The Victorian Influence on Virginia Woolf's Domestic Feminist Aesthetic in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

The Victorian Influence on Virginia Woolf's Domestic Feminist Aesthetic in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* by Heather Mary Greenberg

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the function of the Victorian domestic woman in the Modernist novels and essays of Virginia Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* are the two primary texts covered in this study. Woolf’s Modernist aesthetic develops out of the Victorian literary tradition and represents a conscious shift away from the literary and social conventions associated with pre-WWI society. Woolf draws upon established Victorian models of femininity, like Patmore’s “Angel in the House,” and traditional Victorian domestic middle-class ideology to center her Modernist novels. Her female protagonists, Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, represent quintessential Victorian ideals of femininity: domestic, submissive, married, and chaste. Yet Woolf presents these consummate “Angels” in a changing world in which Victorian ideology no longer makes sense. Woolf’s progressive aesthetic is firmly anchored within the Victorian ideals of the past because her novels represent and illustrate the progressive movement in both social and literary (aesthetic) thought.

The first chapter focuses on the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* and the character Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa, the protagonist and the domestic center of the novel, represents the Victorian ideal in a constantly changing post-WWI society. Clarissa, who suffers from a divided self, is rooted in the past yet learning to live in an ever-changing future. Woolf addresses the duality of Clarissa’s nature by comparing the fervency of youth to the complacency of middle age as she struggles between her engineered social self and her private introspective self. Clarissa has an interesting relationship to traditional marriage and begins to question the foundations of traditional Victorian notions of marriage that have left her cold and passionless. The ardent and youthful relationship between Sally
Seton and Clarissa is also examined to determine how this passionate and suggestively bisexual relationship works to subvert the traditional patriarchal heterosexual marriage plot. Furthermore, I believe that the ability to find an artistic outlet or a way to create is Woolf's idea of true female liberation. Therefore, the party at the novel's conclusion represents a domestic yet artistic outlet for Clarissa because she relegated to the domestic sphere and therefore her aesthetic and artistic expression must develop from that realm.

The second chapter discusses the novel *To the Lighthouse* and the character of Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay is presented as the ideal Victorian woman. Her incomparable beauty coupled with her passive and pleasing nature makes her the domestic center of the novel. Mrs. Ramsay's dedication to her tyrannical husband inadvertently makes her the face of female subservience within the system of Victorian patriarchal hegemony; yet despite her seemingly complacent and traditional nature, she does maintain some semblance of newly emerging feminist ideals. Drawing upon Elizabeth MacLeod Walls' concepts of the modern woman as an "amalgamation of the past and present" (243) and "domestic feminism" (229), I argue that both Mrs. Ramsay and the text of *To the Lighthouse* embody these principles and consequentially emerge as examples of Virginia Woolf's feminist beliefs: a combination of Victorian gender stereotypes coupled with passive forms of resistance that push the feminine self towards aesthetic liberation and challenge patriarchal hegemony by questioning the foundations of artistic inequality. Mrs. Ramsay is the epitome of an emerging woman who is slowly shedding Victorian gender inequality for a more modern way of thought revealing Woolf's distinctive form of feminist thought.
THE VICTORIAN INFLUENCE ON VIRGINIA WOOLF'S DOMESTIC FEMINIST AESTHETIC IN *MRS. DALLOWAY AND TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

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-HG
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Introduction

In the essay *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf considers the plight of the woman novelist: “When they came to set their thoughts on paper... they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help” (*AROO* 76). For Woolf this notion of looking back towards the mother as the foundation of aesthetic inspiration grounds her novels in the Victorian past and within the domestic feminine sphere. For this reason Woolf’s novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* focus on women much like her mother Julia Stephen and the conflict between the ascribed Victorian femininity of the past and the changing roles of women in the post-WWI modern setting. Woolf turns the domestic into the subject of the feminine aesthetic and uses the realm that once signified female suppression as the source of artistic inspiration. There is an authenticity in realistically portraying the domestic feminine as subject that Woolf attributes as part of the female novelist’s commitment to her sex. Woolf believes that there is great discrepancy between how men write women and how they perceive women in reality: “If woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance... as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact... she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room.... Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant” (*AROO* 43). For this reason Woolf’s novels focus on the aesthetic importance of women and the insignificant everyday moments of their domestic lives. Woolf endeavors to accurately portray the Victorian woman in the modern world and the conflict of self that plagues these women trapped in between two powerful yet
opposed social ideologies. Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay both exemplify the Victorian feminine ideal yet both are silently tormented by the desire to free themselves from patriarchal submission. Clarissa's dissatisfaction manifests itself as a fractured identity in which she struggles between an engineered social self and her private introspective self. Similarly, Mrs. Ramsay uses passive forms of resistance within the domestic sphere to push the feminine self towards aesthetic liberation. Both characters exhibit a form of domestic feminism in which they advocate for the freedom of the feminine aesthetic self from within the boundaries of the dictated domestic sphere. Woolf desired to accurately reflect the anxieties, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction women suffered from as the result of their subjugated position within society. This thesis explores how Woolf looks to the past through her mother and envisions the modern feminine experience and the Victorian woman's endeavor for aesthetic freedom. By doing so, Woolf helps to create the feminist literary tradition that she valiantly calls for.
Chapter 1 - The Fractured Feminine Self in Mrs. Dalloway

While reminiscing about her Victorian upbringing at Hyde Gate Park, Virginia Woolf reflects, “While we looked into the future, we were completely under the power of the past...we lived under the sway of a society that was about fifty years too old for us” (MOB 147). Woolf manages to make the past the present by portraying Victorianism surviving within the context of a modern society. By doing so, she makes Victorian domestic principles the foundation of her modernist works. In the novel Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf presents a Victorian feminine ideal, Clarissa Dalloway, the perfect hostess, in a constantly changing post-WWI society. Clarissa is a married, middle-aged, upper-class mother, who, on the surface, embodies the Victorian principles of domesticity, self-discipline, compassion, and altruism. Yet although she is rooted in the Victorian past, she is learning to discover herself in the modern era. Elizabeth Macleod Walls describes the contradictory state of Clarissa’s being and that of the post-WWI modern woman: “This woman offered an amalgamation of the past and the present, the Victorian heroine and the modern free woman, the ‘old’ woman as well as the ‘new’” (243). Woolf presents this duality or contradiction of self as a condition of living in Clarissa’s contemporary upper-class London. In addition to past and present states of consciousness, Woolf also addresses the duality of Clarissa’s nature by comparing the fervency of youth to the complacency of middle age as she struggles between her engineered social self and her private introspective self. I will argue that in this state of contradiction Woolf is able to expound her feminist beliefs, which apply a modernist aesthetic sensibility in calling for a woman’s literary tradition, while championing the inherent value of the female
experience and demanding a space in which women can create through the revelation of
the unconscious life, or what Woolf refers to as the moments of “non-being” (*MOB* 70).

Therefore, Woolf’s feminism subverts English and Victorian patriarchy from
inside the domestic sphere. Suzette Henke explains: “Woolf decries the kind of
authoritarian power that incites nations to war, makes autocrats of husbands and fathers,
and forces individuals into rigid patterns of social conformity. By dislocating traditional
form, she subtly incorporates into avant-garde fiction an impassioned radical ideology”
(125). Woolf locates the struggle for her space and her ability to create within the
domestic sphere directly amid the Victorian household. Clarissa Dalloway, the hostess,
embodies Woolf’s feminist ideals because she illustrates the danger posed to the fractured
feminine self within the confines of a patriarchal society that imposes rigid systems of
domesticity and femininity with little or no opportunity for economic or creative
freedom. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa passively resists traditional Victorian notions of
marriage, heterosexuality, gender identity, and domesticity to illustrate the importance of
the private to the modern feminine experience.

