LIFE AND THE LITERARY SUBJECT
IN VIRGINIA WOOLF’S MRS. DALLOWAY

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This thesis investigates ways that Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, explores the effects of modernity on the human subject. Using the controlling theme of construction and deconstruction, the thesis investigates Woolf's view of subjectivity from ontological, linguistic, and political perspectives. Linguistic symbolic order and British social structures both have roots in patriarchy—both strive to define and control. *Mrs. Dalloway* resists such control with both its innovative literary form and its social criticism. Chapter 1 investigates the binaries of social and essential that Woolf assumes are part of human existence, and it demonstrates how Woolf collapses these binaries in the symbolically constructed lives of her characters. Chapter 2 describes the fundamental duality of language. Language has the ability to order a chaotic material existence, yet it is unable to describe emotion and underlying reality. In order to reconcile this duality, Woolf crafts an impressionistic prose that adheres to a loose structure that allows "reality" to shine through. Chapter 3 presents the literary subject as shaped by cultural narratives and inscription on the body by power. Woolf has her characters use these shared narratives to envision and "write" personal realities. The success of the personal narratives in creating agency depends in part on gender and class.
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INTRODUCTION

Early twentieth-century London: the city is the site of emergent financial capitalism and industrialization. Photography, the cinema, the airplane, the automobile, electric lights, imperialism, mass warfare and violence, increased urbanization and industrialization, and the beginnings of global capitalism revolutionized the lives of Londoners of the time. Buildings, streets, automobiles, omnibuses, and underground transit created new capacities for movement and existence, but they simultaneously constrained and limited the avenues by which people moved around the city. Global capitalism, likewise, provided new commercial opportunities in London and overseas, but confined possibilities for workers. The architectural and financial structures of the city epitomized the duality of existence in the modern age: the structures of modernity!

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1 Marshall Berman, in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, considers modern life a “maelstrom” and details the fast-paced and multi-faceted ways in which twentieth-century life is constantly being transformed. Early twentieth-century Britain saw the beginnings of the “maelstrom.” Berman describes the many factors that play into the advent of modernity:

The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, and ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market. In the twentieth century, the social processes that bring this maelstrom into being and keep it in a state of perpetual becoming, have come to be called ‘modernization.’
concentrated enormous energy and heralded infinite possibility, and they simultaneously rendered society splintered and constricted.

London-based author Virginia Woolf was acutely aware of these enormous changes. Her articles about 1930's London, compiled in *The London Scene*, demonstrate a keen awareness of the changes her city had been undergoing. Woolf connects physical and economic changes with shifts in culture and social relations. In her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” she maintains: “in or about December, 1910, human character changed … All human relations have shifted—those between masters 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” (1-2). Woolf herself effects “change in … literature,” reflecting modernity through innovations in literary form—the altered cityscape results in an altered mindscape. She experiments according to Ezra Pound's dictum, “Make it new,” concerning herself with interiority and the psychological nature of existence and crafting fluid, impressionistic prose that makes a radical stylistic break from her literary predecessors.

*Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's 1925 novel, is set in London—the epicenter of English modernity. Woolf portrays an imaginatively beautiful London in which trees, oceans, glaciers, flowers, and clouds are set amongst churches, clock towers, motor cars, and omnibuses. But her London's beauty does not distract her from a main purpose: analyzing the effects of modern cultural structures on the human subject. In *Three Guineas* she challenges readers to deconstruct the cultural environments in which they find themselves:

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2 Woolf claimed that she underwent a personal revaluation every time society dramatically changed.
Let us think in offices; in omnibuses; while we are standing in the crowd watching Coronations and Lord Mayor’s Shows; let us think as we pass the Cenotaph; and in Whitehall; in the gallery of the House of Commons; in the Law Courts; let us think at baptisms and marriages and funerals. Let us never cease from thinking—what is this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves? (77)

Although *Mrs. Dalloway* was published thirteen years earlier, at that time Woolf had already embarked on the critical project that that culminates in the 1938 *Three Guineas*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf “thinks” about the British civilization in which she finds herself.

