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## “How difficult not to go making ‘reality’ this and that”: Virginia Woolf’s Record of Representation

Julia E. Eifert  
*Bard College*, [je6650@bard.edu](mailto:je6650@bard.edu)

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Bard

“How difficult not to go making ‘reality’ this and that”: Virginia Woolf’s Record of  
Representation

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by  
Julia Eifert

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Introduction: “Living in the midst of loss and violence”

I was seventeen the first time I picked up *To The Lighthouse*. I spent an hour reading a single passage and still couldn't figure out which character was thinking all those cyclical thoughts. I had no idea that words could be constructed on a page without a linear plot, that the English language could be manipulated in a way that mimicked waves ebbing, silent busy streets, or windows slamming shut. The language felt so unfamiliar, and yet, the intrigue I felt to the words remain unmatched. Virginia Woolf's words didn't feel purposefully confusing. Instead, her words demanded my attention. I had to pick up the pen and scribble every question I had in the margins. Essentially, this project began the very moment *To The Lighthouse* captivated me in 2015. The majority of the quotations that I initially close read in order to begin my research came from annotations I marked years ago. My first copy of *Mrs. Dalloway* has stars next to every quote that I liked, or didn't like, or confused me, or made me want to write. I have approached studying and questioning Woolf in multiple ways since my initial introduction to her writing. I have read Woolf through a Freudian lens, a feminist lens, purely for the imagery, purely for the plot, and purely to disregard the plot entirely. For this project, I started with *Mrs. Dalloway*. At the time, the close readings prompted me to address topics like nostalgia, memory, the consciousness, and isolation. I wrote five pages about Woolf's metaphorical use of the window. I wrote and wrote and wrote and yet her language demanded more. I wanted to grasp her fiction and how it could so vividly represent the experience I had come to know as being alive. Yet, her words do not represent an exterior portrayal of reality. Rather, her writing edges on dreamscapes and fractured time. A year later, instead of feeling like an all knowing Woolf scholar, and as if all my questions have been answered, I feel inclined to continue to ask more questions. I feel

deeply invested in conversing with her, placing her in conversation with contemporary scholars to continue and extend her work. This project aims to piece together questions about language, representation, and a recorded version of reality.

I initially began working through Woolf's narrative techniques and portrayal of the individual consciousness. The narrative close readings I performed allowed me to question the effect of how words on the page are arranged. I turned to Kent Puckett and Erich Auerbach to guide my initial questions surrounding her narrative approach. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* gave me the necessary language to begin realizing that Woolf was representing reality through an innovative narrative approach.

[Mimesis: The representation of reality.]<sup>1</sup> How do her texts differ from the Western male-authored canonized texts I have read before? Why does her reality resonate so deeply with me? Early on in the research process I found myself frustrated with the terminology of mimesis, consciousness, and reality. My writing felt removed from any tangible world, only existing in a theoretical space with ambiguous jargon. The term reality seemed to be so multiplicitous that any definition slipped between my fingers. This instability led me to search Woolf's nonfiction for answers.

As I searched through her journals, essays, and letters, I began noticing that Woolf's understanding of reality was intricately tied to her philosophy surrounding the past. In 1927, Woolf wrote in her essay "How It Strikes a Contemporary" that "we are sharply cut off from our predecessors," and that a "shift in the scale [has] shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Auerbach and Edward W. Said, *Mimesis: The Representation of reality in Western Literature*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press., 2003).

us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present.”<sup>2</sup> Woolf makes the claim that a distinct ideological and stylistic difference exists between her contemporaries (herself included) and past writers. She hyper focuses on the Victorians as being ideologically different from herself. She defines these two literary movements by their temporal boundaries. She claims that her writing exists devoid of the past, and devoid of the classical conventions of English literature. At this discovery, I found myself wanting to write on the separation between the Victorians and the Bloomsbury writers (the writing group Woolf belonged to). Yet, to accurately prove that a distinct separation exists between these two literary movements, I first had to define what Modernism is (the literary movement the Bloomsbury group spearheaded). I finally thought I found a term, a movement, that I could define and create a black and white argument with. I look back on my naive-self in awe, the term Modernism caused me much grief.

Madelyn Detloff, in “The Persistence of Modernism: Loss and Mourning in the Twentieth Century,” writes that Modernism is a time of “escalating loss, retribution and violence from 1914-1946.”<sup>3</sup> She argues that the term Modernism has less to do with the time frame and more to do with the writing of violence, death, loss, and mourning. She cites specific writers and states that, “early twentieth-century writers such as Stein, Woolf, and H.D. thus provide conceptual resources for living in the midst of loss and violence.”<sup>4</sup> She further nuances her definition of the term by describing modern fiction as texts that commemorate “shattering losses; the connections between acts of remembrance and our imagined futures; the difficulty of commemorating the particularity of loss when catastrophe and atrocity occur so frequently; and

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1925), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Detloff, Madelyn. *The Persistence of Modernism: Loss and Mourning in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pg 3.

the necessity for forging non-lethal responses to the deadly forms of power.”<sup>5</sup> Detloff highlights the strangeness of navigating emotional traumas when the larger collective society that the individual belongs to experiences repeated tumultuous violence and catastrophe. Another Modernist scholar, Laura Salisbury, writes that “psychoanalysis, which emerges conterminously with the major strands of literary Modernism, seems, then, to offer a fundamentally literary heuristic through which to understand the mind and through which the mind is structured, and a new conduit into portions of experience related to irrationality and desire that exist beneath the embattled structures of social repression.”<sup>6</sup> Salisbury’s definition of Modernism aligns itself with the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>7</sup> She continues to argue, similarly to Detloff, that Modernism does not exist solely as a phenomenon of thought that is mutually exclusive to the violence of World War I and World War II. Rather, the psychological movement towards the understanding of the Freudian unconscious caused fiction to look inward rather than only at exterior representation. Both scholars move away from Modernism being a movement defined by temporal boundaries. They turn away from the widely accepted notion that Modernism exists solely as a movement that emerged due to specific Western historical moments. By arguing this, they expand Modernism’s definition into something that rejects temporality as being the defining element of these works. The difficulty with grasping a solid definition of Modernism allowed me to overcome previous rigidity towards the overarching questions I sought answers to.

Simultaneously, I was beginning to see a paradox emerge within Woolf’s awareness of her own fiction. She loudly dismisses the narrative techniques the Victorian writers utilized. Specifically,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg 23.

<sup>6</sup> Maude, Ulrika, and Mark Nixon. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Modernist literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pg 285.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



Woolf rejected the necessity of a text being linear, plot driven, and action orientated. Yet, I began to ask myself, what exists within Woolf's texts when she is not narrating internal streams of consciousness. Certainly within Woolf's fiction an exterior reality co-exists with the interior reality. As I shifted my focus towards discovering if Woolf stayed true to her rejection of the Victorians, I realized that it was not a matter of Woolf's writing being devoid of the past. Instead, Woolf's fiction harnesses moments of the past, of the Victorian depiction of reality. These scenes in her fiction, that display exterior reality, such as a dinner party, juxtapose and highlight the writing of the interior individual consciousness. The moments of harnessing [writing the Victorian exterior] layers Woolf's realities, creating two distinct realms of reality that are intertwined, and co-exist. This personal paradox [Woolf claiming to reject the Victorians, yet harnessing their literary techniques] could perhaps be a desire to rebel and break apart from those who inspired you. Or perhaps, she cannot admit that she must harness the past, because she is hyper-focused on creating something unfamiliar and unimaginable; therefore, her work is inherently entrenched in that deviation, and in the work of the Victorians. No matter the reason for the paradox, noticing it allowed me to view Woolf's work as existing in a space between reality and the past and between the genre of fiction and the genre of recorded history. The paradox forced me to step back and view Woolf and her work with a higher degree of nuance. Ultimately, I felt inclined to break down restrictions between literary genres and temporal literary movements.

Woolf's personal temporal paradox prompted me to dig deeper into her representation of the past and her representation of reality. This questioning led me to read Woolf's work as a record of the past and a record of her own reality. Once I accepted this, that I was reading fiction

as historical documentation, my true project started to take form. The writing that follows this introduction is deeply connected to my experience of reading Woolf as a woman in 2020. The initial intrigue I felt to Woolf's record of representation stemmed from my desire to see a history that I felt connected to and a part of. The record that Woolf left behind is one of fiction. Yet, her fiction comes closer to the reality that I experience, more than a piece of recorded history ever could. Woolf's record of representation is not finished. Rather, I hope to draw attention to the successive and continuous concept of the record of representation. Woolf left behind a record of her own reality, as do all writers. Her record transcends temporal boundaries, and resonates with me as I sit in a room of my own trying to find the language to represent the windows Woolf's writing has opened for me. Her record continues with every writer that extrapolates from her work in order to create something new.

## Chapter 1: “Men are not the center of the world”: The Missing Archive

In 1928 Virginia Woolf delivered two lectures that would later become the essay “A Room of One’s Own”. The essay examines the relationship between women and fiction.<sup>8</sup> Woolf attempted to address how a woman can enter the publicly male dominated world of literature. Further, the essay questions how fictional language and history were recorded, through the minds of men; therefore, the canon has been curated by men and for men. Woolf asks the reader to think about the Elizabethan era and “why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet.”<sup>9</sup> She argues that, of course, women were also capable of producing literature; yet, the Western world has taught and has been taught that great literature looks like (and is) the work of Shakespeare, Byron, Hardy, Wilde, and Dickens. In a sense, these canonized authors have set the precedent for what the novel can look like.

Within “A Room of One’s Own,” Woolf describes the literature produced during England’s Elizabethan Era (1558-1603). Woolf characterizes the Elizabethan period as largely devoid of female writers. Further, Woolf suggests that there is little surviving historical record describing how Elizabethan women navigated the public and private sphere. Woolf’s arguments and anxieties about the male domination of literature in Elizabethan England fall into a few different categories. She thirsts for historical and biographical information about these Elizabethan women. That is, Woolf craves for a basic understanding of how these women lived and interacted within society. She longs for accurate historical documentation, written by the Elizabethan women. In addition, she asserts that women can only be represented accurately in

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

fiction when they are written by women, rather than from the viewpoint of the male gaze. She wants to read actual words and sentences constructed by past women. Through the questions Woolf poses in this essay, I have come to grapple with a larger theoretical set of questions that will guide the analysis of Woolf's writing.