In the essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” Woolf details the contemporary
avant-garde development of literary style from the “Edwardians” to the “Georgians.” She
attributes this revolution in the literary aesthetic to a shift in social consciousness; Woolf
famously states, “In or about December 1910 human character changed.... All human
relations have shifted—those between master and servants, husbands and wives, parents
and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in
religion, conduct, politics, and literature” (*CDB* 96-7). Woolf is speaking about the
changes in the world that fostered the modern era and became the vehicle by which she
would develop her Modernist aesthetic sensibilities and her feminist sense. Michael Whitworth clarifies the author’s intentions and the admitted arbitrariness of the date, stating, “Woolf’s identification of the watershed as 1910, rather than 1900 or 1901, betrays a certain ambivalence about the Victorian novelists. It would appear that the death of King Edward VII and the Post-Impressionist Exhibition were the significant events, and not the turn of the century or the death of Queen Victoria” (112). The Post-Impressionist Exhibition seems to be the most significant to Woolf’s work because it ushered in a significant revolution in aesthetic sensibility, a change that would be embraced by Modernist writers like Woolf. Woolf also discusses the importance of the year 1910 in regards to the intellectual and aesthetic development of Bloomsbury ideology:

It must have been in 1910 I suppose that Clive [Bell] one evening rushed upstairs in a state of highest excitement. He had just one of the most interesting conversations of his life. It was with Rodger Fry. They had been discussing the theory of art for hours…. We started talking about Marie-Claire. And at once we were all launched into a terrific argument about literature…. We had down Milton; we re-read Wordsworth. We had to think the whole thing over again. The old skeleton arguments of primitive Bloomsbury about art and beauty put on flesh and blood. (MOB 197)

Woolf describes how modern movements in art, thought, and aesthetics began to reshape not only how they, the Bloomsbury group, considered the past but also how they would intellectually approach and create in the future. Modernization and the subsequent loosening of Victorian restraint heralded a sense of freedom in expression and thought.
illustrated through the aesthetic expressions of Modernist literature and Post-Impressionist art and indicative of a new progressive social consciousness.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh describes this transformation in collective social consciousness: “People looked different, Newspapers seemed different...there was a man writing quite openly in one of the respectable weeklies about water closets. That you couldn’t have done ten years ago” (*MD* 71). Peter goes on to describe a woman publicly applying makeup and an unmarried couple behaving coquettishly. These seemingly trivial yet very social acts represent the breakdown of traditional values, pre-WWI innocence, and Victorian decorum. The divisions between public and private and between masculine and feminine parameters of existence no longer make sense within the modern context. The acts that Peter responds to signify the modern movement of women from the domestic into the public sphere and the breakdown of societally dictated Victorian femininity. It is in this shifting world that Woolf sets her novels, yet her characters seem to cling with resolute veneration to the ebbing past.

Remarkably, for Woolf it is precisely the changes of the modern era that foster a literary return to the comforts of the less complicated past. *Mrs. Dalloway* is set in the aftermath of WWI; *To the Lighthouse* focuses on both the time directly before and after the war. The social, political, and personal ramifications of the Great War are exhibited throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* as feelings of sadness, isolation, and madness. Clarissa thinks, “This late age of the world’s experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing” (*MD* 9-10). The loss of innocence or the act of knowing attributed to the devastation of WWI causes nostalgia for prewar naivety; therefore the characters seem to
root themselves in the ideologies of the past in order to avoid the complications of an uncertain and new social present. Elizabeth MacLeod Walls explains:

Modernists writing after World War I deployed conservative rhetorics in their fiction in order to curb the effects of a rapidly changing society.... The postwar affirmation of domesticity, connected to a longing to return to a nebulous England of the past became personified by a woman who, in the mind of disillusioned ‘revolutionaries of the world’ no longer existed.” (242-43)

Woolf presents this divided constitution of historical perception throughout Mrs. Dalloway. The novel presents two characters, Septimus and Clarissa, who Woolf claimed should be viewed as two facets of the same being (Littleton 295; Abel 107). Septimus, the shell-shocked veteran, is the casualty of wartime experience. His inabilities to feel and communicate are symbolic of the modern predicament. Conversely, Clarissa represents a return to the comforting ignorance of pre-WWI Victorian domesticity and an England unfamiliar with the ravages of the Great War. The fractured psyches of both characters suffer immeasurably from their inability to function in modern society. Many other characters exhibit symptoms of a post-war fractured condition, like Richard Dalloway’s inability to tell his wife that he loves her or Peter’s failure to write; yet their complacency allows them to exist without suffering. The recognition of this inauthenticity of self becomes problematic and maddening to both Clarissa and Septimus.

Notably, Woolf’s literary return to the principles of Victorian domesticity is complicated by the voice of her rhetoric. While addressing the inadequate economic opportunities afforded to women, Woolf quite famously evoked one of the most recognizable and damaging versions of Victorian femininity, “The Angel in the House”:
“If I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman… I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper… and so tormented me that at last I killed her” (DM 236-37). Woolf refers to Coventry Patmore’s 1854 long poem, “The Angel in the House,” which established and valorized Victorian paradigms of domesticity, femininity, and conduct for women and by doing so, inadvertently became a mechanism within the patriarchal regime that relegated the Victorian woman to a subservient position within that society (Paul 14). The danger of Patmore’s poem was its ability to promote docile and obsequious versions of femininity in which women became prideful of their inferiority. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar referred to Patmore’s Angel as “the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed upon literary women” (20). Clarissa Dalloway, despite her modern sensibilities, embodies the essence of the “Angel.” Emily Blair explains, “The fashionable lady, the hostess, especially the political hostess who combined domesticity with her potential for social influence, was the mid- and late- Victorian ideal” (35). Clarissa’s position as the novel’s domestic center coupled with the social influence of her husband’s (albeit moderately successful) political career makes her the definition of London society. Peter Walsh describes her: “Clarissa came up, with her perfect manners, like a real hostess…. He admired her courage; her social instinct” (MD 61-2) and later on as “purely feminine; with that extraordinary gift, that woman’s gift” (MD 76). Peter inadvertently validates Clarissa’s place within the patriarchal social system by complimenting her socially engineered public self, the hostess.
The question then becomes why does the "Angel" continually appear as the focus of Woolf's novels if she represents the Victorian woman's lack of equality and opportunity and Woolf has already claimed to have killed her? It is obvious throughout the text that Clarissa is as uncomfortable with her association with the Victorian ideal as we the readers are. She recalls an argument with Peter: "How he scolded her! How they argued! She would marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase; the perfect hostess he called her (she had cried over it in her bedroom)" (MD 7). By relegating Clarissa's identity solely to hostess, Peter acknowledges only her socially constructed public self, or in essence, half of her person. Clarissa recognizes the contradiction of her character between her ascribed femininity and the self she cherishes within the private realm of her attic. The hostess allows Woolf to explore the woman's relationship to her home and community by analyzing how she manages her self both intimately and socially. Blair explains:

Because of the professional hostess's central role in creating an aesthetically charged social atmosphere and because she exists only in her relation to other people in an ambiguous position between public and private spheres, the hostess allows Woolf to enter multiple debates: debates about creating character in fiction; about what constitutes reality; about feminine artistry; and about the Woman Question. (175)

Blair envisions the hostess as a conduit between spheres and people; Clarissa creates the space and environment which fosters social interaction, communication, and ultimately, aesthetic inspiration. I believe that Woolf is acknowledging that there is a power in this position despite its acknowledged subservience. Elizabeth Langland has argued that the
domestic sphere afforded great power to middle-class Victorian women by allowing them to define themselves within society. She believes that by creating and propagating domestic discourses and defining gender roles, women helped to fortify middle-class hegemonic ideology (291). Therefore, Clarissa’s participation within the Victorian patriarchal system could be viewed as a means to subvert hegemonic gender principals from within by promoting and disseminating modern middle-class feminist values.

