The Dog as Guardian of Thresholds in Ali Smith's *Companion Piece*

Aylín Esmeralda García Hernández (alu0100883572@ull.edu.es)
0009-0006-6375-1874
University of La Laguna

Abstract: Whether as the attributes of prominent Greek divinities like Hekate or as the guardian of the Underworld, Cerberus, the pervasive presence of dogs in Greek mythology is surely a result of their role as companions of humans throughout history. The features ascribed to canines through this Classical tradition emerge in literature, by means of symbolism, as a deliberate attempt to convey a message both to the characters and the readers. In most cases, this serves as a reminder of the origins of civilization – which coincides with the first interactions between humans and wolves – and a need for the recovery of some crucial features as a consequence of our estrangement from nature. In *Companion Piece* (2022), Ali Smith's revisiting of the mythical image of the dog/wolf accounts for our aim at exploring its distinct presentation both as companion and custodian of tangible and intangible doorways. The results obtained in this study denote that the narrative, through the image of the dog, entices us to conceive thresholds as an opportunity for the meeting of opposing realities, rather than an arena for the confrontation between arbitrary binary conceptions. This particularly applies to the female characters by asking them to break the conventions accepting their inner and real selves.

Keywords: Ali Smith, *Companion Piece*, dog symbolism, contemporary British fiction, Greek mythology, liminality.

El perro como guardián de umbrales en *Companion Piece* de Ali Smith

Resumen: Ya sea como atributo de prominentes divinidades griegas como Hécate, o en la figura del guardián del Inframundo, el Cancerbero, la ubicua presencia de los perros en la mitología griega responde con total certeza al papel que estos animales han desempeñado como compañeros del ser humano a lo largo de la historia. Las cualidades atribuidas a los canes en esta tradición clásica emergen en la literatura por medio del simbolismo con el propósito deliberado de transmitir un mensaje tanto al conjunto de personajes como al público lector. En la mayoría de los casos, dicho simbolismo remite a los orígenes de la civilización, coincidiendo con las primeras interacciones entre seres humanos y lobos, y plantea la necesidad de recuperar ciertos rasgos esenciales que se han perdido como consecuencia de nuestro distanciamiento del mundo natural. En *Companion Piece* (2022), la reinterpretación que hace Ali Smith de la imagen mítica del perro/lobo nos permite examinar su doble representación como compañero y como guardián de portales tanto tangibles como intangibles. Los resultados obtenidos en este estudio denotan que la narrativa, a través de la figura del perro, invita a concebir los umbrales no como espacios de confrontación entre construcciones binarias arbitrarias, sino como oportunidades para el encuentro entre realidades opuestas. Esto se manifiesta de forma especialmente significativa en relación con los personajes femeninos al instarlos a transgredir las convenciones y aceptar su auténtico yo interior.

Palabras clave: Ali Smith, *Companion Piece*, simbolismo canino, ficción británica contemporánea, mitología griega, liminalidad.

1. Introduction

Scottish writer Ali Smith has become one of the most influential figures in contemporary Anglophone literature particularly after the publishing of her *Seasonal Quartet*. Her subsequent *Companion Piece* (2022) has been understood by a number of reviewers as the coda of that series, whereas others have regarded it as a stand-alone novel. There is no doubt that her latest books share a concern for contemporary issues together with artworks by David Hockney on their covers. Although it has been the target of numerous reviews, especially during the year of its publication, this work is yet to be the subject of further scholarly examination. In general terms, *Companion Piece* has encountered a positive reception. Alex Preston, for instance, praises its awareness of "the way that problems we think of as being very much of our era – pandemic preparedness, gender identity, workplace equality – are rooted deeply in our collective histories" and its meditations on the process of writing: "Sandy's artistic practice … feels like a metaphor for the way Smith constructs her novels." In a similar vein, Bailey Sincox holds that: "*Companion Piece* invites us to read Sand as a version of Smith herself" and stresses its invitation to question aspects of reality which are usually taken for granted. As Sandy herself asserts in the novel: "a story is never an answer. A story is always a question" (Smith 155).