To unpack the complex relationship between history and fictional literature I look to place Virginia Woolf in conversation with Gerda Lerner. The Lerner book I draw from, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, was published in 1986, which is a distinctly different time frame than which Woolf was writing. Lerner provides a more contemporary voice for the ideological issues that come to fruition when women are left out of writing, and left out of history. By placing these two writers in conversation, I hope to highlight the continuous battle female writers and historians face when looking at literary representations of women. Gerda Lerner creates a distinction between “the unrecorded past [which is] all the events of the past as recollected by human beings- and History- the recorded and interpreted past.”<sup>10</sup> To clarify the relationship between fiction, representation, and history I must first break down the difference between “the unrecorded past” and “History.”<sup>11</sup> For elucidation, I will refer to these two different and distinct concepts in Lerner's terms, the unrecorded past and a slight deviation from her term, *recorded history*. Lerner highlights that the difference between these two terms can be summed up through the unrecorded past falling into the category of *reality* and the term History falling into the category of *representation*. Meaning, the unrecorded past acts as an umbrella that covers different perspectives and the events of all people. The unrecorded past does not discriminate based on language or form. It encompasses auditorial history, images, and folktales, within all

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<sup>10</sup>Gerda Lerner, *The creation of patriarchy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

different forms of “recording”. In contrast, the recorded historical evidence of the Western world is curated, and therefore, created in order to represent singular storylines. The writers of recorded history have the ability to pick and choose what will be written down, leaving everlasting ripples of how the public views its own history.

Yet, what happens when identities and perspectives are left out of the creation of recorded history? Lerner argues that we are left with a Eurocentric and male-dominated depiction of the past that further suppresses women and corners us into a domestic sphere. Further, Lerner explains that “the contradiction between women's centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation has been a dynamic force, causing women to struggle against their condition.”<sup>12</sup> Lerner argues that women are and have always been crucial in the experience and development of humankind. However, historical documentation has consistently been written from a male perspective. Lerner further complicates her argument by asserting that women *themselves* have struggled to identify their roles in society. Meaning, the constant historical portrayal of women being subordinate to men has actively slipped into the consciousness of not just men, but has also been ingrained into the consciousness of women. This moment of Lerner’s argument explicitly displays how the written word can affect tangible reality. Lerner next argues that men quietly subordinated women through a falsely remembered history that aimed to equate women’s subordination to a *natural* phenomena. When we are not the writers of our own history, we are removed from the creation of the roles we have filled, and can fill. We are removed from our

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 5.

own understanding of ourselves. To further clarify the importance of the relationship between recorded history and literary fiction, Lerner writes that:

History-making, on the other hand, is a historical creation which dates from the invention of writing in ancient Mesopotamia. From the time of the king lists of ancient Sumer on, historians, whether priests, royal servants, clerks, clerics, or a professional class of university-trained intellectuals, have selected the events to be recorded and have interpreted them so as to give them meaning and significance. Until the most recent past, these historians have been men, and what they have recorded is what men have done and experienced and found significant. They have called this History and claimed universality for it. What women have done and experienced has been left unrecorded, neglected, and ignored in interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

Lerner utilizes another term “history-making” in order to describe the phenomenon of creating a history that does not represent the reality of the public, but rather the reality of those who are writing and making the historical documents. The second element of the term, “making,” points to the inherent skewed perspective of recorded history. I have come to argue, with the help of both Woolf and Lerner, that recorded history and literary representation produce varying forms of fiction. Recorded history represents a curation of reality that does not encompass various perspectives. Fictional literary representation attempts to mirror life; however, certain perspectives are often lost and replaced with one dimensional character tropes.

By placing these two writers in conversation I have come to see a through line between literary fiction and recorded history. In one sense, a constructed fictional narrative transparently does the same thing that recorded history attempts to make invisible: posit a subjective perception as a neutral, empirical reality. Further, both these versions of reality are not merely representational, but, in fact, do affect the realm of reality. These constructions, whether due to the biases of male historians or the incomplete stories written by men, perpetuate false realities of what women can do, be and exist as. Therefore, the lack of representation of the feminine and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

domestic sphere by women writers, the lack of historical documentation by women, and the construction of history and of language as being male-centric, reflects and aids the construction and upkeep of the patriarchy. Recorded history and fictional literature seem to be two sides of the same coin, both bleeding into the public domain. Lerner proposes the question: “What will the writing of history be like, when that umbrella of dominance is removed and definition is shared equally by men and women?”<sup>14</sup> In which she answers:

we will simply step out under the free sky. We will observe how it changes, how the stars rise and the moon circles, and we will describe the earth and its workings in male and female voices. We may, after all, see with greater enrichment. We now know that man is not the measure of that which is human, but men and women are. Men are not the center of the world, but men and women are.<sup>15</sup>

I ask you to keep this quotation in mind while reading the duration of this chapter. Lerner and Woolf are both striving towards a goal of changing the public's understanding of history and representation. They, as well as a plethora of other pioneering women, actively de-center and destabilize the accepted notion that women merely have acted as passive figures within history. In addition, Lerner emphasizes the importance of changing and amending written representation and documentation to include women, which further stabilizes my argument that representation and reality do not merely co-exist, but affect each other constantly. Specifically, I will unpack literature's ability to construct a skewed version of reality that then impacts the culture, social climate, and collective consciousness of society.

Woolf's non-fiction emphasizes an urgent need to dismantle the female archetypes that men have continuously written, constructed, and perpetuated.<sup>16</sup> Woolf's anxiety with accurate

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929).

depictions of women within fiction prompted my understanding of literature's ability to structure society. I now look to turn back to the Victorians, in order to analyze the relationship between fiction and society that Woolf and Lerner both prompt. The archetypes that constructed the feminine space within Victorian literature were primarily created by men. Coventry Patmore, a nineteenth-century poet, published the poem "Angel in the House" in 1862.<sup>17</sup> Coventry's poem accurately depicts the general Victorian gaze on women and discusses and defines what the "ideal" woman should be. The poem perpetuates the concept of two separate spheres of society, one belonging to women and one belonging to men. The female sphere linguistically is formed by words like *domestic*, *interior*, *inside*, and the *home*. The poem and the ideal woman in the poem encapsulate the Victorian ideal that writers such as Charles Dickens utilize, which I will extrapolate upon after an analysis of the original poem itself.

The creation and perpetuation of the trope of the Angel, as well the trope of "the whore," which falls on the opposite side of this binary, upholds and further creates the standard for women, meaning, the language does not simply exist on the page but permeates through the public consciousness. In the poem, Coventry describes his wife, who represents the angelic wife. John M. Hoffman, a literary critic, calls the Angel one that is the "selflessly devoted and submissive wife and mother."<sup>18</sup> According to Coventry and popular thought the ideal woman "was expected to remain virtuous, pure, and untainted by the dangerous worldly contact with which her husband was necessarily involved. She was an asexual being whose task in life was,

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<sup>17</sup> Joan M. Hoffman, "'She Loves with Love That Cannot Tire': The Image of the Angel in the House Across Cultures and Across Time," *Pacific Coast Philology*, 42:2( 2007), 264–271. [www.jstor.org/stable/25474238](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25474238).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



paradoxically, to produce children.”<sup>19</sup> The poem provides list-like guidelines for the perfect woman. In the third stanza of the poem, entitled “Love and Duty” the speaker says:

Anne lived so truly from above  
 She was so gentle and so good,  
 That duty bade me fall in love  
 And ‘but for that,’ thought I, ‘I should!’<sup>20</sup>

The first line marks an initial comparison between the godly heavens and the wife. Even though this could be read as a positive comparison, the speaker only addresses this characteristic in terms of how *he* benefits from the selfless woman. The male-centered rhetoric perpetuates the idea that a woman must represent the Angel, and through this, she acts as a mediator between the heavens and her husband, an intermediary figure. The wife’s angelic behavior does not belong to her, rather it is important because it brings her husband closer to God. The second and third lines utilize adjectives that define the wife: she is “gentle” and “good.” This descriptive language falls short of giving the reader any actual understanding of who this woman is; rather, the reader is only given information about her through the lens of how she presents herself to her husband, and how she impacts *him*. The third line makes it clear that the speaker believes it is his “duty” to fall in love with this woman. She exists to the speaker of the poem as an angelic presence, a link to God; however, her angelic presence does not elevate her status above the speaker. Instead, that status betrays her and ultimately confines her to the amorphous and curated boundaries of the domestic sphere.

A new complexity takes shape in the fourth stanza entitled “A Distinction.” The speaker admits that his true desire is for the maid and not his wife:

The lack of lovely pride, in her

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel In The House* (London: Cassell and Co., 1887), lines 1-4.

Who strives to please, my pleasure numbs,  
 And still the maid I most prefer  
 Whose care to please with pleasing comes.<sup>21</sup>

The speaker explicitly states he prefers the maid to his angelic wife due to the pleasure the maid receives from pleasing others. After the speaker deems his wife the most loyal and angelic, he still admits that he prefers the maid. The maid's entire existence is exclusively confined to reproductive labor. Therefore, the speaker highlights that women are meant to represent not only angelic purity, but she must also willingly accept complete subordination. The maid represents the ultimate form of subordination. However, the wife comes in at a close and redeemable second.

The poem adopts and places a label on the female character trope present within Victorian literature. I now turn further back in time, to 1853, approximately ten years before the publication of "Angel in the House." *Bleak House*, by Charles Dickens, provides a first glimpse into this trope. In *Bleak House*, two female characters, Esther and Lady Dedlock, highlight the intricate line between being the Angel or being the Whore. Dickens presents one woman, Esther, as the ideal, and compares her to Lady Dedlock, who falls utterly short of representing the Angel. These two characters exist within Dickens' novel in order to create a stark juxtaposition. The juxtaposition highlights the wide gap in the binary of representation. Dickens was one male author that popularized this trope. Coventry's poem placed a name onto the trope, which further acts to cement the concept, spinning it into something that exists, existed, and will continue to exist in the real world. This exchange acts as an example of how literary fiction not only mirrors reality, but fiction builds off of fiction, creating tropes that become normalized and accepted

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 1-4.

within reality. The literary realm of fiction is in a sense its own world, having its own history, and acting as a pervasive form of knowledge for society. When novels and poems build off each other they create everlasting representations of reality that are documented through language. At this point in my thinking, Gerda Lerner's definition of recorded history remains present in my mind. When a concept becomes a trope, and is written again and again, it seeps out into the real world and becomes a part of a literary history based on tropes that are not accurate. The novel *Bleak House* portrays an external depiction of reality that is meant to emulate real people and experience. This attempt at mirroring reality allows the characters to falsely come across as accurate, which perpetuates and normalizes the inaccurate depictions of female characters. These depictions uphold standards that women then must abide by.

