kind of modality (bringing something from a character's memory to the focus of attention) underlines the simultaneity that is also applied to the artificial divisions between good and bad, darkness and light. At the end of the text these two opposite poles are actually consolidated in a way (even though it is indicated that nothing will change), when reverend Jenkins' and Mary Ann Sailors's views on life are presented as the night falls:

> The Wood, whose every tree-foot's cloven in the black glad sight of the hunters of lovers, that is a God-built garden to Mary Ann Sailors who knows there is Heaven on earth and the chosen people of His kind fire in Llaregyb's land, that is the fairday farmhands' wantoning ignorant chapel of bridesbeds, and, to the Reverend Eli Jenkins, a greenleaved sermon on the innocence of men, the suddenly wind-shaken wood springs awake for the second dark time this one Spring day.[82]

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81 *UMW*, 62-64.
82 *UMW*, 86.

It is suggested that both views are naive, and this is done in relation to night time in the wood: there is a striking contrast between the sexual acts going on in the dark wood and the idealised conceptions of the characters (e.g. Mary Ann Sailor's Eden). Therefore, the ending emphasises the fact that the characters will stay the same no matter what: their awareness has not grown at all. This is so evident that it seems to be an intended backlash to the complex, estranged modernist 'hero'. This links to the consciously static structure of the text, and could be characterised by Joseph Frank's discussion of *spatial form*:

> . . ."the loss of self" is one of the dominant tendencies of both modernism and postmodernism; and such loss is of course another symptom of what I called 'the transmutation of the time-world of history to the timeless world of myth.' The self no longer feels itself to be an active, individual force operating in the real world of history and time; it exists, if at all, only through its assimilation into a mythical world of eternal prototypes.[83]

As the boundaries of the real and the unreal are blurred, with comic effect, in *Under Milk Wood*, the unchanged, flat characters seem to mark this "loss of self" by being positioned in the midst of surreal narrative situations in their overtly prototypical ways.

3.3. Voice and levels of meaning

I have argued that the narrators hold the utmost power in *Under Milk Wood* and create staged contradictions with their power over the characters. I will now focus more on how the narrators actually use their 'power' and how their voices are different from the characters'

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83 Frank 1978, 278. Spatial form is defined as "a shift in the internal hierarchy of the elements composing narrative structure" and it applies especially to stream of consciousness narrative, fragmented narrative (embedded memories etc.) (ibid., 284).

voices.

Within the dream frame we noted that the modality of dreaming highlights the constructed nature of the text. The frame lends itself to numerous layers of 'unnatural' discourse and textual progression:

> FIRST VOICE: Mr Pugh, schoolmaster, fathoms asleep, pretends to be sleeping, spies foxy round the droop of his nightcap and pssst! whistles up
>
> MR PUGH: Murder.
>
> FIRST VOICE: Mrs Organ Morgan, groceress, coiled grey like a dormouse, her paws to her ears, conjures
>
> MRS ORGAN MORGAN: Silence.
>
> SECOND VOICE: She sleeps very dulcet in a cove of wool, and trumpeting Organ Morgan at her side snores no louder than a spider.[84]

However, this kind of unnatural progression is not restricted just to the dream-related part of the text, consider: "FIRST VOICE: Organ Morgan at his bedroom window playing chords on the sill to the morning fishwife gulls who, heckling over Donkey Street, observe / DAI BREAD: Me, Dai Bread, hurrying to the bakery. . .".[85] It is as if the characters *know* they are being introduced to an outsider, and they knowingly act as the narrators' 'puppets'. Sometimes the narrators lead the reader to see and observe so static narrated scenarios, that is simply impossible to try and naturalise them: "FIRST VOICE: . . .gulls. . .observe. . ./ NOGOOD BOYO: Me, Nogood Boyo, up to no good in the wash-house."[86] Here the 'point of view' that the reader is invited to adopt is that of the "morning fishwife gulls", alluding ambiguously to both women at the market *and* gulls, and as if this point of view was not estranging enough,

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84 *UMW*, 21-22.
85 *UMW*, 29.
86 *UMW*, 29.

the actual action to be observed is so static (Nogood Boyo "up to no good") that the visual image just fails to be identifiable.

This kind of controlling narration is prominent throughout the text, and the question of whether these characters are merely puppet-like beings arises. Indeed, even the names and naming point to very narrow niches and stereotypical roles, for instance Nogood Boyo. Some of the minor characters are just "boys", "drowned people", "women", and so forth - their voices have only a meaning in the conversation they are in, as part of that communicated thought (according to Goodby they have a choric function, linked to the pastoral mode[87]). However, there are instances where the characters might be seen to have more of a say, like with Butcher Beynon's "cunning" sleep. This is seen in passages when the characters can explain, 'narrate', their own dreams, thus in the realm of modal worlds:

> FIRST VOICE: Mary Ann Sailors dreams of
> MARY ANN SAILORS: The Garden of Eden.
> FIRST VOICE: She comes in her smock-frock and clogs
> MARY ANN SAILORS: away from the cool scrubbed cobbled kitchen with the Sunday-school pictures on the whitewashed wall and the farmers' almanac hung above the settle and the sides of bacon on the ceiling hooks, and goes down the cockleshelled paths of that applepie kitchen garden, ducking under the gippo's clothespegs, catching her apron on the blackcurrant bushes, past beanrows and onion-bed and tomatoes ripening on the wall towards the old man playing the harmonium in the orchard, and sits down on the grass at his side and shells the green peas that grow up through the lap of her frock that brushes the dew.[88]