Emilia Ferrante, however, displays some mixed feelings concerning this narrative. Even if she recognises that its apparently discordant topics are inextricably linked, she considers that "this book is not perfect ... the tangents went on too long, the dialogue was confusing and the timeline lost me." Curiously enough, Ali Smith's experimental and uplifting writing has been highly praised. According to Laura Schmitz-Justen, "Smith … advocates for a mode of engagement with our socio-political present that is not hinged on one individual event," an opinion shared by several scholars (318; Houser 2; Slavin 231-33). Prior to the publication of *Companion Piece*, Clair Wills had argued that "sequence and consequence are the enemies of understanding in Smith's work" (4). Likewise, Montesdeoca-Cubas had described Smith's quartet as "a literary companion in hand with the status quo in which it is written" (71). The author's second-to-last novel can indeed be seen as a companion from various perspectives, leading Ferrante to wonder: "what is "Companion Piece" a companion piece to? The answers are

endless: to the pandemic, to the characters in the novel ... But I think, like all books, "Companion Piece" is a companion piece to you, the reader." It is not surprising then, given Smith's metafictional writing, that she explicitly refers to books as companionable (Calder 13-14) and explores how this role can be fulfilled by people as well as by inanimate objects or animals. Regarding the latter, she particularly expands on the figures of curlews and dogs.

In this paper, I explore the emergence of the image of the dog/wolf both as a companion and as the guardian of physical and abstract thresholds in *Companion Piece*. With this aim in mind, I move on to briefly describe our long-lasting relationship with the species and the inheritance of a collection of subject matters from Greek mythology in the following section. Afterwards, I examine how these antecedents have conformed a literary trope since Classical times and have become part of contemporary Anglophone literature through some selected works. A legacy which has been transmitted to Ali Smith's present novel. All these works share liminality intertwined with dog symbolism and their analysis will mainly be approached through the lens of Victor Turner's theory. Besides, it will involve the introduction of pertinent aspects related to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal" and Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*.

2. Dog symbolism

2.1 A long-lasting bond

Dogs have been one of the animal species with the longest and, probably, most significant bonds with human beings. It is a common assumption that our ties with the species originated from their acute senses which made them the ideal trackers or guardians. Yet their ability to warn us of impending danger by barking or carrying loads was developed much later and likely because of their interaction with humans, as these skills are unusual for wolves (Irvin and Lundock 191-92; Spikins 312; Escoll 127). Our relationship with canines has gone through many phases. There is, for instance, evidence of the consumption of dog meat in widely apart regions like prehistoric Greece, prehispanic Mexico or several native American tribes like the Pawnees. In recent

historical episodes, like World War II, people have eaten dogs due to famine but there are countries, like South Korea, where dog meat is still consumed even if this is not a generalised practice (Trantalidou 96; Spikins 305; Morey 86-90). There are grounds to believe that dog domestication did have, in certain cases, emotional-support purposes rather than functional ones. Dogs, according to Penny Spikins, have never played a practical role in a variety of communities, as is the case of the Martu people in Australia (299-306). This agrees with our current relationship with these animals and how they compensate for any possible deficiencies in social interactions, or complement them.

Spikins suggests some additional reasons for our closeness with canines with whom we share certain behavioural patterns. For example, they take care of their ascendants and descendants, being concerned for their well-being both physically and emotionally, and partaking of the same objectives as a community (319). Our relationship with the species has been, therefore, a noticeably multifaceted one where dogs have played a practical role as well as sharing an affective bond with us.