Woolf is well aware that her predecessors have actively upheld specific standards for women to live their lives. In her essay "Professions for Women" Woolf directly critiques the Coventry poem and characterizes the Angel as a woman who:

was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming, She was utterly unselfish. . . She sacrificed herself daily [ . . . ] Above all, she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty- her blushes, her great grace.<sup>22</sup>

Woolf claims that the women represented in these Victorian and Elizabethan canonized novels represented female characters within fiction that inherently had limitations and restraints because they were not for the most part, written by women. She directly calls into question the modern validity of the Angel but argues that "In those days- the last of Queen Victoria- every house had

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<sup>22</sup>Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf. *The Death of the Moth: and other essays*. (London: Readers Union, 1943).

its angel.”<sup>23</sup> She goes on to explain how the image of the Angel maintains a presence in her own writing, she says:

when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: “My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.”<sup>24</sup>

With witty sarcasm, Woolf addresses the blatant shortcomings of the “Angel in the House”. She uses the image of the Angel addressing her, telling her to be docile. It is as if Woolf has a Victorian ghost from the past, whispering in her ear, telling her to be pure and docile. The Angel seems to provide a warning for Woolf. A warning not to stray too far from tradition. In the passage above, Woolf seems to hint towards her own fear of completely dismantling the tropes that men have embedded so deeply into reality. However, Woolf does reorganize and distort the preconceived understanding of what fiction can look like. This effectively also evinces her understanding of what the *domestic* and *feminine* space can look like. Beyond Woolf’s dismantling of Victorian narrative techniques, her use of a narrator that can push past the superficial exterior and enter the inner dialogues of characters, allows for her female characters to be seen through an internal personal gaze, and not just the exterior domestic. Within “A Room of One’s Own” Woolf juxtaposes the Elizabethan woman with the “modern” woman. She articulates that the Elizabethan woman:

never writes her own life and scarcely keeps a diary; there are only a handful of her letters in existence. She left no plays or poems by which we can judge her. What one wants, I thought- and why does not some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it? - is a mass of information; at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself; did she do all the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant?<sup>25</sup>

She attempts to imagine what the Elizabethan woman experienced as a life within the domestic sphere. Yet, she argues that she has no information to even begin to imagine the lives of past women. In the second line of the quote above, when Woolf uses the word “judge” we can deduce that Woolf longs for an understanding and an ability to hear from women writers about their lives and experiences. She wants to understand past women through their words, not the fictional representations written by men. Woolf explains she wants a “mass of information.”<sup>26</sup> Expectedly, this quotation highlights that the only mass of biographical or fictional literature that abundantly presents itself has been written by men. She implicitly argues that one cannot accurately understand a historical period when half of the population is not given notoriety, attention or publication. Once again, it seems that Woolf and Lerner are on the same page. Beyond this, Woolf notes that because we do not know biographical information about these women, we cannot deduce truth or accuracy from the representation of them within male-authored fiction. The attention Woolf pays to the lack of women's writing and thus the lack of women's ability to embed themselves within history-making allows Woolf to crack open the axiomatic understanding that language does not exist as constructed for all and created by all. Woolf's female characters harness an exterior representation of domesticity; however, due to the innovative narrative style, Woolf provides a space for domesticity and femininity that differs from the preconceived understandings of these spaces that have been established through male-authored literature.

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<sup>25</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 45.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Woolf draws further attention to the danger of men writing the fictitious history of the experience of womanhood through their inability to write representative female characters. When I utilize the word “fictitious” I mean the creation of the literary woman through the eyes of men, which inherently limits their ability to represent that reality with minimal artifice. She argues that “if women had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very curious; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction.”<sup>27</sup> Woolf highlights the stark binaries that women characters consist of. She utilizes extreme paradoxes to highlight the lack of character intricacy that she believes to be represented through male-authored texts. These extremes clearly lack nuance and understanding of complexity in regard to women, and provide singular storylines that can be repeated and repeated until they are publicly acknowledged as categories that women belong in. For example, the “Angel in the House ” trope used above.

Paradoxically, within the majority of Woolf’s fiction, her female characters occupy a domestic space of being a mother, a wife, or an obsessive party planner. Yet, this domestic sphere gains complexity due to the readers access to their internal dialogue. The reader is granted access to a domestic sphere that is not tied to the Angel trope; rather, it is riddled with the complexities of navigating an external social sphere that was not created for the female characters. Herbert Marder, author of *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf*, argues that Woolf’s understanding of feminism “implied the broadening, not the rejection, of the domestic

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<sup>27</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 43.

wisdom traditionally cultivated by women.”<sup>28</sup> Marder further analyzes Woolf’s depiction of the domestic space as one that “circumscribes that part of life that cannot be measured” and “is almost exclusively social; there is no privacy for women.”<sup>29</sup> Finally, Marder makes the argument, with which I agree, that Woolf “believed that most of the evils inherent in Victorian family life could be traced, directly or indirectly, to a single source : the traditional dominance of men.”<sup>30</sup> Given the conversation between Lerner and Woolf, and now Marder, I have come to question whether Woolf’s fiction accomplishes what her philosophy desires to accomplish, a reorganization of women’s place in the novel as well as within historical documentation.

Woolf asks the reader “to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people’s hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside a room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters WOMEN AND FICTION, but no more.”<sup>31</sup> Woolf draws a line between the domestic space for a woman to write, and the external world. This physical barricade of the window creates the small space of freedom, an exterior escapism created through the boundaries of a room. Woolf almost admits defeat here, she surrenders to her freedom as a woman being confined to literature and an interior room. She seems to succumb to the very binaries her work exposes. Why does she continue to uphold domestic confinement? This depiction of the area in which a woman can write, will write, and does write, is narrow and barricaded from the exterior. As I sit writing this, looking out the window, I will attempt to reveal Woolf’s portrayal of the domestic space, her reimagining of

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<sup>28</sup> Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1968), 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 32/34.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

what role a woman can occupy in fiction, and what language can be written by a woman, as character, and as author.

I look to begin my application of the theoretical framework created above with Woolf's fictional text, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). *Mrs. Dalloway* begins with the female character Clarissa Dalloway buying "flowers herself" for the party she will be throwing.<sup>32</sup> As she walks around London she wonders about if "she could have her life over again! [. . .] could have looked even differently."<sup>33</sup> Following this, Clarissa explains that:

She would have been, in the first place, dark like Lady Bexborough, with a skin of crumpled leather and beautiful eyes. She would have been, like Lady Bexborough, slow and stately; rather large; interested in politics like a man; with which she had a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's. That she held herself well was true; and had nice hands and feet; and dressed well, considering that she spent little. But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing - nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond street, this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs Richard Dalloway.<sup>34</sup>

She begins her nostalgic train of thought by wishing she could have been like Lady Bexborough, a small character in the novel who Clarissa admires. This initial description harnesses the cliched emphasis on a woman's physical appearance. She follows this description with equating being "interested in politics" to being "like a man."<sup>35</sup> Clarissa seems to be reflecting on her own inability to have broken the boundaries and restraints of the feminine; however, at the same time she expresses respect and admiration for a woman who did not follow the confinements of the

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<sup>32</sup> Virginia Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1925), 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*



domestic space. Despite this, Clarissa explains that she “held herself well” and “dressed well.”<sup>36</sup> However, Clarissa’s feelings grow more complex once she addresses her new feeling of invisibility as now an older woman. The following sentences create tension that allows for Clarissa to extrapolate upon the ways in which women have been forced to define themselves through a man; rather than through their own self. She explains that she is now stuck in a sort of limbo. Further, one can extrapolate that Clarissa feels as though her life has plateaued since she has accomplished what women are supposed to accomplish, marriage. The final sentence further provides textual evidence that Clarissa feels distant from herself due to her identity linking with her husband. She states that she is “not even Clarissa anymore” rather, she is “Mrs. Richard Dalloway”.<sup>37</sup> The acknowledgement of her own loss of identity allows Clarissa to stand out as a female character that consciously is aware of the limitations patriarchal society has placed upon her. Further, her own stream of consciousness tries to push against these restraints, even if it comes within a moment of mindless day dreaming. The narrative style allows the reader to see past the point of an exterior domestic sphere of a house and the duties of the wife. The layering of realities and narrations allows for Clarissa to experience a duality within her character. The external plot of Clarissa throwing and planning a party provides for the external force of action that drives the novel. However, layered right on top of that is a continuous thought loop that creates the internal layer of the novel. This dynamic juxtaposition between the two worlds creates a doubled version of Clarissa and her relationship to the portrayal of the domestic sphere. The narrator allows for the reader to receive intimate information, which layers Woolf’s

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

portrayal of the domestic sphere as a split entity - the interior portrayal of womanhood and the exterior portrayal.