Mary Ann Sailors paints a very vivid visual image here for the reader, and the narrators do not interfere. However, these instances are admittedly very few, and Mary Ann Sailors is a significant character, and therefore it could be argued that the narrators only allow a couple of

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87 2001, 211.
88 *UMW*, 21-22.

exceptions in their overpowering narrative. Captain Cat is the clearest example of this: he sometimes becomes almost like an equal to the narrators, leading the reader into seeings things and commenting on them. Captain Cat's role can thus be seen as a parallel to the one the reader has, listening to what is going on in the village: he is blind, but 'sees' everything through the medium of hearing. When the town awakes, Captain Cat is centrally the character through whom the normal morning activities are expressed (e.g. the postman sequence). He is even given the power to make generalisations in the style of the narrators: "Can't hear what the women are gabbing round the pump. Same as ever."[89] Indeed, this power extends to the ominous tone of 'knowing more than the characters', expressed through the dark mode of the A TOWN IS ITS INHABITANTSmetaphor. Even though Captain Cat is blind, he can see *in the dark*: "Blind Captain Cat climbs into his bunk. Like a cat, he sees in the dark."[90] Obviously the seeing must be again interpreted metaphorically - seeing can refer to both dreaming as visualising and to 'seeing' through the medium of other senses. But only Captain Cat is allowed to break the cycle of night and day and the central modality of dreaming: he naps and dreams during the day, whereas the others are subjected to the night/sin mode, sleeping behind their blinds. It is significant that when Captain Cat dreams, he goes back in time in his memories, thus in a way reliving the past: this emphasises the separate role he has in the play, he is in a way detached from the normal passing of time in the text. Captain Cat's modal world is different from the others'.

The other characters (except reverend Eli Jenkins and Mary Ann Sailors who are more important) are not given any chance and are ridiculed through judgmental narration. Even though the narrators' tone is poetic, they can be quite cruel; this contradiction is a parallel to a

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89 *UMW*, 42.
90 *UMW*, 84.

significant passage in the text where "the voice of a guide book" presents the village in the mode of a traditional guide book, but passes judgment as well:

> Though there is little to attract the hillclimber, the healthseeker, the sportsman, or the weekending motorist, the contemplative may, if sufficiently attracted to spare it some leisurely hours, find, in its cobbled streets and its little fishing harbour, in its several curious customs, and in the conversation of its local 'characters,' some of that picturesque sense of the past so frequently lacking in towns and villages which have kept more abreast of the times.[91]

This voice could be said to belong to the narrators, as the tone reflects the hinted tone present in the disposition, for instance. This kind of use of different registers, then, intentionally reveals to the reader the significance of the 'seeming' qualities of the text, and also makes explicit the tendency to cross and test genre boundaries: if even a quide book cannot give a neutral depiction of the town and its people, can such a thing exist?

More subtle judgment occurs throughout the text: "Alone until she dies, Bessie Bighead, hired help, born in the workhouse, smelling of the cowshed, snores bass and gruff. . .", ". . . says Mrs. Pugh, sweet as a razor."[92] Often there is a contrast between what the narrators and the characters say. The characters, then, seem powerless, even up to a point of rebelling against their flat roles: "NOGOOD BOYO: I want to be *good* Boyo, but nobody'll let me".[93] The text plays with stereotypes of this kind, for instance there is a farmer in the play who actually hates his cows more than anything. This kind of controlling is a parallel to the way in which language creates contrasts for the reader: "it is the precision and unpredictability of the language which continually pulls the listener back from its own

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91 *UMW*, 23.
92 *UMW*, 19, 67.
93 *UMW*, 73.

calculated lurches in the direction of lavish word-painting".[94] As Goodby summarises the

point, Thomas interweaves realism and "near-surrealism" so that "if the characters of the play

and their routines are frozen and stereotypical, the language is anything but."[95]

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[94] Goodby 2001, 211.
[95] Ibid., 212.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that *Under Milk Wood* is a typically modernist text because of its clearly constructed nature. Even if the text was written as late as the 1950s, it can be related to (other) modernist texts that use language to a certain effect and stretch genre and technique boundaries with their composition. The main characteristic of this kind of modernist literariness in *Under Milk Wood* is its poetic, unconventional textual progression that challenges traditional, 'realist' modes of depicting the world. This is the source of the humour in the play as well.

In my analysis, the constructedness of *Under Milk Wood* has three main technical strands that create a unique world that stretches our conceptions of things. These three strands are the overall structure, imagery related to the 'dark' undercurrent in the text and manipulation of the different voices in the text. The structure proved to be the most dominant aspect in linking the text to modernist practice: the day-in-the-life-of cycle is formed in a way that tells the reader that conventionality itself is at stake here. Also, the structure ties in the use of the voice apparatus and the ominous darker images as well: the reader gets a clear picture of the power dynamics in the text straight away, and the interpretation the reader is led into is one of superiority (the characters are subjected to criticism and ridicule, as is the image of man as a result).

The world that is constructed via the complex layers of speech and narration challenges traditional views of reality. Unnatural scenarios and blurring the boundaries of dreaming and the real world (of fiction and the actual world) seem to suggest an alternative way of thinking about human cognition and conventions created by human cognition. The

reader has to accept that the real world principles of logic and discourse do not apply here, and at the same time the surreal scenarios make the reader laugh. Thus there are two levels to the constructedness: the deeper level of critical views of the world, and the surface of comic clashes in language. The levels interact nicely in the reading process, provided the conventions behind the constructedness are familiar to the reader.

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