2.2. Canines in Greek mythology

The first canine-based or related cults have been recorded in Mesopotamia ca. 1800 BCE. At the time, they embodied a series of deities and were also sacrificed to them. There is evidence of the existence of similar practices during the late Bronze and Iron Ages both for purification and healing purposes (Irvin and Lundock 191-95). After the Mycenaean period, relevant differences were found in Italy and Greece, where dogs started to be related to the hereafter. Jacopo de Grossi Mazzorin and Claudia Minniti argue that the reason for interring dogs close to or inside human burial sites can be ascribed to their condition as companions in our passage to the Underworld (62-4). That is, dogs continued to accompany human beings in the afterlife as they had done during lifetime. Another key factor in this association of canines with death is their link with chthonic deities in Greek mythology. This is true for Enodia, who was the goddess of death and crossroads, and who often received dogs as offerings (Trantalidou 109-13). Hekate is the most remarkable example, though. She was seen as an intermediary between gods and people as well as a protector of intersections and borders. The latter is in alignment with her role as

protector of gates, most significantly of those leading from the land of the living to that of the dead. She is usually depicted with a dog's head or escorted by dogs, wolves and other animals which are also regarded as guards of this passage. Throughout time, canines continued to be involved in rites for protecting city gates; the Roman Lupercalia is a good illustration of how dogs were sacrificed to pay homage to the *Lupa* (female wolf) who reared Romulus and established a frontier separating the inner life of the city from the exterior (De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 65-115).

The presence of canines who are in connection with the afterlife is a recurrent topic in the mythology of Indo-European countries including the Sarameyan dogs Cabala and Cyama or the wolf-headed Calu for Etruscans (Irvin and Lundock 196; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 62). The most significant dog associated with thresholds is Cerberus, the custodian of the entry to the Underworld in Greek mythology. This uncanny creature is mostly portrayed with three heads and the tail of a snake, whereas in other cases, he is also depicted with a mane made of these animals. The beast was twice subdued, once by Orpheus's lyre and another time by Herakles's strength (Syropoulos 85-91; Trantalidou 112). In the words of Chevalier and Gheerbrant, "these two instances strongly support the neo-Platonic interpretation of Cerberus as an in-dwelling daemon" (175). Thus, it is only through willpower and self-reliance that we can control our innermost fears or natural tendencies. This interpretation gains significance when compared to the use of dog symbolism in literature, which also continues to mirror the historic and mythological antecedents from a variety of perspectives.

3. The liminal nature of dog/wolf symbolism

The literary usage of canine symbolism for the depiction of liminal states or subjects dates back to Classical times. The term "liminality" — which stems from Latin "limen," which means threshold — was coined by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1909). In the 1960s, Victor Turner reassessed this notion. He established that the liminal state is characterised by "symbolic dissolutions of the self" occurring when the subject abandons the prevailing social structure either purposefully or by coming into contact with other realities by chance (E. Turner 35-39; Kovach et al. 1). Consequently, subjects experience

an in-between state or "crack in the mirror" that is characterised by their invisibility to society as it resists categorisation. This explains the usefulness of this theory "for dealing with phenomena that obstinately elude clear-cut definitions" (Mueller-Greene 68-74).

In certain narratives, the dog/wolf symbolism discloses negative aspects of liminal subjects who are said to be tainted by their exploration of alternative lifestyles and disregard for social conventions. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which is an important source of inspiration for Ali Smith's novels, we find the myth of Lycaon. This Arcadian king committed cannibalism, hence his transformation into a werewolf by Jupiter (Ranger 399; Otten 8). His anthropophagy, nevertheless, can be read as the embracement of his animal instincts over rationality. The figure of the werewolf could work then as a representation of his natural tendencies: "Dogs can represent for humans aspects of the unconscious that are warded off, such as aggressivity, hostility, and sexuality" (Escoll 128). And, even more so, when there is a reference to an untamed member of the same species.