Peter Walsh, a former lover of Clarissa, reflects on Clarissa in reference to marriage and thinks that “here she’s been sitting all the time I’ve been in India; mending her dress; playing about; going to parties; running to the house and back and all that, he thought, growing more and more irritated, more and more agitated, for there’s nothing in the world so bad for some women as marriage.”<sup>38</sup> Peter Walsh, a character who, unlike the reader, does not have intimate access to the language and political forces that occupy Clarissa’s mind, depicts and thinks about her as maintaining and upholding the conventions of the Victorian woman. He thinks to himself that while he has been gifted with the ability to travel, Clarissa has been home, mending her dress. Yet, even though Clarissa has been labeled as a wife, and is meant to occupy the category and role of motherhood and the domestic, she is still a singular isolated entity. Clarissa thinks that “there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect [ . . . ] for one would not part with it oneself, or take it, against his will, from one’s husband, without losing one’s independence, one’s self-respect—something, after all, priceless.”<sup>39</sup> Clarissa praises independence and brings attention to the concept of the isolated consciousness. Clarissa explains that this “gulf” or abyss exists between all human interactions. She specifies that the gulf exists between even the most intimate of relationships, marriage. Externally, Clarissa seems to meld and mold into the ideal woman. As her internal dialogue addresses the limitations of romantic intimacy and the concept of marriage in general, she virtually performs for her guests at the party she is currently hosting. This external and internal dissonance allows

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

for reality to appear layered with one dimension sitting on top of the other. The narrator portrays the external reality of the party scene layered on top of, parallel to and without touching the internal reality. Clarissa's complex understanding of the world around her exists within the cavities of her mind. She allows the men around her to think she spends her days mending clothes and planning parties, not working through vast philosophical questions and undergoing intense self-analysis. Due to the narrator that has this intimate access to Clarissa's thoughts, the reader is able to see that Clarissa's navigation of the external domestic sphere appears to be upholding the status quo. Yet, internally, Clarissa reimagines and recreates what the domestic sphere can do, provide, and create.

One would assume that the external portrayal of Clarissa that involves parties and upper class mannerisms, would be strictly a depiction of performative femininity. I don't want to completely dismiss this; however, I find the external domestic sphere to include more complexity. When Clarissa attempts to self-analyze her love for parties, she explains that "what she liked was simply life" and "they're an offering."<sup>40</sup> This then prompts her to ask what life means to her, in which she explains that she "felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?"<sup>41</sup> Clarissa explains her desire to plan parties as one to initiate contact and social interaction. The pronoun "they" is used and specificity as to who is included and who is not included within the ambiguous pronoun is never given. It seems that Clarissa is thinking in generalized terms that allows for the "they" to stand in for all humans. She feels a constant pressure and reminder of all

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 109.

the external entities around her, and by bringing them together, she feels as though she is a creator. Yet, the quote ends with her not knowing who she is creating this mass of social connection for. Clarissa perhaps is creating with an external performative drive; however, it seems that she is driven by inescapable loneliness, wanting to create something but being confined to creating within the realm she has been given access and control over, the home. She goes on to say that party planning is her “gift” and “nothing else had she of the slightest importance; could not think, write, even play the piano.”<sup>42</sup> She dismisses herself as a creative yet upholds the idea that party-planning is a creation. Seemingly, Clarissa upholds the status quo; however, she reinvents the understanding of planning a party. She looks at it through a complex lens of creation, of aiding the isolated consciousness, of creating connections within the “gulf.” This reimagining of what the domestic sphere can do and create further layers the two different spheres that Clarissa is caught between.

*To The Lighthouse* similarly creates a character that externally represents classic conventions of the domestic. Mrs. Ramsay, both mother and wife, acts as an ultimate representation of Woolf’s understanding of both the domestic sphere and of a woman’s relationship to the external world. Marder writes that “Virginia Woolf was unable to take the family for granted, as earlier novelists had done. She was impelled to reflect consciously about it as an institution. In most eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels, moral judgements had been made against the background of more or less fixed social forms.”<sup>43</sup> Marder highlights a change between the Victorians and Woolf through her portrayal and intense analysis of marriage. Rather

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art: A study of Virginia Woolf*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1968), 32.

than marriage being portrayed as a savior for women, Woolf unpacks the detrimental confinements that marriage forces upon women. Marder goes on to explain that “Woolf tended to think concretely and to visualize ideas like “domestic life” in terms of concrete images. Thus she frequently represented the Victorian family, and occasionally the social structure of which it was the center, by the image of the house.”<sup>44</sup> The image of the Victorian family that Woolf presents in *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway* requires speculation. How come Woolf wanted to represent women being confined to the house? If we accept that Woolf was a progressive and innovative writer and thinker, why did she not break her female characters free from all restraints?

Within *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf utilizes the Victorian tactic of a dinner party. The dinner party allows for the external dialogue between characters and the internal inner monologues of the characters to co-exist and layer on top of each other to produce a multi-layered scene. The scene begins when Mrs. Ramsay wonders “what have I done with my life?”<sup>45</sup> Following this, the guests take their seats, including Mr. Ramsay who was “sitting down, all in a heap, frowning.”<sup>46</sup> Which prompts Mrs. Ramsay to make the claim that “she did not mind. She could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or affection for him. She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup.”<sup>47</sup> The narrative choice to juxtapose the inner dialogue of Mrs. Ramsay with the mundane exterior bird’s-eye view of guests sitting at a table, and her serving them, allows for there to be multi-dimensionality between the internal and the external. Mrs. Ramsay contemplates the lack

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>45</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), 125.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

of love she feels for her husband, while he sits across from her, and while she simultaneously presents herself as a loving mother and wife that ladles soups and plans dinners. Woolf allows for the worlds to co-exist spatially and simultaneously; however, the distance and separation between the two different Mrs. Ramsays is jarring. The internal domestic and the external domestic seem to be pulling at each other, creating a tension between artifice and reality. Mrs. Ramsay is even given self-awareness of the strange friction between her identities when she raises “her eyebrows at the discrepancy- that was what she was thinking, this was what she was doing- ladling out soup- she felt, more and more strongly, outside that eddy.”<sup>48</sup> Mrs. Ramsay explains that she feels “outside that eddy.” Meaning, she feels outside of the box of the exterior, feels distant from not only the external world and people that occupy that space, but also her exterior body, perhaps the feelings of being outside of herself refers to a dissociation which allows her connection to her interior self to expand. Further, this interior self that she is referring to allows her to possess an interior sphere that is removed from the home, removed from the Victorian domestic; while she simultaneously maintains the facade of the wife. She balances the two in order to maintain and be allowed the interior freedom and creativity she so strongly desires.

Mrs. Ramsay possesses a form of feminine self-awareness that further drives my argument. Her self-awareness of the limitations and confinements she must endure, due to her status as a woman, elevates her character into the realm of conscious subordination. The concept of “conscious subordination” exists as a two-fold phenomenon for Mrs. Ramsay. Her interior domestic space is occupied by the knowledge that she has certain restraints, yet within her

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 126.

interior stream of consciousness she has the freedom to think what she pleases. Externally she maintains the appearance of what is expected of her gender. Therefore, I propose the question: Does conscious subordination elevate the individual towards freedom, or does it simply extend the subordination? Mrs. Ramsay explains that:

She was becoming conscious of her husband looking at her. He was smiling at her, quizzically, as if he were ridiculing her gently for being asleep in broad daylight, but at the same time he was thinking, Go on reading. You don't look sad now, he thought. And he wondered what she was reading, and exaggerated her ignorance, her simplicity, for he liked to think that she was not clever, not book learned at all. He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought. She was astonishingly beautiful.<sup>49</sup>

Mrs. Ramsay articulates the feeling of being watched, constantly, by a man. Even though specifically it is her husband, she highlights the unsettling critique that stems from the male gaze. The narrative stream of consciousness technique allows Mrs. Ramsay's emotions regarding her husband's looming gaze to come to the surface. She feels judged and critiqued, proving that female criticism does not stop from a man even if a wedding certificate is involved. The quote above puts Mr. Ramsay's hypothetical thoughts in conversation with Mrs. Ramsay's actual thoughts. In juxtaposition, the final sentence above highlights the common trope of placing beauty over brains. Meaning, Mr. Ramsay degrades the mind of his wife, but amplifies her beauty. Mrs. Ramsay's language does not suggest anger; rather, she consciously observes the mistreatment she receives. She sits within the gaze and does not fight it externally. Rather, she critiques it internally. The stark contrast between Mrs. Ramsay's two worlds highlights the phenomena of a *feminine split consciousness*. The body and mind of Mrs. Ramsay exists split between the external loving mother and the internal feminist critic. The splitting of the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 127.

consciousness rests in her ability to naturally fluctuate, to filter her own thoughts, to upkeep a consistent exterior personality, and to simultaneously upkeep an interior sense of individuality.

The term I utilize above, a *feminine split consciousness*, brings me to my final evaluation of Woolf's ability to alter the Victorian ideal of womanhood.. As I have cited in the introduction, Woolf remains caught between two worlds in her fiction. Her obsession with breaking free from the Victorians remains in paradox to her ability to harness the Victorian in her fiction. After placing Woolf in conversation with Lerner, I now read Woolf's fiction with greater complexity and understanding of her relationship with the past. Her female characters are split between the external and the internal. She allows her female characters to *descend* into blatant subordination, but further, she allows her female characters to *critique* their own subordination. The rebellion against the Angel stops short of a total rejection. Woolf harnesses the trope while she writes the external lives of the characters, and then rejects the trope while writing the interior stream of consciousness. Woolf's personal relationship to the past, bleeds directly into her fiction. Her fictional portrayal of female characters is a balancing act between a harnessing of past tropes and a rejection of those same tropes. She places women in two separate spheres, allowing for the rejection to be notable, but she harnesses the Victorian enough to soften that rebellion. In a sense, Woolf cuts a middle path. The reality that Woolf shows is one of pull and tug, acceptance and rebellion, performance and truth. Woolf speaks towards a duality within the consciousness of women. The duality encompasses a need to be docile in order to be taken seriously within a male-dominated world. The duality also encompasses a need to rebel in order to raise the collective consciousness of women's subordination, and ultimately present and document accurate representations of women's voices within recorded history. In a sense, given the work



done to produce this chapter, I have come to recognize the balancing act Woolf's writing performs. The theoretical framework that Lerner provided early on in this chapter guided my understanding that the work Woolf was doing in her writing is infinitely more important than mere fictional representation. Literary fiction creates character molds that reflect and affect how women are treated, observed, and understood within history. Woolf's position as a privileged writer spearheading a literary era that asked its writers to break free of tradition, allows Woolf to re-mold and create a new female character. Woolf's female characters may harness an exterior version of the docile Angel. However, Woolf's inclusion of the interior stream of consciousness does not simply create a new narrative style. Rather, it allows her female characters to be rebellious, conscious, and above all, nuanced and dynamic. Clarissa and Mrs. Ramsay break free from traditional depictions of womanhood; however, Woolf provides the external docile character traits in order to display a reality that has been created and perpetuated within history and literature previously. Woolf understands that the transition towards equality, accurate representation, and a collective remembrance of women's voices within history, must come in a way that is palatable to the masses. Woolf effectively achieves this balancing act, which allowed for her writing to enter a mainstream market, forever embedding her ideologies into a larger Western understanding of women and their experiences. Perhaps, Woolf should have done more to dismantle the novel and alongside it, depictions of women throughout history. She could have abandoned the Victorians entirely. Or perhaps, that would have been too much for a deeply patriarchal society to even fathom. Perhaps, if Woolf would have depicted an entirely free woman, that would have been the ultimate form of fiction.