Furthermore, Blair interestingly brings up “the Woman Question” which references the latter half of the nineteenth-century’s modern woman and the beginning of first-wave feminism. This also complicates Woolf’s decision to depict a woman so rooted within an archaic and patriarchal social system when the “New Woman,” the face of the contemporary feminist movement, may have seem like a better fit to convey her unique feminist ideology. Laura Marcus elucidates Woolf’s reasoning:

Woolf... subverted representations and discussions of “The New Woman,” and her later manifestation, “The Modern Girl,” both of which were central personifications for late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century feminisms... [and] may well have seemed too slender and shallow a figure through which to explore psychical and temporal complexities, including women’s collusions with their unfreedoms. (147)

Marcus believes that the Victorian woman and her complacency within the patriarchal system as well as her knowledge of her subservient position make for a more interesting study for Woolf to explore the complex nature of the feminine self and the desire for aesthetic autonomy.
Consequently, Virginia Woolf’s disillusionment with the “New Woman” is illustrated through her complicated relationship with the suffragist movement. “In Woolf’s early to middle years the woman’s movement was dominated by the single issue of suffrage, and her attitude to this was typically ambivalent” (Park 119). This inconclusiveness of Woolf’s feminist intention is a source of debate among critics. Alex Zwerdling explains, “No other element in Woolf’s work has created so much confusion and disagreement among her serious readers as her relationship to the women’s movement. She was a feminist, though she did not like the term. And many of her works ... are shaped by her desire to contribute to the liberation of women from the constraints of their lives” (210). For Virginia Woolf, women’s liberation began with economic equality and aesthetic opportunity. She famously wrote in *A Room of One’s Own*, “Of the two—the vote and the money—the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important” (37). Woolf believed that financial independence created spaces in which women were able to express themselves creatively and to realize other aesthetic facets of their private selves. Despite her bourgeois upbringing, Woolf was commenting on the economic disparity between class and gender and acknowledging the often-hypocritical “New Woman” suffragist whose fight for enfranchisement often excluded lower-class women. Ann Ardis explains, “The suffragists... demanded the right to vote, but only for themselves, not for all women. Typically, in fact, they were quite outspoken in arguing against (author’s emphasis) extending suffrage beyond the ranks of the middle class” (15). Woolf’s disillusionment with the “New Women” lies in their inherently antifeminist ideology in which enfranchisement becomes a matter of class first then gender.
Notably, in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Sally Seton, the free-spirited and penniless friend of Clarissa, brings up the subject of suffrage. Peter recalls the story:

One of the things he remembered best was an argument one Sunday morning at Bourton about women’s rights (that antediluvian topic), when Sally suddenly lost her temper, flared up and told Hugh that he represented all that was most detestable in British middle-class life. She told him that she considered him responsible for the state of “those poor girls in Piccadilly.” *(MD 73)*

The “poor girls” referenced by Sally are most likely prostitutes. The vision of the prostitute embodies the economic exploitation and inequality in women’s opportunity. Sally’s argument places the vote directly within the economic context that concerns Woolf. It is no coincidence that Sally, who is described as “ragamuffin Sally without a penny to her name” *(MD 73)* is both the voice of the suffragist movement and the epitome of class disparity and economic disadvantage. This is the hypocrisy that Woolf is acknowledging; she believes that the key to freeing the feminine voice is through economic equality not the enfranchisement of the political voice. The vote placates political opposition, creates a false sense of freedom, and continues complacency within the patriarchal social system. Further on in this chapter I will consider how Sally eventually embraces the promise of freedom through economic means as illustrated by her marriage to a successful noble merchant.

Hugh and Sally’s argument is also steeped in Victorian gender and sexual politics. Their debate essentially destabilizes traditional Victorian notions of gender boundaries by creating social spaces of androgyny. Sally and Hugh’s political conversation is considered a masculine arena of discussion. Clarissa makes the association between
politics and masculinity early in the novel while describing Lady Bexborough as
“interested in politics like a man” (MD 10). Moreover, Sally’s behavior is also
continually described as manly and masculine in nature, contradicting her ascribed
femininity. Clarissa fondly recalls Sally “sitting on the floor with her arms round her
knees, smoking a cigarette” (MD 32), discussing “how they were to reform the world.
They meant to found a society to abolish private property” (MD 33). Sally’s masculine
temperament coupled with her foray into masculine subject matter attempts to subvert
Victorian hegemonic notions of gender. It is compelling to note that the argument takes
place with a designated masculine space, the smoking room, further obscuring gender
lines and domestic territory. Langland elucidates the importance of gendered domestic
spaces within middle-class Victorian culture, by citing the desire for “the segregation and
privacy of sexes and classes in Victorian houses: “Spaces were coded as masculine or
feminine. Drawing rooms... were regarded as feminine and usually decorated with
‘spindly girt or rosewood, and silk or chintz,’ while the dining rooms, considered
masculine, require ‘massive oak or mahogany and Turkey carpets’ (294-95). Therefore,
Sally’s intrusion into a masculine domestic space and her willingness to engage
masculine subjects with men is ultimately an attempt to subvert the Victorian patriarchal
system through androgyny. Sally’s presence effectively de-masculinizes the space and
ultimately neutralizes the gendered hegemonic system.

Hugh’s reaction to Sally’s brazen conduct and lack of proper feminine decorum is
to exert his patriarchal power through physical force; he kisses her. Clarissa remembers,
stating, “[Sally] accused Hugh Whitbread... of kissing her in the smoking-room to punish
her for saying that women should have votes” (MD 181). Clarissa acknowledges that this
censure serves to exert Victorian patriarchy, and attempts to reassert established femininity on Sally. Makiko Minow-Pinkney furthers this argument: “Hugh Whitbread’s kiss is an act of sexual violence, the rape on a miniature scale of a woman who has dared argue that her sex should have the vote. But to… Clarissa’s disappointment the apparently fearless Sally has married a capitalist millionaire and now has five sons” (189). One could argue that Sally has accepted her subservient role within Victorian society and has surrendered herself to traditional and accepted forms of female gender identity, that of mother and wife. But it is also plausible that Sally’s decision to marry provides her with the economic opportunity and social security that Woolf believes fosters the creative feminine self. Sally’s participation within the patriarchal system allows her the economic opportunities to express herself, bolstering her feminine identity, and eventually helping her to subvert Victorian hegemony from within the domestic sphere.

The role of marriage plays a pivotal role within the narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway*. In many ways the representation of marriage coincides with the novel’s investment in Victorian ideals. The consistent retelling of the summer spent at Bourton where both Peter and Richard competed for Clarissa’s hand in marriage, ultimately won by Richard, is reminiscent of the traditional Victorian marriage plot. Yet Woolf’s narrative illustrates the problems of marriage as a literary device and implicates its position within the patriarchal hegemonic system that robs women of their self. Rachael Blau DuPlessis details some of the more problematic issues with the Victorian marriage/romance literary device:
The romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest, valorizes heterosexual ties as opposed to homosexual, incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal narrative success, the romance plot separates love and quest, values sexual asymmetry including the division of labor by gender; it can be based on extremes of sexual difference. (324)

Throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf illustrates the negative impact marriage has on Clarissa’s fractured self; Clarissa thinks, “She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having children now… this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (*MD* 10-11). Without the romance of the marriage plot or the fulfillment of motherhood, Clarissa is contemplating her place within the confines of traditional marriage. Clarissa envisages her maturity, mediating upon the function of a middle-aged woman in a society that equates femininity with youth, beauty, and fecundity. Her marriage to Richard has left her nameless; her husband defines her identity. By taking Richard’s name, through becoming Mrs. Richard Dalloway, Clarissa adopts her public persona thus implicating herself within the system of patriarchy. Henke accedes: “The title of Woolf’s novel is partially ironic since, in actuality, there is no ‘Mrs. Dalloway.’ The name designates a fictitious person, a social mask that disguises the former Clarissa Parry” (130). Marriage has fractured Clarissa’s identity; she has become the public face of her husband, revealing the true Clarissa only in the seclusion of her attic.

In fact, the entire narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway* can be viewed as an indictment against traditional Victorian marriage. Peter observes the unrealistic association between beauty, femininity, and marital prospects, stating “You’ll get married, for you’re pretty
enough” (27); Clarissa, noting that marriage results in the calamity of the feminine soul, remembers that her and Sally “spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe (34). Peter corroborates Clarissa’s sentiments, referring to her choice to marry Richard as “the death of her soul” (59). Also, the unrealistic restrictions of marriage and monogamy are clearly elucidated through Peter’s relationship with Daisy, who is “a married woman... the wife of a Major in the Indian Army” (45). Perhaps the saddest illustration of the stifling effects of marriage upon the soul is Richard Dalloway’s inability to tell his wife that he loves her: “He was holding out flowers—roses, red and white roses. (But he could not bring himself to say loved her; not in so many words)” (118). According to Woolf, the condition of modern marriage, in a post-WWI, post-Victorian society is represented by the inability to feel and a false display of public stoicism that hides the slow painful death of the individual soul. It is this innate desire to preserve the self that becomes the central determinant of Clarissa Dalloway’s existence.