Woolf’s “thinking” results in a critical attitude toward Britain. She explains in her diary that *Mrs. Dalloway* is meant to analyze and deconstruct British culture: “I want to criticize the social system, & show it at work, at its most intense,” she writes (*Diary* 2:248). Using a subtle irony that is nevertheless directed and incisive, *Mrs. Dalloway* criticizes numerous aspects of the social system. On the surface, the novel describes a high-society party and the impressions of the “glittering & tinsely” upper-class woman who orchestrates it (*Diary* 2:272). But under the surface of the glittering social machine lie its ugly inner workings. Woolf criticizes the empire through Peter and Lady Bruton; employing Hugh Whitbread, she criticizes capitalism and aristocracy; Dr. Holmes and William Bradshaw caricature autocratic patriarchy; Clarissa articulates the negative effects of marriage on women. Woolf comments on limitations on sexual preference, and she most sharply criticizes the tragic effects of the Great War and the British class system through Septimus’s story. Each of these literary instances condemns the “great patriarchal machine” that manufactures and perpetuates imperialist, aristocratic, capitalist, religious, class, and sexist ideologies (“Sketch” 153).
Such ideologies leave their marks on the life of the individual. Woolf worries that modern, capitalist-industrial ideology dulls the individual’s experience of life. She worries that even colors take on mechanical, symbolic significance: “in the eyes of a motorist red is not a colour but simply a danger signal. We shall very soon lose our sense of colour ... [in] the change wrought upon our senses by modern conditions” (“Sickert” 233). Woolf’s near contemporary, Georg Simmel, worries not that people will lose the capacity for sensation, but that individuals will become subsumed by capitalist ideology. Simmel suggests, “the deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life” (24). Woolf shares this concern, and in *Mrs. Dalloway* she undertakes to articulate the near impossible to articulate, namely the nature and construction of the modern human subject. She asks: What is essential about us? What is socio-linguistically constructed? How are we constructed by our environment? And meanwhile, how can we creatively deconstruct and reconstruct language and culture, enjoying the language, and life, for itself?

While grappling with the fragmentation and alienation of modern life, Woolf answers these questions for herself—the inevitable inconclusiveness of her “answers” becomes an end in itself. She creates a comprehensive yet diffuse philosophy with which she explores the conundrum of the human subject within the modern condition. Social criticism lies at the center of the novel, and it is deeply informed by both her existential beliefs and her concern with the limits of language. Existence and language are the topics

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3 In his essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel outlines the development of the urban individual, whose psychic life is formed largely through a barrage of capital-produced stimulus.
I explore in Mrs. *Dalloway*, and I place them in relation to political and ethical circumstances in post-war Britain.

Woolf’s prose is the subject of the second chapter. This chapter grew out of my initial response to *Mrs. Dalloway*, which I had developed in a seminar paper in a course on Literary London. This central chapter remains foundational to my argument. I sensed that Woolf’s work embodies a fundamental Modernist concern: writers are compelled to use language to make sense of a complex and splintered world, but at the same time language fails to capture essential “reality.” Furthermore, Woolf conceives of two seemingly irreconcilable types of language: pre-linguistic articulation and patriarchal symbolic order. Waves of pre-linguistic, emotion-inspired articulation arise from lived experience in the body. The deep, inner feeling from which these articulations arise is foundational, but without symbolic language to explain lived experience, such experience becomes terrifying. Patriarchal, logical-empirical language confers order upon unmediated lived experience, but it also rigidly segments and defines life. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf continues her project of reconciling both modes of articulation. She does this by developing a fluid, impressionistic language and literary form that is connected to the semiotic. She builds linguistic structure but adheres to it loosely, allowing “life” and emotion to shine through. In this way, she also reconciles the dual capacity of language—her impressionistic language paradoxically illuminates “reality.”

I found myself often resorting to vague terms such as “life” and “reality” while writing chapter two. I had gained an intuitive understanding of these terms from reading *Mrs. Dalloway*, but I had not explicitly defined their use in my thesis. Therefore, in the

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4 Reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in conjunction with “Modern Fiction,” “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” and Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* informed and deepened my response.
first chapter, I articulate Woolf's use of *self, body, life, reality,* and *meaning,* laying the definitional groundwork for the subsequent chapters. As I explored the terms, I realized that each term possesses dual significance: each has a social-cultural significance and an essential-spiritual significance. Woolf saw the split between the social and essential as irreconcilable, just as she understands the gulf between emotion and symbolic order. Yet once again, Woolf reconciles this split in her fiction. The lived experience of her characters collapses the social and the essential; the social and essential are contrary states of existence that reciprocally inform each other in infinite ways and are often indistinguishable in the material world. Finally, the analysis of Woolf’s terms led me to understand Woolf’s philosophy of existence: moments of lived experience in the material-social world contribute to a greater pattern of existence. The entire pattern of existence remains shrouded, but moments of lived experience illuminate it for brief, exalted moments.  