## Chapter 2: “Memory is the seamstress”: The Archive

Virginia Woolf asks that writers of modern fiction “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.”<sup>50</sup> Here Woolf highlights the transition from the Victorian novel, which consists of narrative, plot, and action to the modern novel that fuses an interior representation of reality with the narrative and plot of the text. Woolf’s definition of what modern fiction should accomplish allows for Modernism to exist as a temporally-bound opposition against the formal traditions of Victorian literature. Yet, she also allows for her definition of modern fiction to transcend the time period and exist as a category of fiction that deviates from convention and linearity and places emphasis on representing the interior through formal narrative devices. In the quote above from her essay “Modern Fiction,” she highlights her fascination with representing what humans perceive as reality. She argues that her writing achieves an unmatched closeness to reality. In the last chapter, I sought to ask questions surrounding history and the act of recording the past. Here, I turn to Woolf’s ability to create, redefine, and record reality as it happens. The term *reality* has proven to be largely undefinable. Woolf idles on the term consistently throughout her journal entries. She claims her fiction is meant to define and depict reality through both internal and external narrations. Through this, Woolf ultimately leaves her own record of history, of women, and of reality as a whole. Through an excavation of Woolf’s journals and nonfiction work, I have

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<sup>50</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), 1.

uncovered a through line that connects a plethora of Woolf's personal ideologies surrounding fictional representation. In September 1928 Woolf seemed to land on a definition of reality. She writes that "reality: [is] a thing [she] see[s] before [her]; something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which [she] shall rest and continue to exist. Reality [she] call[s] it."<sup>51</sup> Her understanding of reality extends beyond the exterior world, perhaps at times Woolf's reality is devoid of any external factors, it resides in the abstract, not in the tangible. She then goes on to write that:

this is the most necessary thing to me: that which I seek. But who knows- once one takes a pen and writes? How difficult not to go making 'reality' this and that, whereas it is one thing. Now perhaps this is my gift; this perhaps is what distinguishes me from other people; I think it may be rare to have so acute a sense of something like that- but again, who knows?"<sup>52</sup>

This question that Woolf proposes here will guide the remaining pages of this chapter. How close can representation through the medium of language get to mimicking internal reality and human consciousness? She questions that once she begins writing, can she even make "reality"? In addition, where is the line between making reality and recording history? I look to develop an understanding of Woolf's ability to "make" reality through a manipulation of language and rearranging of conventional literary form. Yet, within this passage above Woolf displays uncertainty that depicting reality could exist without artifice and performance. She seems to question if representation through language and art can only achieve closeness, and not exactness. In the previous chapter, I narrowed my focus of representation to that of women and the domestic sphere. I will draw upon similar terminology utilized previously in order to zoom

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<sup>51</sup>Virginia Woolf, *Volume Three*. Edited by Anne Olivier Bell. Vol. 3 of *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 196.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

out my lens of analysis from the micro to the macro and extend my questions surrounding Woolf's linguistic representations of reality. I look to continue to press on the questions Woolf evoked surrounding history, fiction, and representation. Ultimately, displaying the interconnectedness of producing a depiction of reality and recording history. I look to press on the stability of the term reality, particularly in relationship to recorded history. Woolf explains that "for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners."<sup>53</sup> As argued in the previous chapter, the line between fictional writing and historical documentation is thin and often destabilizes. I previously looked at the lack of recorded history written by women, now I look to see what happens when a female author of fiction can leave a recorded representation of reality.

Virginia Woolf, perhaps correctly, seems to have believed she accomplishes an unmatched closeness to reality through her writing by shifting the novel's focus to the interiority of the human mind. In March 1929, she wrote:

life is very solid, or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on forever: will last forever; goes down to the bottom of the world- this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change; one flying after another, so quick so quick, yet we are somehow successive and continuous- we human beings; and show the light through. But what is the light? I am impressed by the transitoriness of human life to such an extent that I am often saying a farewell.<sup>54</sup>

Woolf's diaries reveal that she occupied herself constantly with trying to define the intricacies of experiencing a human reality. Her nonfiction provides us with a basic philosophical understanding of how she attempts to write reality, consciousness, and life in general. She

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<sup>53</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 40.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 218.

emphasizes the contradictions of the transience of human life. Her journals contemplate the difficulty of defining reality and argue for a successive continuous human experience that exists outside of a specific temporal restraint. In the passage above she suggests that time is fleeting and ever-changing. Her repetitive journaling around temporal changes in correlation to her self-proclaimed ability to deviate from the past and push literature beyond the linear Victorian text, creates a paradox between Woolf's writing and herself. As the introduction to this project suggests, Woolf's understanding of herself in relation to the past, the Victorians specifically, has left me puzzled but wildly intrigued.

Woolf and the Modernist scholars I have cited in the introduction, highlight the importance of interiority, a shift toward portraying internal emotion, individual consciousness, and a shift towards *representing* the phenomenon of the consciousness *of* characters rather than representing the social interactions *between* characters. Essentially, there is a general shift from the Victorian *exterior mimetic* text to the modern *interior mimetic* text. I argue that mimesis acts as a twofold phenomenon where external representation aligns itself with the Victorian novel and the internal representation aligns itself with the modern novel. Novels included within the movement Modernism show a nuanced representation of reality that unveils the various layers of the character's self. In a sense, the modern novel redefines reality and through this, redefines a collective understanding of the present time frame. Kent Puckett defines "mimetic styles" as "concentrated expressions or distillations of how particular cultures imagined themselves and the world."<sup>55</sup> Within the interior mimetic elements of texts, the representation of reality comes from the representation of human consciousness. My definition of literary representation continues to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pg 165.

evolve with every scholar I introduce to the conversation with Woolf. Puckett led me to think that Woolf's representation attempts to mimic the internal processes of each individual human being, because, for Woolf, reality seems to lie within each individual, not in a collective understanding of a linear timeline that exists due to events that drive an external plot.

To provide an example of a Victorian linear text, I turn back to the paradigmatic and well-known novel *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. Dickens's writing places a heavy emphasis on detailed descriptions of characters' appearances and how they present themselves to the world. Dickens, an example of the Victorian writer, depicts an exterior representation of the world while the modern novel puts emphasis on the cognitive functioning, memory recollection, trauma response, and daily internal dialogue of the individual. *Bleak House* is centered around social class and the relationship between class and individual. The narrator writes that Esther, a main female character:

Is perfectly well bred. If she could be translated to Heaven tomorrow, she might be expected to ascend without any rapture. She has beauty still, and, if it be not in its heyday, it is not yet in its autumn. She has a fine face - originally of a character that would be rather called very pretty than handsome.<sup>56</sup>

The emphasis on character development within the Dickens novel relies on characters' relation to society and how they present themselves in the world. In the passage above, the description places sole emphasis on the character's appearance. The novel tracks Esther through external descriptions. Simultaneously, this acts to highlight the external gaze of the narrator and the inevitable aging Esther will endure. The characters within the linear novel follow a trajectory

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Dickens and Hablot Knight Browne. *Bleak House* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 22.

that resembles a calendar. Meaning, both the plot and the characters are driven by the external force of the passing of time.

Woolf's rejection of the linear Victorian novel is striking within every single piece of fiction she produced. The stream of consciousness narrative style is clear from the initial pages of her novels, and the readers must adapt quickly to the new and innovative style. I now will delve into three of Woolf's novels, *To The Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and finally *Orlando*, in order to highlight the difficulty of Woolf's personal grappling with ephemeral temporality and her texts' ability to exist in a world caught between the Victorian and the modern, between fiction and fact, and reality and representation. In relation to these innovative modern elements of the text, I will highlight Woolf's inescapable attachment to the Victorians and her inclination to write the external world as well. While Woolf's novels undeniably contain innovative Modernist elements, they also throw into relief Woolf's persistent attachment to the Victorian era, and her talent for writing into the Victorian world she often critiqued. I will place my focus on how Woolf's writing of the interior, indirect, stream-like dialogue highlights her desire to reject the Victorian style while her ability to create mundane plot points highlights her inability to be devoid of Victorian representations of reality.

Within the opening line of *Mrs. Dalloway*, a third-person omniscient narrator introduces itself by explaining that "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."<sup>57</sup> The narrator establishes itself as a voyeur of the exterior action of the characters. This opening line thematically positions the text within a classically Victorian external plot; the novel centers itself around Clarissa Dalloway planning a party. The opening scene provides this context, she buys

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<sup>57</sup> Virginia Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1925), 5.

flowers, she wanders around London's Westminster. This guiding external element aligns itself with a superficial, social, and mundane story that works to represent a reality based on plot points. However, the narrator is not limited by an external viewing of the characters; rather, Woolf allows the narrator access to the character's individual consciousnesses as well. This narrative tactic allows Woolf to juxtapose the character's external interactions, a dinner party, with the intimate interiority of the characters. Following the establishing move of the external plot of the party, the narrator creates an *internal voyeuristic* attitude within the character of Clarissa:

What a Lark! What a Plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave, chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, 'Musing among the vegetables?' - was that it? - 'I prefer men to cauliflowers' - was that it?<sup>58</sup>

The initial moment of closeness that a reader of this passage feels is a false feeling of closeness. These sentences seem to be coming directly from the mind of Clarissa, without representation from the narrator. The first two remarks of this passage come in three word sentences ending in exclamation marks. The sentences lack personal pronouns or any proper nouns to refer to who is thinking or saying these exclamations. This provides ambiguity as to whether the narrator reproduces these thoughts from Clarissa, or if Clarissa momentarily becomes the narrator. The exclamation mark allows for the sentences to be infused with Clarissa's emotion rather than a direct and neutral retelling from the narrator. This narrative technique defined as free indirect

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 5.



discourse, a technique where the narrator takes on the voice and emotion of the character, effectively muddles the distinction between character and narrator. However, this tactic quickly integrates and the narrator becomes visible again and interjects when saying that “it had always seemed to her” with the pronoun “her” being in reference to Clarissa.