Despite these very disdainful sentiments concerning traditional marriage, the novel’s only spinster, Miss Kilman, is met with extreme contempt from Clarissa, who views the unfortunate woman as competition for her daughter Elizabeth’s affections. Miss Kilman rebukes everything that Clarissa stands for including her Victorian upper-class upbringing, her parties, and her social aestheticism. She describes Clarissa: “Mr. Dalloway, to do him justice, had been kind. But Mrs. Dalloway had not. She had been merely condescending. She came from the most worthless of all classes—the rich, with a smattering of culture” (MD 123). Miss Kilman’s relationship with Elizabeth is problematic for Clarissa because she disavows the Victorian ideology that created a safe socially distinguished life for her family but also because Miss Kilman proves that a
woman who rejects these values, refuses to marry, and subsequently fails to acquire wealth is doomed to a life of anger, loneliness, and misery.

Throughout the course of the novel Clarissa feelings vacillate between regret and confidence concerning her decision not to marry Peter Walsh. Although she acknowledges her passionate love of Peter, she accepts that a marriage between the two of them would have been disastrous because his love was oppressive. Clarissa clarifies this: “For in marriage a little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in and day out in the same house; which Richard gave her.... But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into... she had to break with him or they would have been destroyed, both of them ruined” (MD 7-8). By choosing Richard, Clarissa chooses a life for herself within the boundaries of middle-class Victorian society. She realizes that the economic opportunities afforded to her through her marriage to Richard were her best chance to preserve the private portion of her soul; once again illustrating the importance Woolf placed on the economic autonomy of women. Henke explains Clarissa’s choice: “In deciding to marry Richard Dalloway instead of Peter Walsh, Clarissa chose privacy over passion. She forfeited romantic intensity for companionate love. Marriage to Peter would have entailed a schizoid modality of existence, a constant tension between amorous fusion and personal creativity” (133). Clarissa discloses the woeful lack of sexual passion within her marriage to Richard. The couple sleeps separately, which Richard insisted upon during one of Clarissa’s illnesses yet the routine remained after her ailment ceased. Also, Clarissa confesses to failing Richard in some manner associated to her duty as wife (we assume sexually). Clarissa attributes her marked frigidness and lack of desire to a dysfunction within her
constitution, she explains, “She could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth... through some contradiction of this cold spirit, she had failed him. And then again at Constantinople, and again and again. She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated” (MD 31). Despite these sentiments, Woolf is not suggesting that Clarissa’s frigidity within her marriage has rendered her incapable of sexual desire because she has explicitly and publicly expressed ardent desire towards Sally.

Virginia Woolf seems to indicate that the suffocating passionless nature of Victorian marriage lies in the inherent heterosexuality of the union. Clarissa Dalloway acknowledges love for both Peter and Richard, yet Woolf suggests that passionate love cannot be based upon a structure of inequality. Therefore, the sexual love between a man and a woman theoretically cannot exist within the system of marriage, which is ultimately a construct of Victorian patriarchy, because it is a system built fundamentally on the subservience and control of the feminine identity. Clarissa’s relationship with Peter remains somewhat passionate in nature because its foundations have remained free from the gendered inequality of marriage.

Woolf further illustrates this concept through the ardent relationship between Sally Seton and Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa’s lesbian attraction to Sally allows the women to form a relationship based on equality in which both of their feminine souls are nurtured. Clarissa recalls with zealous delight their first sexual encounter:

She and Sally fell a little behind. Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The
others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told to keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious. (MD 35)

This moment remains unblemished within Clarissa’s consciousness because it is homosexual in nature and therefore exists outside of patriarchal authority. Henke explains, “Clarissa’s lesbian attraction to Sally is celebratory and openly expressed.... Her virginal passion for Sally is graced by an adolescent purity, unclouded by the sexual masks and societal roles that often muddle adult heterosexual relations” (135). Their relationship occurs outside of dictated Victorian gender roles and represents the unabashed expression of the complete feminine self, both the private and the public or both the masculine and feminine as one. Through Sally and Clarissa, Woolf acknowledges an intrinsic feminism within lesbian relationships, and advocates that love between women cultivates the feminine identity. Clarissa thinks about the collaborative nature of her relationship with Sally: “The strange thing... was the purity, the integrity, of her feelings for Sally. It was not like one’s feelings for a man. It was completely disinterested... it had a quality which could only exist between two women just grown up. It was protective, on her side; sprang from a sense of being in league together” (MD 34). Woolf suggests that the lesbian relationship has the potential to remain immaculate in essence because it based purely on the principles of passion, love, and nurture.

This relationship echoes the passionate and aesthetically nurturing relationship that existed between Woolf and Vita Sackville West. Jane Marcus explains:

Virginia’s love for Vita Sackville-West is also a special case, for it was truly sexual.... There was... much more of a professional camaraderie than has been
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suggested, and a real respect for each other’s craft…. Woolf’s relationship with Vita Sackville-West is the only one in which she was willing and able to play mother to another woman’s mind and to give the intellectual nourishment she had so often taken from her own mental “mothers.” It is significant that her love affair with Vita was her most fully sexual experience. (107)

For Woolf sexuality and desire exist simultaneously with and fostered by aesthetic encouragement and intellectual compatibility. Sackville-West gave Woolf the opportunity to act upon both sexual and aesthetic desire and also to cultivate these aspirations within the fertile mind of her muse. Similarly, in Mrs. Dalloway Clarissa and Sally’s passionate relationship exists both sexually and intellectually as their desires are nurtured by the women’s egalitarian relationship.

By advocating the lesbian relationship in Mrs. Dalloway Woolf doesn’t entirely dismiss the masculine identity; instead, she redefines what constitutes Victorian gender normativity by incorporating androgyny and by doing so attempts to heal the fractured feminine self and foster aesthetic development. Clarissa envisions her private self as “breastless” (MD 31) within the protective confines of her attic room. Woolf suggests that in privacy women can cast off the social parameters that dictate their femininity and embrace the many facets of their self, both masculine and feminine. It is provocative that Woolf chose to mirror Clarissa with Septimus, a man, whose madness can be attributed to the contrived masculinity asserted upon his somewhat feminine nature during military service. Septimus describes the wartime inscription of his masculinity: “There in the trenches the change which Mr. Brewer desired when he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness; he was promoted” (MD 86). Septimus represents the
feminized male who is forced to adopt a false masculinity within the ultimate masculine arena, war; and Clarissa is a masculinized female who renders herself into the domain of feminine subjectivity, the domestic sphere and marriage, in order to find aesthetic space. Minow–Pinkney further develops the relationship between Clarissa and Septimus and the implications of Septimus’ suicide:

Septimus vicariously represents the risk of a total rejection of patriarchal law, and perishes... a surrogate for Clarissa, committing suicide on her behalf. In Woolf’s original plan Clarissa was herself to die. The invention of Septimus is thus a defensive splitting, whereby Clarissa’s most dangerous impulses are projected into another figure. (190)

This is a captivating opinion because Minow–Pinkney suggests that there is a complacence in which Clarissa accepts a subordinate feminized role, and that there is an element of patriarchy that must exist in Clarissa’s world because Woolf intended the novel to be an accurate reflection of modern times. It would have been too revolutionary or too feminist for Woolf to suggest otherwise and still justify the reflection of realism.

However, Woolf has advocated for the preservation and the fostering of both genders within the creative mind: “It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.... Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the act of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated” (AROO 104). Woolf advocates for an androgynous awareness free from prescribed notions of Victorian gender normativity. Septimus sacrificed his feminine side to participate in the war; the loss of half of his self was irreparable. Clarissa comprehends the gravity and relevance of the young man’s
suicide: “A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate” (MD 184). Clarissa understands his motivations; through suicide, Septimus is able to acknowledge that facet of his identity that society has mandated he conceal. His death is a both declaration of androgyny and rebuke against the rapidly changing modern patriarchal society that destroyed his soul and the passionate bond he developed for his fellow soldier Evan.