Turner elaborates on how the liminal state is one where socially established categories, like those between women and men or humans and animals, are suspended. The liminal subject is othered and considered a paradoxical figure, which results in their being feared and rejected (95-97). The mistrust to the possible presence of animal inclinations in human beings was particularly feared by Victorian society after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*. There was indeed a proliferation of novels evincing this concern such as Stoker's *Dracula* and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Escoll 134). In Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), Sherlock Holmes and his friend Watson are confronted with "an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering gaze..." (150). As Adrian Tait notes, the detective is recurrently compared to a hound in Doyle's novels due to his capacity to follow a trail, but this may not be the only reason for this association. That is, Holmes, who is mostly regarded as the perfect embodiment of the rational man, is nonetheless frequently depicted as being carried away by his intuition, a possible hint to instinctive behaviour. Moreover, rationality and intuition were two opposed features in Victorian England, which regarded them

as manifestations of masculinity and femininity, respectively. The comparison between Holmes and the hound lays bare the arbitrariness of socially accepted binaries, which are exposed through the presence of the animal Other (48-52; Taylor-Ide 55-57).

Liminality entails the suspension of notions that we take for granted and this frequently generates social rejection. In fact, Turner adds that liminal subjects are mostly regarded as polluted due to their in-between state, this "uncleanness" is also the principal reason why they are marginalised in their own societies (96-97). A similar perspective is to be found in Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*. The expression was originally employed in ancient Rome when referring to "a human being alive only in a biological but not in a political sense, since he has none of the usual rights of a member of society." Even if this is not the place for an in-depth examination of all the implications of this term, suffice it to say that Agamben's theory implies that those citizens who are not completely subjected to the social contract are excluded from the prerogatives reserved to those that are compliant with the system (Fiskesjö 162). In this sense, both Turner's and Agamben's theories recognise the existence of individuals who live but are not fully integrated in our societies, being alienated or othered because of their different conditions or life choices.

Dana Fields explores how these issues have been constantly present in literature. In "Chained Animals and Human Liberty" (2016), she scrutinises the original and ensuing versions of a fable which contrasts the different lifestyles of a dog and a starving wolf. The canines represent two contrary aspects of humanity: our desire for material comfort versus our desire for freedom. Over the years, this story was increasingly regarded as a reflection of how society constricts individuals' actions whereas the wolf emerged as the embodiment of freedom at all costs, even if this means the rejection of any form of hierarchy, or renouncing society (68-80). This is echoed in Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1993) where both the eponymous dog and her owner, Elizabeth Barrett, experience the confinement of bourgeois life. Accordingly, the reader can understand the dog's unease with being kept inside a house as the depiction of Elizabeth's discontent with the Victorian lifestyle (Feuerstein 32-33). Moreover, Woolf is commonly seen as a precursor of postmodernism which precisely advocated for the acceptance of otherness and rejected

the conception of the animal Other as a source of contamination. Postmodern literature defends hybridity or monstrosity as desirable sources of creativity (Baker 100).

The portrayal of otherness through animals is, Rosi Braidotti argues, usually linked to the inclusion of "the negative opposite of the dominant subject" (Brown xiii-xv). This axiom is certainly on par with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal," which also challenges the dominant position of human beings regarding animals. "Becoming-animal" is under no circumstances the imitation or transformation of a person into an animal. It is rather a dissolution of the boundaries that exist between them; a process that enables the disruption of our patterns of thought. Becomings can be intended or accidental processes, but they always imply the movement from fixed or "molar" identities to "molecular multiplicities." The latter is a state similar to the liminal condition because it allows the emergence of new principles and is mostly considered as a source of creativity (Brown 262-67). That is why, on a similar note, Steve Baker states that "*what becoming-animal does is close to what art does*" (138).

Baker analyses how Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal is bound to their notion of "becoming-minoritarian," that is, the suspension of the power hierarchy between humans and animals is only the first stage in the questioning of a few arbitrary binaries (104-13). It is then not only a withdrawal from anthropocentrism. It stands further as an invitation to appreciate the similarities between normative individuals and those perceived as the "other" like women, LGBTIQ+ people or some indigenous groups. This aim aligns with the ideals defended by posthumanism, which Francesca Ferrando links to the "recognition of nonhuman alterities" that should go hand in hand "with the recognition of human alterities" (2). Thus, writers adhering to posthuman beliefs are not involved in the dismantling of humanism but rather in giving voice to silenced collectives. It is an ideal way to open the door to a variety of perspectives by accepting they are all equally valid and worthy of respect as is, in fact, the case in Ali Smith's *Companion Piece*.