The free indirect discourse of the exclamatory sentences allows for the reader to develop a moment of closeness to Clarissa. For just a moment, a pause, or an interruption, the reader catches a glimpse past the barrier of the third-person narration. However, the third-person pronoun that comes in the following sentence acts as a clear reminder that someone, a voyeur, an observer, exists between the reader and the character, acting as a filter. The narrator does not truly ever allow unobstructed access to the mind of the characters. The technique of having a narrator, and not utilizing first person, allows for this false closeness, a space of ambiguity, and a philosophical/narrative fusion presenting the modern understanding that the individual consciousness exists in isolation and cannot be fully understood, or ever accessed by another individual. Within the passage, a similar phenomenon occurs again. Clarissa’s interior stream flips from the present, her out in public, on the quest to buy flowers for the party she throws where she thinks that “Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges”<sup>59</sup> which catapults Clarissa to delve into a memory where she hears “the squeak of hinges.”<sup>60</sup> The word “hinges” triggers a memory for Clarissa and causes her to delve back into the past and escape the present through memory.

The narrative techniques Woolf employs allows for depth within the characters that could not be accomplished otherwise. The narrative technique effectively layers an exterior and an

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

interior reality upon each character. This minimizes the reader's artificial surface level understanding of why the characters engage in certain plots. We are given the ability to break free from the normal relationship between character and reader. The portrayal of time exists non-linearly due to her internal transition from the present to a memory. The text states that Clarrissa "could hear now" the hinges and she had "burst open the French windows." Following this, pronouns are removed again from the language and the text asks, "how fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning."<sup>61</sup> The removal of the proper and personal nouns once again removes the narrator and allows for a slip into free indirect discourse. The clear imagery of the memory Clarissa currently exists within allows for further feelings of intimacy between Clarissa and the reader. Alongside this, the memory floats into the present moment of the text, allowing the past to presently occupy the interiority of Clarissa. The linearity of the text dissipates as Clarissa immerses herself in the nostalgia of past experience. Clarissa floats between existing in the present, and retreating to a longing for a temporal past. This allows for the separation of memory and the present to begin to diminish within the text. The interiority allows for memory and reality to coexist, blend, and fuse together.

Thematically, memory becomes a topic of notability, and the blending of past and present connects Woolf's own fascination with the Victorian and past time periods to her fictional literature. The narrator, and linear time, both interject the text when a parenthetical reveals that Clarrissa is aware that this is a memory and she was "(a girl of eighteen as she then was)."<sup>62</sup> The text plays with the ambiguity of time and of the narrator by allowing for moments of slippage and ambiguity. These moments fuse the external with the internal by having them overlap and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 5.

switch from internal memory to the external plot within a single sentence. The combination of this narrative technique, and Woolf's positioning of the story within an external party, allows for a complex dynamic between the external and the internal to unfold. A clear narrator, a distinct present time frame, and knowledge of which character speaks at a time does not exist within the text. This technique aligns with Woolf's understanding of her own work stated in her nonfiction work. These innovative literary devices fuse the new understanding of human consciousness directly into the formal techniques, and completely destroys any concept of linearity.

However, an external plot is not completely absent from the text. Rather, the text swings between the internal and external, they coexist with each other, mimicking Woolf's own relationship between the Victorian and the modern. In a condensed statement of this relationship, Woolf harnesses external mimesis in order to juxtapose the internal with the external. The external reality comes back to the forefront of the text when the narrator writes that:

The car had gone, but it had left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors' shops on both sides of Bond Street. For thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way - to the window. Choosing a pair of gloves - should they be to the elbow or above it, lemon or pale grey?<sup>63</sup>

The scene reflects on a group of people who seem to be interacting in a collective consciousness behavior. The narrator explains that the "heads" are looking towards the same thing, the window, and then asks a question directly after this statement. The usage of the term "heads" creates a feeling of ambiguous collectivity among the individuals within the scene. The "heads" exist as a singular entity, because the narrator does not receive intimate access to their interiorities. Rather, this group functions as a reminder of the external, a reminder that outside of fiction we are not

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 22.

granted intimate access to the internal worlds of anyone but our own self. The scene allows for a glimpse into the narrator's understanding of the external because the final lines of the scene display the narrator *attempting* to guess what the collective interior experiences. Yet, the assumption the narrator makes that the “heads” question what pair of gloves to choose, implies a superficial analysis of the individuals. When the narrator forgoes pronouns and says that the group wonders about “choosing a pair of gloves - should they be to the elbow or above it, lemon or pale grey?”<sup>64</sup> free indirect discourse layers the narration. This difference between this free indirect discourse and that of Clarissa’s moments of free indirect discourse lies in the narrator's inability to actually gain intimacy with these collective outsiders. Since Woolf does not allow the narrator to have intimate access to this collective group, this scene provides a further understanding of the modern philosophical understanding of the accessibility of the individual. The writing distinctly differs from the writing of Clarissa’s consciousness. The narrator displays the external scene; yet, the twinge of speculation that lies within this scene only exists as speculation of the group.

In *To The Lighthouse* Woolf uses similar tactics to maintain interior mimesis. The novel provides arguably the greatest examples of Woolf’s fascination with the individual consciousness and the inability to permeate the interiority of another. The novel centers around a family, the Ramsays. The family wants to visit a lighthouse. The family’s connections and relations, classically Victorian focal points, drive the narrative. Yet, even as Woolf subverts the Victorian device, she harnesses the classic concept of family dynamics; yet, she focuses on the idea that familial and romantic intimacy exist as not much more than a false idealization. Mrs.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Pg 22

Ramsey, like Mrs. Dalloway, finds herself constantly drawn to windows. Her voyeurism, while looking out a window, prompts her descent into self-awareness where she “had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything.”<sup>65</sup> The narrator, also a third-person, ambiguous, all-seeing narrator, addresses Mrs. Ramsay as though her personal consciousness exists completely separate from all other individuals in the world of the text. The voyeuristic element Woolf employs of having her characters peering out windows allows for a thematic and tangible way for characters to slip out of the external and completely delve into their own selves. Her characters slip into thought of the self through her own loss of spatial grounding in reality that voyeurism allows for. In addition, the use of windows within these works aligns the external plot and the internal philosophy. On a visual level, a window acts as a way to see outside, meaning it creates a frame for viewing a specific image. While looking out the window, it appears that one has a clear and unobstructed view of the outside world. However, a window consists of a physical obstruction between the individual and the outside world. The window exists as a frame and glass. You might be able to see outside, but you cannot break through, you cannot enter the outside without *opening* the window. The visual elements and restraints of the window allows for a metaphor to be made to further understand the narrative techniques Woolf employs.

The narrator acts as a window to the character’s internal world. The narrator allows the reader to view the intimate internal dialogues the characters have; however, the narrator exists as a voyeuristic fictional window frame for the reader. The reader is not given the ability to open the window, to remove the frame of the narrator. The consciousness exists as an isolated

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<sup>65</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), 25.

phenomenon, and even the most intimate of relationships cannot escape this fate, cannot open or destroy the window, and is only granted access to the interiority through the window frame. This narrative device remains present in the larger theoretical premise of the text as well:

Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily.<sup>66</sup>

The narrator draws distinct and explicit lines between the interior of the space and the exterior. The binaries Woolf employs bring to light the separate spheres that can be blurred and layered but not intertwined. Similarly, the individual cannot be intertwined with another. In the quote above, the candlelight draws two faces together, but the candle acts as the ultimate illusion. Two individuals can become close, layered, blurred, but the consciousness exists only in individual form.

A later scene in *To the Lighthouse* will enable me to examine more closely the concept of isolated consciousness. The narrator writes that “Lily was listening; Mrs. Ramsay was listening; they were all listening. But already bored, Lily felt that something was lacking; Mr. Bankes felt that something was lacking. Pulling her shawl round her Mrs. Ramsay felt that something was lacking.”<sup>67</sup> The characters mentioned are sitting at the dinner table, they are all existing together in the same room; yet, this sentence highlights the complete internal separation of the characters. The list-like form that these sentences take on allow for actual semicolons to separate the different character’s consciousness from each other. They act as grammatical separations on the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 146-7.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., Pg141.

page that visually represent the narrator's ability to transcend the limitations of consciousness, but the actual character's inability to do so. The image of the scene allows for the characters to be together, positioned within a social gathering, where they are speaking externally to each other. This scene acts to layer the interior dialogue on top of an external reality. This is a crucial moment that displays Woolf's nuanced relationship to the Victorians. Woolf harnesses the Victorian external by providing this scene; however, the list explaining what the characters are experiencing within their internal realities allows for the mimetic depiction to be severed directly in half, the internal representation and the external representation. They simultaneously occur; however, they exist as completely different and separate realities for all the characters involved. This scene depicts the tensions between the two realities, while simultaneously providing another example of Woolf utilizing tactics from the Victorian and the modern. Essentially, she juxtaposes a Victorian understanding of reality, a social gathering where individuals exist and interact, and a modern understanding of reality, a completely isolated and internal experience.