At the novel’s culmination Clarissa Dalloway steps away from her party to reflect upon Septimus’ suicide. His tragedy excites an epiphany within her; she acknowledges the predicament of her fractured self and her complacency within the hegemonic system. Clarissa thinks, recognizing the spiritual bond between them: “Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success” (MD 185). Clarissa, in the sanctuary of her attic, comes to realizes that her survival depends upon the unification of her divided self, her private, introspective, creative self and her domestic, public, social self into one Clarissa. When Clarissa approaches the window to gaze upon the old woman across the street she essentially reflects upon her true self in the glass. The surveillance of the woman violates the privacy of her feminine space rendering it public. In this lies the unity of Clarissa’s fragmented self. When Clarissa wonders whether or not the woman can view her through her window she fundamentally publicizes her space through the mutual invitation of surveillance.
Clarissa, the Victorian domestic hostess, becomes the feminine heroine of Woolf's aesthetic ideology. Clarissa’s party becomes both the domestic and aesthetic culmination of the narrative. Many critics have discussed the inherent aesthetic value in Clarissa’s domesticity and position as hostess. Henke refers to Clarissa as “a social artist who brings people together in new, imaginative configurations. With painstaking care, she weaves an evanescent web of friendship that creates new possibilities (128). Jesse Wolfe states: “Admittedly, Clarissa is not a writer. But the hostess-heroine is certainly an artist figure, and her marriage provides her not only with the means to host, but the space to imagine herself into being, the opportunity continually to narrate her own story” (44).

Throughout the novel, Clarissa herself details the aesthetic substance of her parties and her life or her social art: “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? An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift” (MD 122). The party represents a domestic yet artistic outlet for Clarissa. The party is an unapologetic aesthetic creation that exists for its own account. It is through the party that she is able to express herself, by allowing her to create a setting that challenges traditional social and class hierarchies. Woolf drew the comparison between the hostess and the artist/author in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” Woolf asserts, “It is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guests on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other…. The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes… and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy” (CDB110). Here Woolf validates both her portrayal
of Clarissa as artist and the intrinsically aesthetic intimacy of the domestic setting that culminates with the party as creative output.

Aesthetic expression is essential to Woolf's feminist ideology and the domestic hostess allows Woolf to illustrate subtle forms of resistance within the context of traditional patriarchal society. Clarissa Dalloway represents the motivation behind Woolf's feminism; she illustrates the dangers posed to the feminine self within a patriarchal system that demands submission, imposes dangerous parameters of femininity upon women, and extinguishes the feminine creative soul. Clarissa silently subverts the patriarchal system from within her domestic sphere by finding an acceptable outlet to consummate her aesthetic aspirations and by preserving her private space with an unyielding fervency. Many critics have questioned the validity of Woolf's feminist beliefs because her female protagonists ascribe to the versions of femininity dictated by patriarchal society, like Clarissa's society hostess or Mrs. Ramsay's sacrificial matriarch. Laura Marcus discuss Woolf's problematic relationship with modern feminists: "Her 'alternating loyalty to and deviation from' the familiar positions of the feminist movement produced contradictions in her thought which more recent feminists have found it difficult to accept" (144). I have previously stated that it is within this state of contradiction that Woolf's feminism is expounded. Woolf locates the source of her feminist inspiration within the patriarchal domestic household; she advocates for an androgynous nature in which both the masculine and feminine aspects are recognized as natural expressions of either gender. Woolf's relationship to modern feminism is complicated because she, like the character of Clarissa Dalloway, is rooted in the traditions of Victorianism. In her autobiographical piece, "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf
discusses the Victorian influence on her writing: “We both learnt the rules of Victorian society so thoroughly that we have never forgotten them.... The Victorian manner is perhaps... a disadvantage in writing.... On the other hand, the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out” (MOB 150). This illustrates the key to Woolf’s feminism: it is slipped in, passively conveyed through a middle-aged domestic hostess preparing for a society party. The subtlety of her feminist demands from within the domestic sphere is revolutionary and reflective of the modern feminine experience. The challenge to patriarchy lies more in Clarissa’s ability to heal her fractured feminine self and to achieve aesthetically within the domestic setting than in any assured allegiance to the suffrage movement or the validation of “New Woman” ideology.
Chapter 2 - The Feminism of Passive Resistance in *To the Lighthouse*

In the novel *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf depicts the character Mrs. Ramsay as the Victorian feminine ideal. Mrs. Ramsay’s incomparable beauty coupled with her passive and pleasing nature makes her the domestic center of the novel. Her dedication to her tyrannical husband inadvertently makes her the face of female subservience within the system of Victorian patriarchal hegemony; yet despite her seemingly complacent and traditional nature, she does maintain some semblance of newly emerging feminist ideals. Drawing upon Elizabeth MacLeod Walls’ concepts of the modern woman as an “amalgamation of the past and present” (243) and “domestic feminism” (229), I will argue that both Mrs. Ramsay and the text of *To the Lighthouse* embody these principles and consequentially emerge as examples of Virginia Woolf’s feminist beliefs: a combination of Victorian gender stereotypes coupled with passive forms of resistance that push the feminine self towards aesthetic liberation and challenge patriarchal hegemony by questioning the foundations of artistic inequality. Mrs. Ramsay’s passive domestic feminism is exemplified by her ability to use silence as a way to maintain power; her willingness to control her emotions, including anger and love; and her recognition of the hypocrisy in Victorian ideals, such as marriage. She is the epitome of an emerging woman who is slowly shedding Victorian gender inequality for a more modern way of thought. Woolf also uses the narrative technique of stream of consciousness to free the text from patriarchal hegemony associated with the exclusion of women from writing and the Victorian constructions concerning the form and subject of the narrative. All of these aspects reveal Woolf’s distinctive form of feminist thought.
Woolf famously asserted in the 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own* that “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (*AROO* 4). Woolf’s scathing indictment on a Victorian society that excluded women from writing fiction by preventing them from attaining education, meaningful employment, and property ownership was revolutionary for its time. The alienation of women from the male literary tradition led to the patriarchal dominance of convention in its exclusion of women; therefore, language and form both became a part of that hegemonic tradition. In the modernist masterpiece *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf created a novel whose form and narrative sought to free itself from Victorian constraint and the patriarchal control of language through the use of stream of consciousness narration and the novel’s unwillingness to focus on traditional plot. “For Woolf, oppression derives from the content and function of language rather than from words and symbols themselves. While she often played with language herself, she also saw that women can use words to ‘tell the truth.’ Therein lies the liberating potential of language: referential discourse can rupture the mystifications upon which patriarchy survives” (Pfaelzer 7). Woolf’s linguistic truth lies within the inner cerebral monologue of her characters. By liberating them from the spoken word, Woolf allows her narrative to rebel against the patriarchal constraints of the male literary tradition. Woolf writes in the essay “Women and Fiction”:

> Men... have established an order of values in life, so too, since fiction is largely based on life, these values prevail there also to a very great extent. It is probable, however, that both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is
perpetually wishing to alter the established values—to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important. (GR 81)

The novel’s construction becomes a subtle form of resistance against Victorian literary values by celebrating the inner emotions and anticipatory perspective of its characters rather than the driving force of occurrence and plot. Rachael Blau DuPlessis explains: “The sentence, the plot, narrative convention and subject matter will alike be subjected to revisionary scrutiny by the female novelist because these narrative forms and modes carry an ideological and interpretative freight about gender” (324).

The narrative of To the Lighthouse represents a feminist literary tradition because it seeks to challenge and redefine fiction for and by women. In To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe, who throughout the novel seeks to create art free from the influence of the male gaze, represents the artistic freedom of the modern woman. Despite being told by Mr. Tansley that “Women can’t paint, women can’t write” (TL 48), she completes her artistic endeavor at the novel’s conclusion by creating a painting that exists solely for herself. Lily thinks, “Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (TL 209). By claiming the vision as her own, Lily has succeeded, much in the same way as Woolf does upon completion of her novel, in creating art free from the hegemonic influence of Victorian patriarchy. The vision is hers and it is inherently feminine in nature.