4. Canine symbolism and its implications in Ali Smith's *Companion Piece*

Ali Smith's *Companion Piece* is itself a compendium of the different ramifications of canine symbolism which, of course, includes the role of the dog as a companion: "Dogs were generally meant to be company. Companionable" (26). This allows the author to refer to companions other than people and, in particular, literature: "People said books were very companionable things. Much like dogs were said to be companionable" or "I think how *not* alone the speaker is every time someone reads that poem" (27, 117). However, there is an unnatural feeling regarding the relationship between the protagonist – Sandy – and her father's dog: "What this dog knew about me was that I wasn't my father" or "I'd given the dog nothing she really needed apart from food and water" (33-34;103). This alienation from "man's best friend" happens at the same time as the Covid-19 pandemic and, in all probability, works as a means for questioning the individuality and indifference of our present society.

In this narrative, on the contrary, everyone is welcomed irrespective of their condition. From the outset, Smith emphasises the word "hello," and continues to do so when opening each of the three parts of the book. In the first one, this greeting is articulated by Cerberus "'Ello 'ello 'ello. Wot's all this then? That's the voice of Cerberus, the savage mythical three headed dog" (3). The inaugural presence of this mythical figure is a clear hint to the author's intention of likening the entry to her novel to that of the Underworld, since both are spaces where changes of state do occur. In other words, it is her way of emphasising the liminal condition of literature, and its creative power to alter our perception: "And you're smiling at death now. Look how powerful a poem is" or "The people at the fair had gone wild for this story … caught up in the story like something had melted all their bodies into one body" (43, 206-207).

Continuing with this liminal approach in mind, Smith refers to the space between the world of the living and that of the dead, given that the plot of *Companion Piece* is set in the Covid-19 pandemic. A period in which many people were struggling for their lives and their relatives were not allowed to visit and accompany them. The protagonist's father happens to be hospitalised on account of a heart attack, a situation which is described by Sandy in the following terms: "He was some

place I couldn't get into, its windows all dark to me. Or maybe it was me who was in the dark place and he was in a bright elsewhere" (117). The pandemic is not a simple backdrop to the action of this narrative, but an in-between episode in the characters' lives which works as a recurrent source of reflection for the readers. In one of the scenes, Sandy remembers the conversations she would keep with other patients' relatives while sitting on a fence outside the hospital: "We'd say things like *we're not alone* and *you're not alone*." They are in the same situation irrespective of their status or profession: "*A bus driver. A dinner lady. Designs books. Teacher*" (119-20). Their unexpected comradeship takes us back to Turner's theory as those subjects who undergo a liminal process share a connection or *communitas* where differences cease to matter (E. Turner 36). The fence in this fragment is deformed as a result of their improvised meetings and, arguably, suggests Smith's aim to interrogate those arbitrary distinctions between people which became blurred during this unprecedented event.

The narrative continues to underscore the role of dogs as guardians of doorways. There is, for instance, a reference to a painting by William Blake where "there's a dog … All we know about it is its sheer size and the silent howl that's coming from it and passes between it and the child. There's no getting out of that room" (112). But, especially, Sandy's father's dog, Shep, which barks at every caller: "She's only barking because you knocked on the door, I said" (86-87). The dog seems to share Sandy's pandemic inhospitality: "Oh, I'm sorry, I said. I'm letting nobody inside the house. A member of my family is poorly and in hospital and I'm keen not to endanger him" (87). Although this is in line with Deleuze and Guattari's view that pets like dogs can only work as the representation of a person's subjectivity and are consequently despised as a means for "becoming-animal" (Baker 125), this paper will show how the figure of the dog in Smith's novel can also be used with similar purposes to the ones proposed by this concept.