Juxtaposing the different characters in quick fragmented lines connected by these semicolons acts as a formal manifestation of Lily Briscoe's biggest anxiety in which she "would never know him. He would never know her. Human relations were all like that."<sup>68</sup> Lily finds herself constantly wondering why she does not possess the ability to actually know another. At this junction, I would like to invite another scholar into my argument. Within the essay, "Sundered Waters: Isolated Consciousnesses and Ostensible Communion in Woolf's Narration," Dominik Scheck asserts that "characters do not experience the interwoven textile of

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., Pg 139.

consciousness available to the reader; they witness only their own.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the only character that does have access to this map of floating consciousness is, indeed, the narrator that does not exist as a human being, character, or any imaginable form. Therefore the most fictitious element of the story comes in the form of the unidentifiable narrator that transcends the limitations of consciousness. The tension with the narrator and its ability to melt the barriers of occupying different minds, allows for the reader to share an experience with the narrator that exists only in artistic representation. The reader exists adjacent to the narrator as the ultimate voyeur of the text. Woolf provides a literary representation of exactly what the individual cannot do; exactly what riddles Lily Briscoe with anxiety. Woolf’s work allows for the reader to experience the ability to see within the consciousness of another. Even though the reader grants this access at the expense of having it obstructed through the third party of the narrator, Woolf’s novels allow the reader to come closer to the artificial consciousnesses of these characters than to the consciousness of friends, families, and intimate partners. Scheck argues that “instead of actually experiencing the same interior thoughts as another, or attempting to encode one’s experience and recreate it in another’s consciousness via language, the individual creates an illusory yet functional communion with others through the perception of mutually exterior objects.”<sup>70</sup> This analysis elevates my argument by explaining the relationship between Woolf’s interior and exterior mimesis to be intrinsically merged, inseparable, and symbiotic.

Her ability to harness plot points, the mundane social sphere, and Victorian imagery, allows for the characters to attend a party, host a dinner, and experience tangible social events.

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<sup>69</sup> Kristin, Czarnecki, and Carrie Rohman. *Virginia Woolf and the natural world selected papers from the twentieth annual international conference on Virginia Woolf* (Georgetown University, Georgetown, Kentucky, 3-6 June, 2010. Clemson, SC: Clemson University Digital Press), 55.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, Pg 55.



Woolf's writing relies on these moments of exterior plot, because they allow for the understanding that this communion exists within performance and artifice. It allows for the text to highlight specific moments of social exchange between characters, while also revealing how every character exists predominantly within their own mind. That is, Woolf's choice to draw on these inherently Victorian and external plot points, allows for the narrator to examine the isolated and separated consciousness and examine the outward imagery of these multiple consciousnesses at the table together. Woolf's own rejection of the Victorian conventions remains a paradoxical element of her understanding of herself, her writing, and her position within a temporal time frame. She relies on the Victorian exterior, she utilizes it; her writing would not achieve her philosophical goals of displaying the experience of the human condition without her ability to harness the past.

Perhaps the strongest rejection of the Victorian belief that romantic intimacy and marriage enables a closeness between individuals that eliminates loneliness, enables true human connection, and enhances the potential for happiness, comes from the relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Through their marriage, Woolf highlights that even romantic intimacies lack the ability to break these barriers. Mrs. Ramsay strips away the false hope that marriage, love, or romance can break these barriers and connect two consciousnesses by explaining that she "could never say what she felt."<sup>71</sup> Mrs. Ramsay refuses to accept the idea that romantic intimacy transcends the isolated consciousness; she explains that she cannot manage to actually speak what she is able to think in the privacy of her own dialogue. She then goes up and stands by the window, looking out, and "knowing that he was watching her, instead of saying anything she

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<sup>71</sup> Virginia Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1925), 185.

turned, holding her stocking, and looked at him.”<sup>72</sup> She then looks back out the window where she sees the lighthouse and “said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness).”<sup>73</sup> Juxtaposed to this strange scene, Mrs. Ramsay breaks from her own interiority and says to Mr. Ramsay “Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow.”<sup>74</sup> This scene, which ends the first section of *To The Lighthouse* (“The Window”), elevates the inability for complete and utter communion by framing it within romantic intimacy as well as the familial and the friend. The actual image of what is happening on the exterior is a simple surface-level conversation happening between two people, united through marriage. Yet, the narrator’s portrayal of the inner world of Mrs. Ramsay highlights the gulf and conflict with her external reality and her relationship with her husband. Within this passage the window once again acts as a form of escape and solace for Mrs. Ramsay. While she looks out the window, away from her husband, towards the lighthouse, happiness fills her. The voyeuristic attitude toward the lighthouse allows for not just escapism from the mundane and performative external reality that her husband’s presence reminds her of; rather, her looking towards the lighthouse allows the image and symbol of the lighthouse to become a form of escapism as well. Since the external plot revolves around a family trip to the lighthouse, the lighthouse acts as an external object that unites the characters in some capacity, even though it is one of artificial externalities. This allows me to speculate that while Mrs. Ramsay becomes filled with happiness while viewing the lighthouse, Woolf displays how her characters, those who possess the limitations of connection inherent in the human experience, are able to escape the cynical realizations of the inability to truly know the interiority of another, through the Victorian understanding of connection through

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

social dynamics and shared objects and experiences. Mrs. Ramsay consciously understands her and her husband's intimacy limitations; however, she escapes this through the visual of the lighthouse, a symbol of her family's hopes to take a trip together. I suggest that this crucial yet ambiguous scene displays Woolf's paradoxical rejection of the Victorian's relationship with romantic intimacy. Woolf's own longing for a concrete temporal placement in the world was falsely labeled as the utmost form of human connection, a salvation from loneliness, and the key to happiness. They long for a time where, even on false pretenses, the external world provided a source of comfort; rather than Modernist belief that the:

only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in personal consciousnesses, minds, selves, concrete particular I's and you's... Neither contemporaneity, nor proximity in space, nor similarity of quality and content are able to fuse thoughts together which are sundered by this barrier of belonging to different personal minds.<sup>75</sup>

The harsh reality of the isolated consciousness rejects any romantic ideals about marriage and love being the end goal of the journey of existence. Woolf refuses to show any everlasting complete love within her work. Rather, she highlights moments and fragments of bliss, followed by inevitable heartbreak. Even within Woolf's most fantastical text, *Orlando*, the isolated consciousness seems to be the only concrete truth of the world that Woolf presents.

*Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* display a transparent layered mimetic style. Both stories stay eerily close to various definitions of reality. Whether one prescribes to an exterior reality or an interior reality, both texts allow for enjoyment within both ideas of mimesis. However, perhaps some would call it an anomaly among writing, Woolf does indeed have a novel that rejects the concept of strict genres entirely. Woolf's biographical text *Orlando*,

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<sup>75</sup> William James. *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890) Classics in the History of Psychology. Web. 14 Dec. 2009, 226.

published in 1928, destroys the literary boundaries of biography and reconstructs a fantastical world that ignores the chronological restraints of literary time, historical time, and gender altogether. An introduction to the novel, written by Maria Dibattista, explains this magical biography as one that “obliterates time not by transcending it but by blithely ignoring its power to limit the life of its hero or end that of its heroine.”<sup>76</sup> The biography blends historical reality with magical elements in order to tell the story of Virginia’s lover, Vita Sackville-West.

Dibattista argues that “*Orlando* is Woolf’s outlandish solution to the biographer’s problem of wedding the rainbow and granite, the aura of personality and the truth of fact.”<sup>77</sup> Dibattista builds upon this assertion by arguing that “whenever the truth of fact and truth of fiction are on the verge of destroying each other, the rainbow-like intangibles of personality triumph over the granite-like solidity of truth.”<sup>78</sup> Vita represents not only a mere lover of Virginia; rather, Vita represents a familial heritage that ties both her own literature and her life to generations and generations of Sackville-Wests. As Woolf continually argues in her nonfiction work, she analyzes the modern writers as being distant from previous literary generations due to their willingness and further, their need, to reconstruct literature towards an internal representation of the self. However, it seems *Orlando*, and therefore Vita, allowed Woolf to create a novel that paradoxically revisits the historical past while maintaining a literary distance from conventional biographies. *Orlando* creates a fantastical world in order to allow for the restraints of fiction to fall aside, elevating the speculation upon human constructs.

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<sup>76</sup> Virginia Woolf. *Orlando: a biography* (London: Published by Leonard & Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth, 1933), .xxxvii.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, xlvi.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

*Orlando* contorts and adds nuance to Woolf's portrayal of reality by reimagining the world without the restraints of time and gender; this lack of restraint allows Orlando (Vita) to live outside the natural world. A crucial element of dismantling this text lies in the reimagining of a reality without being confined to one's own literary and historical time frame. Woolf bluntly addresses linear time through a complex understanding of memory:

Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting, like the underlinen of a family of fourteen on a line in a gale of wind. Instead of being a single, downright, bluff piece of work of which no man need feel ashamed, our commonest deeds are set about with a fluttering and flickering of wings, a rising and falling of lights.<sup>79</sup>

In the biography, Woolf melts the past, present, and future of Orlando in addition to the past, present, and future literary history. As these notions meld together, the concept of a singular present dissipates. Woolf's focus on memory comes to the forefront at a personal, historical and literary level. In the passage above, Woolf addresses the impossibility to exist devoid of memory and devoid of the past. Further, she places emphasis on the vast expansion of time, and argues that the self cannot be without a constant fragmentation of past experiences. It is explained that the character Orlando "would go out after breakfast a man of thirty and come home to dinner a man of fifty-five at least. Some weeks added a century to his age, others no more than three seconds at most."<sup>80</sup> Through this underlying portrayal of time Woolf generates the character of Orlando as magical, capable of breaking free from time, gender, and history. *Orlando* flips

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 73.

reality on its head; moreover, through this distorted version of a biography, Woolf continues to break down the barriers of representing fact and representing fiction.

The biography's fascination with time grounds itself within imagery of the natural world.