Mrs. Ramsay’s narrative voice is arguably the focal point of the novel’s first part yet her vocal spirit resonates throughout the novel’s entirety well after her tragic and sudden death. The Ramsay matriarch, with her eight children and doting nature, embodies Victorian feminine values; yet Woolf seems to have imbued her with a sense of
passive rebellion, or what Walls would refer to as "domestic feminism." Walls explains: "The New Woman novels, enlivening reform rhetoric even while operating within the boundaries of conformist culture, created a new mode of activism for Victorian women that enabled them to proffer critique about marriage and society, although (and often sadly) from within the home: a tactic I term 'domestic feminism'" (229). It is my assertion that Mrs. Ramsay can be viewed as a sort of Victorian "domestic feminist" who passively pushes the boundaries of the dominant patriarchal system while remaining safely within the domestic sphere. An example of this from the novel is Mrs. Ramsay's preoccupation with marriage. The marriage plot is a quintessential Victorian subject and it seems fitting that Mrs. Ramsay should play matchmaker to her guests. Despite thinking sentiments like "An unmarried woman has missed the best of life" (TL 49), Mrs. Ramsay quietly reveals her dissatisfaction with her own marriage to her tyrannical and insecure husband. "She could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or affection for him" (TL 83). This stark indictment concerning the lack of emotion felt for her husband calls into question the doting façade that she puts on for her family and guests, mirroring Clarissa's divided self in Mrs. Dalloway. Despite often reveling in her duties as wife to Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay is beginning to become aware of the realities of her docile position within her marriage. Her regretful and dejected tone, a grim contrast to the excitement she feels when thinking about Minta and Paul's impending engagement, reflect these newly surfacing feelings.

Later, Mrs. Ramsay considers the sincerity of her matchmaking in light of her marital dissatisfaction: "Whatever she might feel about her own transaction, she had had experiences which need not happen to every one (she did not name them to herself); she
was driven on, too quickly she knew, almost as if it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry; people must have children” (*TL* 60). Mrs. Ramsay’s escape lies in her ability to believe in these Victorian domestic ideals like the traditional notion of marriage, family and love despite their failure in her own life. Lily, who represents the modern evolved woman, later expresses the sentiments that Mrs. Ramsay’s Victorian self won’t allow her to. Lily affirms to herself: “She need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution” (*TL* 102). Lily, who sees marriage as a form of surrender, refuses to sacrifice her self and ultimately her artistic voice to participate in the patriarchal gambit. Despite exhibiting some instances of domestic feminism Mrs. Ramsay’s Victorian upbringing will only allow her to passively question the patriarchal constitution of Victorian marriage, while complacently participating within its structure. Mrs. Ramsay does however recognize the greater opportunities that will be available to women in the future. She looks at her girls and her resistance is silent: “Her daughters, Prue, Nancy, Rose—could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of a man” (*TL* 6-7). Mrs. Ramsay, being both a “new, old woman” holds the modern feminist sentiments within her mind yet is not able to fully realize herself free of the Victorian patriarchal structure of her married life; but she can envision a future for her daughters where they have autonomy over their lives.

Silence and speech also play important roles when considering the passive feminism of the novel *To the Lighthouse*. Silence pervades most of the novel since its narrative style is stream of consciousness, yet it is important to look at what I’ll refer to as selective silence or when a character purposely withholds her thoughts. In order to
properly understand the gravity of silence within the novel, it is paramount to first understand the significance of the spoken word. In a novel that contains very little dialogue, particular attention should be paid to what is actually spoken. In the relationship between Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay the spoken word is especially relevant. Mr. Ramsay is a somewhat miserable, professionally washed-up, and often insecure man who is constantly looking for sympathy and reaffirmation of his “genius” from his wife. Woolf describes the affirmation and placation of the masculine identity as part of ascribed Victorian feminine conducts: “The patriarchal society of the Victorian age was in full swing in our drawing room. It of course had many parts. Vanessa and I were not called upon to take part in some of those acts. We were only asked to admire and applaud when our male relations went through the different figures of the intellectual game” (MOB 153). Victorian women were excluded from the intellectual aspects of socializing and served only to host and appease their husbands and guests; Mrs. Ramsay embodies these docile principles of Victorian feminine subjectivity.

Throughout the novel, Mrs. Ramsay reaffirms the masculinization of her husband’s fragile ego, and restores his dignity with her words of encouragement and affirmation. Woolf writes, “The fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. He wanted sympathy. He was a failure, he said, Mrs. Ramsay flashed her needles. Mr. Ramsay repeated, never taking his eyes from her face, that he was a failure. She blew the words back at him. ‘Charles Tansley...’ she said” (TL 37). Mr. Ramsay almost demands that his wife inflates his bruised ego with encouraging words and sentiments. He intimidates her with his unyielding stare until she complies. Mr. Ramsay, representative of patriarchal authority, controls speech as way to enforce its
hegemony. Noting the hypocrisy, Woolf angrily wrote in *A Room of One's Own*: “The cry of wounded vanity; it was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself. Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (*AROO* 35). Mrs. Ramsay willingly maintains Victorian gender hierarchal standards by inflating her husband’s ego, yet acknowledges there is a latent power expressed in this ability to control masculine dignity.

Mr. Ramsay also uses his wife’s words to diminish her ego whenever she has the courage to assert herself, further tightening the patriarchal constrains of spoken speech. When Mrs. Ramsay simply asks, “How did he know…. The wind often changed” (*TL* 31) in reference to Mr. Ramsay’s premature decision not to go to the lighthouse, he becomes enraged. Mr. Ramsay furiously thinks, “The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women’s minds enraged him. He had ridden through the valley of death, been shattered and shivered; and now she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect told lies. He stamped his foot on the stone step. ‘Damn you,’ he said” (*TL* 31). Mr. Ramsay, viewing her subtle defiance as a threat against his paternal instinct, turns his wife’s innocent question into an excuse not only to insult her intelligence and undermine her integrity but also to assert his paternal authority. It is important to understand Mrs. Ramsay’s subtle dissent in reference to Walls’ notion of the “New Woman.” “If the New Woman was a novelist who voiced progressive opinions, she also was a woman who did so indoors- inside the family and dominant culture” (Walls 238). Mrs. Ramsay’s simple remark passively represents Woolf’s literary challenge of the patriarchal social structure and the traditional Victorian family. This
resistance is passive in nature because Mrs. Ramsay clearly isn’t comfortable with challenging her husband outright and even states that, “She did not like, even for a second to feel finer than her husband” (TL 39). Mrs. Ramsay’s quiet resistance is not yet about equality; she is just advocating that her voice be heard, which is challenge enough to warrant Mr. Ramsay vitriolic response.

Similarly, silence provides Mrs. Ramsay with the opportunity to maintain and exert some passive feminist control within her marriage and family. Jean Pfaelzer discusses the literary importance of silence: “Phallocentrism is logocentrism...a woman’s speech, even rebellious or dissenting speech, is made up of the signs and signifiers of patriarchy. Hence, they call for a retreat from language, directly through silence or obliquely, through the discontinuities and disruptions of avant-garde practices” (1). Although Pfaelzer’s opinion may seem a bit more absolutist than necessary for this inquiry, it does indeed show how spoken language could promote a patriarchal agenda. Therefore, resistance through silence is a legitimate way to show passive dissent, especially in the case of Mr. Ramsay who requires spoken affirmation from his wife to maintain his fragile masculine ego. David Galef explains: “When women act sadistically they tend to employ subtler modes: inflicting guilt, withholding emotion, or subverting seemingly innocuous situations through latent hostility. Inaction and silence, for example, often read as socially enforced passivity, may also function on another level as socially acceptable aggression” (86). It is the deliberateness of Mrs. Ramsay’s silence that transforms it into a somewhat sadistic form of passive resistance, especially considering the emotional pain purposefully inflicted upon her husband. When Mr. Ramsay, feeling particularly fragile and unsatisfied, wants to hear his wife tell him that she loves him Mrs.
Ramsay refuses. She does so despite being referred to as a “heartless woman” because, as she affirms, “she could never say what she felt” (TL 123). Mrs. Ramsay’s reluctance to express herself could easily be considered the result of years living under Mr. Ramsay and his hegemonic control of language. By withholding her words and her feelings, by remaining silent, she is passively resisting Mr. Ramsay. When she does finally speak they are not the words that her husband wants to hear. She manipulates him ever so slightly: “Yes you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow. You won’t be able to go.” And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew” (TL 124). She is exercising a subtle yet formative amount of power over him. Gabrielle McIntire explains:

Her “triumph” is in being able to show her love without speaking its language- to show rather than tell; and for her, loving her husband means capitulating to his desires. That is, she silently acts out her resistance to his craving for declarative words of love, even while she concedes to his desire to be right...Her one source of power is withholding speech to counter the overpowering Victorian patriarch, whose command of language is so maddeningly precise. (89)

Initially it is hard to comprehend power in silence especially since much feminist rhetoric attempts to champion and free the feminine voice, but Mrs. Ramsay’s feminism is grounded in the domestic and therefore must still adhere to a certain set of Victorian values. Walls discusses how a woman experiences freedom within a patriarchal domestic system: “According to the new rhetoric about modernist women, the individual modern woman could be just as happy were she to claim a kind of equality while remaining securely within the androcentric intellectual tradition- and thus remaining always lesser
and subjugate within this paradigm” (237). Since Victorian women like Mrs. Ramsay are supposed to be proper and obedient and are not encouraged to cross their husbands, resistance through silence seems to be one of the only ways to demonstrate a domestic feminist agenda while adhering to social norms. As Woolf states in *A Sketch of the Past,* “Silence was a breach of convention” (*MOB* 149). Silence contradicts the parameters of the Victorian woman’s prescribed social femininity and therefore becomes a form of resistance against these ascribed gendered characteristics.

Mrs. Ramsay recognizes the patriarchal ties to language both spoken and unspoken and therefore seeks a true sense of silence in which she can rediscover herself, free from the ties of Victorian domestic rule and patriarchal hegemony. It is here that she is able to cast off all of her ascribed social personalities like mother, wife, and friend. She thinks:

For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of – to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. (*TL* 62)

Silence allows her true emotional freedom, independent of her domestic responsibilities, where she can explore and foster these new feeling of emancipation. This experience parallels Clarissa Dalloway’s attic and the revelation of her private introspective self from within the safety of its confines.

Another way in which Mrs. Ramsay exhibits control over her domestic sphere is through the suppression of feelings, specifically love and anger. Overt displays of
emotions are traditionally attributed as womanly characteristics, as revealed by Andrew Ramsay’s thought on Minta’s outburst: “She had no control over her emotions...Women hadn’t. The wretched Paul had to pacify her” (TL 77). According to Andrew, who like his father, is representative of patriarchal thought, women are bound to their unyielding emotions. Yet Mrs. Ramsay exhibits the strictest control over her feelings, especially anger: “Mrs. Ramsay smoothed out what had been harsh in her manner a moment before” (TL 30). It is, in fact, Mr. Ramsay who appears to not be in control of his emotions: “She looked at him thinking to find this in his face; he would be looking magnificent...but not in the least! He was screwing his face up, he was scowling and frowning, and flushing with anger” (TL 95). Mrs. Ramsay's controlled anger manifests itself through her domestic feminist rhetoric and action. Woolf spoke about the transfer of anger into action in *A Room of One’s Own* where she wrote, “Anger, I called it. But it was anger that had gone underground and mixed itself with all kinds of other emotions. To judge from its odd effects, it was anger disguised and complex, not anger simple and open” (*AROO* 32). There is power in anger, even if the anger is withheld and transformed such as with Mrs. Ramsay, who must mask her anger within passive forms of resistance and defiance. Kathleen M. Helal further discusses Woolf’s relationship with anger, stating:

*To the Lighthouse* suggests that while masculine rage seems socially inherited and justified, feminine fury is latent, repressed, and punished.... Woolf’s expressions of anger and her analyses of it enhance our understanding of the way women writers negotiate between their desire to express anger and their frustration with a society that disciplines women to be docile. (81)
This concept relates back to Walls' idea of domestic feminism. Victorian women like Mrs. Ramsay had to find ways to express their anger within the confines of the Victorian social structure. Their anger was domestic in nature and manifested itself within the home, or as Wall states, "they enacted their political agenda without endangering the patriarchal relationship or the family model" (239). Although it is implausible to assume that Mrs. Ramsay was consciously subverting patriarchal hegemony and promoting a secret feminist agenda in between her walks, knitting, and diner parties, it is still possible to see Virginia Woolf's latent feminist anger manifest itself in her characters, Mrs. Ramsay included.

This thesis has determined that Mrs. Ramsay represents a form of domestic feminism, in which Victorian and patriarchal ideologies are passively subverted and modern ways of thinking are slowly brought to light. Yet for all of Mrs. Ramsay's modernity, Woolf kills her, quite unceremoniously, halfway through her novel. What does this action say about what Mrs. Ramsay stands for? In order to understand who Mrs. Ramsay was, it's important to refer to Virginia Woolf's speech, entitled, "Professions for Women, 1931." Here Woolf describes "The Angel in the House:"

It was she who used to come between me and my paper.... It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her-you may not know what I mean by The Angel in the House. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily... she was
so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (DM 236-37)

This Angel represents the perfect Victorian woman who exists for everyone else but herself. Therefore Mrs. Ramsay is essentially “The Angel” of her house and her family. Mrs. Ramsay’s life consisted of constant sacrifice; even her slight instances of resistance were not enough to save her in the modern world. Woolf later writes, “I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing....Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (DM 238). It is important to note that according to Woolf, it is only necessary to kill the Angel if you are a woman writer. This is because The Angel, like Mrs. Ramsay, represents Victorian restraint. It illustrates entrenched gender roles enforced by patriarchal hegemony that bind and prevent; the Angel represents the inability of women to create artistic expressions within a society that degrades them. Mrs. Ramsay, although not the hegemonic force of patriarchy, represents a woman who is mostly complacent; and therefore she must die if a newer social structure is to emerge. In fact, Mrs. Ramsay had to die so that Lily, the representative artist and modern woman, was able to realize her artistic vision at the novel’s conclusion. Woolf makes it clear that the Angel must be killed so that artistic expression can become unencumbered.

Much has been said about the autobiographical nature of To the Lighthouse and specifically Virginia Woolf’s mother, Julia Stephen, as the foundation for the character of Mrs. Ramsay. McIntire notes that both the mother and the fictional character had eight children, were uneducated, considered very beautiful, and died at relatively young ages (88). Julia Stephen was notoriously complacent within the Victorian patriarchal system
and even signed the "Appeal against Female Suffrage" (88). The reader is supposed to believe that Mr. Ramsay is inadvertently responsible for the death of his wife and that she sacrificed herself until there was no life left to give. Lily exclaims to herself near the novel's conclusion: "Giving, giving, giving, she had died- and had left all this. Really, she was angry with Mrs. Ramsay.... It was all Mrs. Ramsay's doing. She was dead" (TL 149). Lily suggests that Mrs. Ramsay herself is at fault for her early and unexpected death. Lily insinuates that she should not have given so much of herself to others and that if she were more selfish with herself, she would be alive. Beth Rigel Daugherty discusses Mrs. Ramsay's complicity in her own death: "Mrs. Ramsay feels the pressure to play the Angel in the House as inherent and her drive to sacrifice self as natural. She cannot possibly see how she participates in her own destruction" (296). It has become evident that being a new, old woman isn't enough to survive in post World War I modern world. In order to survive, a woman must fully embrace modernity and resist Victorian, domestic hegemonic ideals and embrace the idea of the free, educated modern woman. Daugherty:

What Mrs. Ramsay cannot do for herself, then Lily (and Woolf) do for her. But the painter and the writer free neither the mother nor their own imaginations without a struggle. They must fight against their own reliance on patriarchal definitions, must strive to accept death, pain, and loss as part of reality, and finally, must go beyond being merely critics of patriarchal culture to become feminist seers. (296)

According to Daugherty's statement, Mrs. Ramsay's version of "domestic feminism" isn't feminist enough for the modern era. Therefore, Woolf had to write her mother into
Mrs. Ramsay and subsequently kill her off to finally be rid of her stifling Victorian influence. Woolf writes of exercising her mother's Victorian dominion over her life:

It is perfectly true that [Julia Stephen] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking around Tavistock Square I made up... *To the Lighthouse*.... I wrote the book very quickly; when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. (*MOB* 81)

The act of writing *To the Lighthouse* destroys the Victorian influence on Woolf's writing and allows Lily to emerge at the conclusion free from Victorian restraint and able to achieve her aesthetic endeavor.