I extend ontological questions to their social-political implications in the third chapter. The idea for the third chapter grew from my concern with the personal and political agency of the human subject in a society constructed from rigid social codes. Grand cultural narratives of patriarchy, aristocracy, and capitalism inscribe themselves upon the bodies of Woolf’s characters and dictate the ways that they experience the world. However, by no means does Woolf relegate the literary body as entirely subject to grand cultural narrative. Using shared cultural material, characters envision personal narratives to negotiate their political and personal realities. The tension between a

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5 Mark Hussey's *The Singing of the Real World* and Ann Banfield’s *The Phantom Table* deepened my argument about Woolf’s philosophy.
predetermined cultural narrative and a creative one is often reconciled in moments of characters’ lived experience.

The tensions between social and essential, structure and fluidity, intellect and intuition, culture and nature, patriarchal social structure and feminine embodied feeling struck me as I read *Mrs. Dalloway* for the first time. Fluidity alone is formless—fluid needs containment, believes Woolf. But if a structure is too rigid, life stagnates. Therefore, structures must be perpetually constructed and deconstructed. The continuous erecting and collapsing of ideas is a concept that I had come back to repeatedly in my time as a graduate student. I explored this theme in George Oppen’s poetry, in Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*, and in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. Therefore, when I encountered the tension between structure and fluidity in *Mrs. Dalloway* and discovered the text also spoke to my interest in feminism and my fascination with modernity, I was inspired to investigate further.

The motif of construction works on many levels in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The modern city becomes an overarching metaphor for varieties of structure: the “real” material city constructed by economic forces, the social system, the economic system, a constructed idea of “self,” and literary form. Woolf values emotion, fluidity, and moment-by-moment lived experience in the body over structure. But without structure, it is impossible to make sense of the fluid materiality of the universe. Building constructions forges new paths, forms new connections, and contains and concentrates experience. Structures become the bones of existence to which life is anchored—the skeletal structure that allows the body mobility and agency. But if structure is valued at the expense of the life it supports, it becomes rigid and dead. Neither structure nor fluidity may exist on its own—
each depends on the other. And in order to exist in the world ethically, structures must be valued for their function but not unquestioningly adhered to; they must continually be assembled, dismantled, and reassembled. For this reason, Woolf advocates radical changes in literary form, speaks out on the rights of women, and moves away from her dark, Victorian childhood home into a house with a bright, modern interior. Changing the old structures allowed new forms of life to come into being. Even Woolf's illness followed a pattern of construction and deconstruction—she arose from each episode of mental illness with revived literary inspiration; the completion of a novel often brought on a breakdown. Ultimately, construction and deconstruction became Woolf's mode of existence.

The tension between structure and fluidity has made Mrs. Dalloway difficult to write about. Woolf builds the novel with motifs of light, dark, waves, atoms, seas, flowers, time, threads, fragments, and bones. But, because of the fluidity of her prose, these motifs repeatedly resurface; each flower, each wave, is a unique incidence, but “all ... taken together” the flowers and waves weave the impossible-to-wholly-comprehend pattern that is essential to Woolf's philosophy (Dalloway 22). In her philosophy, associated ideas and images are connected through the endless “caves” that she writes about in her diary (Diary 2:263). Her prose relies on these caves; it is dense and circular, layered and multi-directional—the entirety of its import remains hidden. Mrs. Dalloway's rhizomatic structure led me to alight on similar conclusions based on different passages,

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6 Julia Kristeva's "The Ethics of Linguistics" offers an interesting model of how linguistic structure and fluid creativity operate in a dialectic. Even more interestingly, Kristeva connects fascist political systems with a misinterpretation of the nature of the linguistic sign. Kristeva's work was certainly informed in part by her exposure to Woolf's work. She writes about Woolf in About Chinese Women.

7 In "The Word Split Its Husk: Woolf's Double Vision of Modernist Language," Bonnie Kime Scott cites Woolf's metaphor of the male modernist author as constructing a sandcastle, and Woolf, as a feminine force, embodies the sea, which gently yet insistently subsumes architectural construction (371-2).
but the subterranean strands of the novel continued to elude me. It has been challenging to explicate the complexity of her work in an academic paper, which approaches analysis in the logical, systematic fashion that Woolf herself derides. But in lucid and intuitive moments of comprehension I got her—while reading, myriad insights came “to daylight in the present moment” (Diary 2:263). Perhaps such moments of insight, arising from the complexity of Woolf’s prose, are why so much scholarship on her work and life continues to be produced. Woolf’s complex prose has allowed me to explore a fragment of her thinking and to illuminate it in my own circular fashion. Writing this thesis has allowed me to make order out of a small sliver of chaos. It has simultaneously illuminated some of the endless chaos in Woolf’s novels—and in the world—in which, paradoxically, everything beautifully and mysteriously connects.