Together with dogs and gates, locks are employed to make readers aware of arbitrary distinctions: "Church doors need to be locked to keep the people both out and in, Ann Shaklock said. Churches like to flaunt their closedness" (176). The most persistent example is the Boothby Lock, a fictitious work of art that serves as a nexus between the contemporary and former times in the novel: "an English metal lock

and key mechanism, a device, she explained, way ahead of its time and an unusually good and beautiful version, quite important historically" (6). As a result, Smith leaves bare the societal fear of everything that is not one thing or the other, but that exists in the in-between as ascertained by Turner, this is the case of Martina Pelf who has a double nationality: "Is one country not enough for you? the man behind the screen said" (96-97; 7). This is also related to how politicians and other sectors of British society try to create the illusion of pure English customs, language, etc. that need to be defended from external influence when in truth most cultures and, obviously, languages have been affected by other countries to a certain extent: "I'd listened to a cabinet minister declaring that TV or radio etc should feature only programmes that celebrated *distinctly British values"* (30).

The narrative also engages in the debate about the British policy on immigration: "I've heard how more new laws were on their way to stop anyone who asked for refuge in this country from getting here or getting help" or "I'd heard how some refugees who'd arrived in this country God knew how against all the odds were now being housed in the real cells of an old decrepit prison" (29; 30). Immigrants are a clear example of what means to be *homo sacer* in our present societies, they betray the hypocrisy of citizens in Western democracies who "convince themselves that illegal migrants are lawbreakers who must not be granted any rights" (Fiskesjö 163). In this novel, the reader encounters another character that faces a similar situation to the one of migrants nowadays, this is a female blacksmith from five hundred years ago. She is raped and almost murdered to evict her from her foundry because as her mentor had told her: "They love us for our magic, and then when they forget their good sense they think we're doing black magic and they get scared and angry" (188). Her tutor was called Ann Shaklock, yet another connection with "locks", like the ones they make at the forge. On a curious note, the girl is equated to the dogs because when she "was younger ... settled in the dogs' bed with the dogs happed round her for sleep" and when they try to murder her, "they killed the dogs first because the dogs were growling" (192, 175). As a consequence of this almost fatal experience, she starts to live in what she considers a middle stage between life and death, halfway between her life in the woods and her occasional contact with others. She becomes a pariah: "Christine Gross's father says she's a witch and she can't come into the house" and

is subjected to the Vagabonds Acts, a series of laws enacted in England since 1349 (212, 108). She is no longer regarded as a proper member of the community and is deprived of any rights, a condition she shares with a group of players she meets in one of the neighbouring towns. But it also means that, as an outcast, she is free from social pressure: "a wanderer, a vagabond, a person more free in this life than most of us can be and though they pay dear for their freedom God help them they walk free for all of us who can't" (191).

Throughout *Companion Piece*, the persistent feeling that Smith is deliberately casting doubts on societal restrictions permeates the narrative. A good indicator is the name given to the different parts of the novels: "You choose," "Curlew" and "Curfew" that could be interpreted as the necessity of choosing between the limitations imposed by our current society and a new lifestyle that may recover values lost as a result of our alienation from nature: "what we do with our allotted time ... dictated or controlled one way or another not by nature alone but by outside forces like economics, history, social constraint, social convention..." (21). Becoming-animal, as described by Deleuze and Guattari, may prove to be a powerful instrument to achieve this purpose. The first step is establishing an alliance with an animal that enables us to leave aside our preconceptions: "I smiled with my own preconceptions on both Martina Inglis's / Pelf's children. They looked back at me with their grown faces full of their preconceptions about me" (Brown 266; Smith 96). And, apparently, pets like dogs are too close for comfort. The wolf, however, is a common example of what these philosophers denominate "demonic animals," that is, animals that prompt us to move from our fixed identity and into new perspectives. This agrees with Smith's frequent allusions to wolves in *Companion Piece*: "I'd be wearing a kind of wolfskin over my whole self … Hello wolf, I'd say in the dream. Where've you been, old friend?" (51). Wolves connect Sandy with her absent mother who is described by her father as "a wild one ... That's exactly what she'd do. Throw a bold of curtain material at a curtain window and shatter it" (68). Actually, her mother says to her before going away "you'll be fine. I'm not worried for you. Because, you know what? There is a dog, a big one … in fact it's not a dog, it *is* a wolf, and it's sitting right next to you" (84). But this is not only indicative of a link between the two women but is also associated with those aspects of femininity that are restricted by society. What is

more, Deleuze and Guattari had emphasised the destabilising quality of becoming-animal in patriarchal societies as it makes possible the empowerment of women by subverting the distinctions between dominant and minoritarian positions (Steve 125, 168; Heymans 18).