Furthermore, Mrs. Ramsay's death scene is interesting to consider. "[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]" (*TL* 128). Woolf kills off her protagonist in a bracketed aside that is very reminiscent of stage directions. Her death is somewhat emotionless (save for a poignant Mr. Ramsay wandering the halls reaching for his deceased wife) and treated as though it is of little consequence. Woolf rebukes traditional Victorian narrative techniques by refusing to indulge in sentiment; Mrs. Ramsay is gone without commotion in an instant. Mrs. Ramsay's death occurs ten years after the beginning of the novel, in the section *Time Passes*. The reader learns at this point in the novel that World War I has come and gone as well. Woolf puts the death of one Victorian woman in perspective considering the rapidly changing modern word reeling from its first ever world war. McIntire elaborates: "Mrs. Ramsay could literally not make it past World War I into the brave new
world of a (gradual) reconceptualization of what and who women could be” (88). The war brought death to Victorian ideology and heralded the modern way; Mrs. Ramsay represented what woman was never to be again because the realities of world war prevented the kind of innocence that allowed for such complacency to exist.

This raises the question of Woolf’s intentions. Why create a character steeped in the traditions of a dying age, representative of the patriarchal dominance over women, who sacrificed herself for her family, who wasn’t free enough to create art? Wells explains: “Modernists revived New Woman ideologies, promoted nostalgic revisions of ‘the woman of the past,’ but simultaneously devoted a good deal of their criticism to devaluing the past as a means of defining the future” (230). In To the Lighthouse, Woolf looks to a figure of the past, Mrs. Ramsay, to define the future, Lily Briscoe. Theresa L. Crater writes, “Women must find an alternative to the crushing, monolithic image of Women, and that alternative must be brought to birth, to the surface, so women may come to live differently. Accomplishing this is a great risk, especially in post-Victorian England, because masculine cultural interests oppose any such formulations” (123). The novel needs Mrs. Ramsay if it is to fully understand Lily’s representation as a modern woman. Lily rebukes Victorian ideologies that tell her that she must marry and must have a family, that she cannot be an artist. Lily, gazing upon the spectral image of Mrs. Ramsay thinks: “Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone, she thought. We can over-ride her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us...It has all gone against your wishes. They’re happy like that; I’m happy like this. Life has changed completely” (TL 175). Lily represents the aesthetic potential of women who are freed from the fetters of history, patriarchy, and Victorian ideology. Like
Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay’s only aesthetic production comes from within the domestic sphere in the form of a dinner party. The ephemerality of Mrs. Ramsay’s aesthetic production renders it unable to satisfy her aesthetic desire. Mrs. Ramsay thinks: “With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta’s arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past” (TL 111). Unlike Mrs. Ramsay, Lily finds fulfillment in herself and through her art; she isn’t forced to give herself away piece by piece until there is nothing left.

Lily, the modern woman, represents a feminist belief system different from that of Mrs. Ramsay because it isn’t domestically anchored. Mrs. Ramsay’s representation as the “old, new woman” is a necessary bridge to Lily’s artistic manifestation and realization as the modern woman at the novel’s conclusion. Virginia Woolf rebelled against the Victorian ideology that denied women education and a means for artistic expression. She called into question the patriarchal influence over a literary tradition that excluded women by writing in a manner that sought to redefine the changing role of women. The concepts of “new, old women” and “domestic feminism” help to better understand Mrs. Ramsay’s function within a changing society. Virginia Woolf’s feminist voice is finally realized in the character of Lily, who desires freedom and opportunity for artistic expression, free from the patriarchal hegemony of old Victorian ideology. The fact that Lily affirms: “I have had my vision” (TL 209) at the novel’s conclusion is no coincidence, because the novel’s culmination is also the realization of Woolf’s artistic vision and personal feminine liberation.
Conclusion

Despite Miss Kilman’s encouragement, an adventurous romp through London, and a trip down the Strand, Elizabeth Dalloway is unable to completely free herself from the Victorian patriarchal influence of her mother Clarissa and her middle-class London upbringing. Initially her dauntless afternoon inspires feelings of freedom and possibility; Elizabeth thinks: “For no Dalloway’s came down the Strand daily; she was a pioneer, a stray, venturing, trusting” (MD 137). At this time Elizabeth also begins to entertain, with Miss Kilman’s confidence, the possibility of a vocation and economic freedom for herself: “And every profession is open to the women of your generation, said Miss Kilman...she would like to have a profession. She would become a doctor, a farmer, possibly go into Parliament, if she found it necessary, all because of the Strand” (MD 136). It is interesting to note that Elizabeth considers the masculine realm of politics as a possible career choice furthering the notion of the androgynous future initiated by a young Sally Seton in the smoking room at Bourton. Yet despite all of these progressive sentiments Elizabeth dismisses the possibility of a profession rather quickly with the acknowledgement of her inherent laziness. Elizabeth, already recognized for her beauty and passive nature, will most likely follow in her mother’s footsteps.

Elizabeth’s attendance at her mother’s party all but solidifies the girl’s future as middle-class hostess because it is an acknowledgement to the hold Clarissa has over her daughter. Elizabeth meanders around the party capturing both the male gaze and admiration and subsequently adopts the public face that her mother is desperate but unable to shed. Richard discovers himself staring at his daughter and the novels conclusion: “He had thought to himself, Who is this lovely girl? And suddenly he
realized that it was his Elizabeth, and he had not recognized her, she looked so lovely in her pink frock! Elizabeth had felt him looking at her as she talked to Willie Titcomb. So she went to him and they stood together... looking at people going” (MD 194). Richard declares his paternal possession over Elizabeth, echoing Clarissa’s earlier sentiments, through the use of the possessive pronoun “his.” Yet Richard’s “his” is also steeped in patriarchal possession and competitive masculinity because he pulls Elizabeth away from a conversation with another male admirer into the protective realm of his paternal embrace.

Conversely, Lily develops into the modern free woman at the conclusion of *To the Lighthouse* because she is able to free herself from the male gaze and create. Lily emerges from Mrs. Ramsay’s death questioning the inherent value of the Victorian femininity that Mrs. Ramsay was recognized and valorized for. She wonders: “There must have been people who disliked her very much.... People who thought her too drastic. Also her beauty offended people probably. How monotonous, they would say, and the same always....Then she was weak with her husband. She let him make those scenes. Then she was reserved. Nobody knew exactly what had happened to her” (TL 195-6). Lily is able to recognize the hypocrisy in dictated femininity and is subsequently able to completely free herself from its hegemonic grasp and realize herself as the artist.

It is for these reason that I believe that the conclusion of *To the Lighthouse* is ultimately the final conclusion for both of Woolf’s novels. Lily achieves a feminist and aesthetic transcendence at the end of *To the Lighthouse* that Elizabeth is prevented from realizing at the culmination of *Mrs. Dalloway* because of the possessive nature of her parents and their inherent Victorianism. The death of Mrs. Ramsay allows Lily, who
functions as a surrogate daughter and idealized lover to the Victorian matriarch, the opportunity to completely shed the patriarchal restraints of Victorian femininity and ultimately achieve a concrete aesthetic creation. Clarissa, being of divided constitution, only loses half of her self when Septimus commits suicide and because Septimus represents the ravages of modern society on the delicate nature of humanity, Clarissa is left with the aspect of her self that is rooted in the Victorian past. Therefore, Elizabeth will ultimately be unable to dismiss the Victorian influence on her and will most likely be left finding temporary aesthetic fulfillment in the form of dinner parties and social engagements, just like her mother. Ultimately, Virginia Woolf used the composition of To the Lighthouse to relinquish the presence of her mother's spirit from her life and art and therefore Lily Briscoe's aesthetic and feminist achievement ultimately parallels Woolf's own triumph over the Victorian patriarchal influence upon her personal and aesthetic sensibilities.
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