Orlando claims that:

he came then, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. He saw the beech trees turn golden and the young ferns unfurl; he saw the moon sickle and then circular; he saw - but probably the reader can imagine the passage which should follow and how every tree and plant in the neighborhood is described first green, then golden; how moons rise and suns set; how spring follows winter and autumn summer; how night succeeds day and day night; how things remain as they are for two or three hundred years or so, except for a little dust and a few cobwebs which one old woman can sweep up in half an hour; a conclusion which, one cannot help feeling, might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that "Time passed" (here the exact amount could be indicated in brackets) and nothing whatever happened.<sup>81</sup>

This passage emphasizes the fleeting transience of the seasons, but, more emphatically, an overall lack of change. Orlando returns to nature throughout the duration of his life, and closely notices the small minute natural changes. The opening sentence of the quotation utilizes time reference points that are based on human construction, the time on a clock. Immediately after, Orlando juxtaposes natural measures of time that exist devoid of human life. Orlando notices time lapses from the micro to the macro. He begins with noticing the ferns uncurling, and then the cycle of the moon. Then, he enlarges his description to the changing of the seasons, how the sun comes out and sets. These markings of time are grounded in the natural, in the tangible, not in the theoretical. Following this, Orlando argues that not much actually changes within a time frame. He concludes this rather lovely passage by pointing out a simple phrase that can conclude the emotions tied to the feeling these changes evoke. "Time Passed" he explains. This simple, yet profound statement, cuts through the complexities of binding yourself to temporality. Time

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 72.

passes, the present fleets simultaneously as the future crashes into you. Orlando follows this sentiment by explaining that:

Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by the second.<sup>82</sup>

The text continues to pull apart a linear concept of time by unraveling how individuals uniquely experience and internally perceive time. The text argues that clock-time can be stretched, shortened, or morphed within the mind of a human. *Orlando* places emphasis on the individual, and the experience of the individual consciousness. A moment perhaps exists as a wound for someone, lodged into memory, re-lived over and over again. Perhaps, the same moment, existed for a second, never to be thought about again. The text brings this phenomena to life through the character Orlando and his ability to transcend any restraint of time. One could find humor in Orlando, he is magical. Yet, his fantastical abilities personify Woolf's attempt to highlight the triviality of time on a clock and further blurs the separation between past, present and future into a single, amorphous unit. *Orlando* distorts a genre through reimagining a reality without specific phenomenon (time, gender) that humans look to bind themselves to for stability. Orlando does not live in a world unfamiliar to reality. Rather, the world is familiar, he travels through different literary periods and across familiar lands. The familiarity of historically documented events and people combined with the lack of binaries between time and gender, allow the text to highlight the nuances of all these complex concepts. The fantastical elements of the biography allow the aspects of "reality" to blend and morph. This tactic that Woolf employs breaks down the barriers

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

between fact and fiction, resulting in a text that takes from both realms of writing and brings the two together. The fusion of historical fact and fantastical fiction emphasizes the artifice of recorded history and the truth that lies within fiction.

In “A Room of One’s Own” Virginia Woolf asked for an accurate account of reality. She asks writers of the modern novel to produce this, and then actively defines reality through her own fiction. However, Woolf layers various definitions and pre-established portrayals of reality on top of each other. Ultimately, this layering technique allows Woolf to harness the Victorian style while redefining a new version of reality, allowing Woolf to produce inclusive documentation and representation. Woolf’s fictional texts provide both personal accounts of reality as well as external social moments. This allows for a strange intimacy to form between the reader and the author. Woolf allows the writer to view her work as fiction, but also as a new account of reality that bends and shifts, and is not exclusively written for men and by men. Woolf provides the account for the record she wants. Reading Woolf in 2020 is a gate to the past, a gate to her experiences, and a general understanding of her reality. Woolf effectively wrote a depiction of reality that comes closer to the experience of the individual. Her writing resonates because it not only harnesses the past, but it represents a present that is consistently caught in the past while simultaneously seeking innovation and progression. Woolf’s words harness feelings and experiences that are innately human, not bound to fleeting time periods.



Conclusion: ““Time’s up! Silence””

On April 29th, in 1937, Virginia Woolf broadcasted a talk called “Craftsmanship” as a part of the BBC series “Words Fail Me.”<sup>83</sup> The BBC cites this as the only surviving recording of Woolf’s voice. Throughout this conclusion I will exclusively cite quotes from this talk. I encourage the reader of this project to now listen to the attached recording before reading the pieces of transcription I will analyze below. I ask you to listen for the changes in pitch in her tone, the words she emphasizes, and the approach she takes when speaking about writing, instead of writing about writing. Her linguistic precision is haunting. Every word she speaks has purpose. The change in representative medium, from written word to voice, allows this project to question the differences between auditory listening and reading the written word. I ask you to keep this in mind as I perform close readings on the transcribed language. While analyzing Woolf’s words, I both read them and listen to her simultaneously. Ultimately, I believe this led me to question and think through these final passages with a greater closeness to Woolf herself. Perhaps, this concluding element acted as the final barrier breaker, the final dissolution between Virginia Woolf’s record of representation and the literary and historical present that I occupy.

Woolf begins her talk by personifying and honing in on the theoretical concept of the English language. She argues that “words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations - naturally. They have been out and about, on people’s lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries.” Her argument on word association continues when she explains that one “of the chief difficulties in writing [words] today - is that they are so stored

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<sup>83</sup> Virginia Woolf. *Craftmanship* (British Broadcasting Corporation: April 29th, 1937). <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160324-the-only-surviving-recording-of-virginia-woolf>. Accessed: April 16, 2020.

with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages.” Woolf lingers on the idea of words harnessing past connotations, meanings, or assumptions. Here, she addresses the inability for the English language itself to break free from the past, because language can evolve but cannot exist devoid of its past forms. She uses the “splendid word ‘incarnadine,’” as an example and says “who can use it without remembering also ‘multitudinous seas’.” She adduces this Macbeth quote in order to display the connection between generations of writers. She points at a through line between literary history. Language constantly repeats itself and regurgitates. With every new space a word occupies in a sentence, it grows, evolves and becomes rippled with various connotations.

Woolf goes on to call the English language old, and in the “old days, of course, when English was a new language, writers could invent new words and use them.” However, “nowadays it is easy enough to invent new words- they spring to the lips whenever we see a new sight or feel a new sensation - but we cannot use them because the language is old.” She finalizes this sentiment by addressing the audience directly and says “you cannot use a brand new word in an old language because of the very obvious yet mysterious fact that a word is not a single and separate entity, but part of other words. It is not a word indeed until it is part of a sentence.” She explicitly states that one must write within the context of literary history. Meaning, one must pay attention to the past, to the linguistic construction of past writers, because writing does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, words exist in association with the sentences constructed in the past. In addition, she explains that words do not exist as individual entities; rather, within literature, a word derives meaning from its relation to the words surrounding it. She explains that “in order to use new words properly you would have to invent a new language; and that, though no doubt we

shall come to it, is not at the moment of our business.” Rather, she cites that she and her contemporaries “business is to see what [they] can do with the English language as it is.” She then raises the final guiding question of my project: “How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth?” Woolf follows this question by asking the audience to imagine:

what it would mean if you could teach, if you could learn, the art of writing. Why, every book, every newspaper would tell the truth, would create beauty. But there is, it would appear, some obstacle in the way, some hindrance to the teaching of words. For though at this moment at least 100 professors are lecturing upon the literature of the past, at least a thousand critics are reviewing the literature of the present, and hundreds upon hundreds of young men and women are passing examinations in English literature with the utmost credit, still – do we write better, do we read better than we read and wrote 400 years ago when we were unlectured, criticised, untaught?

Woolf explicitly asks the audience to question the relationship between the past and the present. She questions if education and perhaps industrialization led to better writing than was previously capable. At this moment, I ask you to remember the theoretical conversation I performed between Lerner and Woolf in chapter one. Woolf places emphasis on literary change stemming from knowledge, critique, and academia. Yet, Woolf, as a female author, acts as a physical human representation of a change in English literature. The expansion of English literature occurred through a change in who was able to be published and what literature became accessible. Here, Woolf, fails to acknowledge her own role in rebelling against the past and pushing literature forward. The collective understanding of literature continues to transform from a singular point of view to one that incorporates multiple points of views. Perhaps, instead of understanding this expansion as “better” literature, we can view it as writing that comes closer to an all encompassing reality due to a new understanding of who can write and what they can write.

Woolf defines words as “the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things. Of course, you can catch them and sort them and place them in alphabetical order in dictionaries.” Yet, she counters the rigidity of words existing in a dictionary by arguing that “words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind.” She expands upon this by explaining that words live in the mind “variously and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together.” She continues her definition by saying words are “highly sensitive, easily made self-conscious. They do not like to have their purity or their impurity discussed. If you start a Society for Pure English, they will show their resentment by starting another for impure English - hence the unnatural violence of much modern speech; it is a protest against the puritans.” Woolf tactfully personifies the idea of words. She speaks about words as though they exist separate from the human who is speaking or writing them. They are their own being, the author merely organizes them. Further, she argues that words “hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change.” By this, Woolf means that words “mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pikestaff to the next. And it is because of this complexity that they survive.” At first glance it seems Woolf is contradicting herself. Earlier she explained that the English language is an old language, and that new words cannot be written within an old language. Yet she suggests that words inherently and naturally change. Woolf does not mean the actual word changes. Rather, the reality surrounding the word changes.

Woolf highlights a tension between the changing perceptions of reality and the successive sameness of the English language. She addresses this tension by guessing that “perhaps that is

their most striking peculiarity - their need of change. It is because the truth they try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that.” She emphasises that words are not the problem with producing depictions of reality. Rather, the idea of reality in itself is an ambiguous, multi-faceted, subjective phenomena. The truth that words try to catch, in Woolf’s language, is not singular; rather, reality evolves every moment, it cannot be caught, it can only be represented. Woolf leaves the audience with a final sentiment:

words, like ourselves, in order to live at their ease, need privacy. Undoubtedly they like us to think, and they like us to feel, before we use them but they also like us to pause; to become unconscious. Our unconsciousness is their privacy; our darkness is their light. . . . That pause was made, that veil of darkness was dropped, to tempt words to come together in one of those swift marriages which are perfect images and create everlasting beauty.

I have vigorously savoured Woolf’s fiction, her journals, her essays, and finally, heard her spoken voice. I have compiled a record of Woolf’s representation of her own reality. She has left a piece of herself, a piece of her history, and a representation of her own truth. Further, as she said in this recording, English words themselves are artifacts of the past riddled with meanings and associations that cannot be escaped even with new innovative ways of arranging them. Being a writer is to harness the linguistic past to illustrate the tangible present and shape the foreseeable future. Even though Woolf spends countless pages dismissing the restraints the Victorians harnessed within their fiction, Woolf ideologically argues that language acts to break down the barriers of time itself. Language can be manipulated, re-imagined, and re-worked. Yet, the words themselves remain the same. Here, I take guidance from Woolf, and pause and ask you to pause alongside me. Virginia Woolf’s words haunt me, the questions I have addressed ripple out like a spider web, attaching themselves to all the cracks and crevices of my brain. I have reached a

tangible end, but my reality has shifted and I once again, must listen to Woolf's words that are "disobliging; disobedient; dumb. What is it that they are muttering? "Time's up! Silence"."

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