At present, Sandy breaks traditional conventions about women because of her homosexuality but, in this novel, the reader can also find a non-binary character, Lea Pelf, who disrupts the traditional assumption that sex and gender are the same thing. They are not only an instance of how binaries are arbitrary by not considering themselves a man nor a woman but also their problems with their father echo this same notion: "my father … won't let me in the house till I *stop buggering about* and use what he calls the *traditionally correct pronoun* to refer to myself again" or "I was living in the workroom above the garage. Banished. To make me see sense. But because it didn't make me see sense he wants me banished from the garage too. I sully his Audi" (96, 135). In the last quotation, Lea goes through three different stages: firstly, they are inside the house; then they are in an in-between state while living in the workroom and, lastly, they are homeless because they do not subject themselves to social conventions. These are very similar to the ones categorised by Turner as preliminal, liminal and postliminal phases and, once more, stress the notion that liminal subjects, because of their contradictory status, are dismissed as polluted beings.

In contrast, every instance of prejudice or discrimination in *Companion Piece* appears to have a straightforward solution for Ali Smith: "Invite them in. Put the kettle on. What else you going to do?" (65-6). It is clear that the narrative advocates for embracing any person who comes to our doors or borders, and this is done by reversing the notion of locks as tools for segregation and transforming them into opportunities to open our minds to different realities and peoples: "Something about the story of that old lock mechanism had unlocked something in me" or "You've literally unlocked something, she said. Not just for me. In me" (34, 111). The threshold becomes a place where the meeting of opposing perceptions and the creation of more inclusive perspectives is possible as suggested by Turner's theory and posthumanism. Most importantly, the presence of dogs throughout the novel serves as a reminder of the importance of companionship, as underlined since the very title of this work. Contrary to Deleuze and

Guattari's theory, in Smith's case, the dog is not only able to reflect the subjective perspective of, for example, Sandy, but also to remind us of the necessity of welcoming other points of view and accepting them as equally valid to ours.

5. Conclusion

The reading of *Companion Piece* is in itself a liminal experience. Ali Smith employs several elements like doors and locks to draw our attention to the arbitrariness of the dual notions that we employ in our everyday lives. The most significant one is canine symbolism which intends to disrupt the binary between human beings and animals. It is a reminder of our animal nature and our estrangement from it. Both humans and dogs are liminal creatures because, as Escoll states, "human beings, one might say, have emigrated from the animal kingdom, although animals remain an important part of their lives. Dogs have also emigrated from the world of pack animals, perhaps jaguars, to being domesticated animals" (130). Moreover, the awareness of our own liminal disposition through "becoming-animals" is just a step away from the challenging of other binaries. It allows us to question if we may have lost some essential aspects with our current lifestyle causing our categorising of people into native vs immigrant or man vs woman, deeming the Other as marginalised and even placing them in the position of the *homo sacer*. After all, these distinctions are a human creation, inexistent in Nature.

In a nutshell, canines with their long relationship with humankind and their similarities with us become the perfect companions for exploring the threshold that they themselves guard. Smith, similarly, sets herself up as a custodian of this passage by writing about these concerns in a world where superficiality is widespread. Today's news is indeed easily forgotten in a society where immediacy prevails, and one of the possible solutions may be to register such relevant issues as the ones portrayed in this novel by means of literature, so that they are remembered and taken into account. This way, Smith is encouraging us to open the locks imposed by our social conventions in a posthuman attempt to accept new points of view and welcome people from different realities or, in other words, to value companionship over intolerance.

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