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8 I use “rhizomatic” as a metaphor for the structure of Woolf’s prose; the term bears no relation to Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic theory.
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VIRGINIA WOOLF’S PHILOSOPHY OF EXISTENCE: ILLUMINATING THE “FLOWERS OF DARKNESS”

“My aim is always to get hold of the magic of reality and to transfer this reality into painting—to make the invisible visible through reality. It may sound paradoxical, but it is, in fact, reality which forms the mystery of our existence.” – Max Beckmann

“What is it? Where am I? And why, after all, does one do it?” wonders Peter Walsh in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, echoing concerns that likely prompted Woolf to write the novel. Mrs. Dalloway elucidates Woolf’s ontological concerns; the novel questions the meaning of life and the nature of reality. Mark Hussey claims that Woolf neither constructed nor drew from an overarching philosophy, but he cites an allusion she makes to her “philosophy” in “A Sketch of the Past.” There, Woolf writes:

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (72)

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9 From Max Beckman’s On My Painting (1938) quoted in Hershel B. Chipp’s Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics (187-8).
10 In The Singing of the Real World Mark Hussey comprehensively outlines Woolf’s philosophy as appears in her essays, diaries, letters, and fiction. However, it is not a philosophy in the traditional sense; Hussey explains that it is rather a “conceptual rod that she felt stood always behind her art. It is the philosophy of her fiction in this restricted sense [ ] of what she felt was the background of her art that I wish to elucidate” (xii). Ann Banfield, in her article “Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time,” claims “Woolf adopted ... G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell’s realism,” adapting their ideas into her philosophy (471). Banfield’s The Phantom Table is an in-depth study of how their ideas are manifested in her novels.
This passage summarizes her views on existence, and it illustrates the tension between meaning and meaninglessness that dominates her thinking in *Mrs. Dalloway*.\(^\text{11}\) One of the novel’s characters, Septimus Warren Smith, intuits a meaningful existence: “[h]e knew the meaning of the world” (65). At other moments, Septimus is convinced that “the world itself is without meaning” (86). A single character holds such seemingly contradictory convictions because Woolf conceives of a contrary existence in which neither “meaning” nor “meaninglessness” is ever definitively established.\(^\text{12}\) Woolf gathers all that exists in the “world” into an overwhelming and unified whole, yet her philosophy implies a radical negation: “Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet” is the entire “truth,” but “there is no Shakespeare … no Beethoven … certainly and emphatically no God.” In the moment, for the individual subject, no Shakespeare, no Beethoven, no God exists; none is manifested as an individuated, “real,” or historical figure. Nevertheless, lived experience with their “art” remains the “truth about this vast mass that we call the world.”

Such contraries arise from the tension between Woolf’s suspicion that an essential beingness underlies all existence and her awareness that human experience is socially constructed. These dual existences operate in a dialectic that generates action in the world but never arrives at conclusive synthesis. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, oft-repeated terms, *self*, *body*, *life*, *reality*, and *meaning*, are assigned both essential and social significance, but neither operates independently. Woolf’s characters’ social existence is constructed to contain and explain essential existence, and essential existence continually irrupts into her characters’ social existence. Furthermore, essential beingness is suspected but can

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\(^{11}\) Hussey claims that Woolf’s foundational concern is the tension “between faith in a meaningful world and a sense of life’s absurdity” (96).

\(^{12}\) Woolf’s characters express paradoxes: Septimus notices, “how wonderful, but at the same time … how strange” (82), and Clarissa Dalloway perceives at her party “that everyone was unreal in one way; much more real in another” (166) and “felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged” (8).
never be proven: although the “pattern” exists, it remains hidden “behind the cotton wool” (Sketch” 9). Each character, although limited in time and space, by acting in the world, contributes to the creation of the unifying pattern, and each character, again by acting in the world, glimpses the pattern for brief and illuminating moments. Woolf thus creates a comprehensive philosophy that remains diffuse and elusive; it presumes a deep and complete existence that is both created and apprehended through isolated fragments of lived experience.

**Solitary-Social Selves**

Woolf portrays two seemingly incompatible conceptions of “self” in *Mrs. Dalloway*: the solitary self and the social self. Characters experience the chasm between these two selves as irreconcilable. A split between these two selves preoccupies Woolf throughout her life. As early as her second novel, *Night and Day*, the main character asks: “Why should there be this perpetual disparity between the thought and the action, between the life of solitude and the life of society?” (419). The contraries of existence arise in part from this seeming “disparity” between the solitary and social selves. Septimus, for instance, experiences his social existence as painful. He is thrust into being a clerk and a soldier in spite of his poetic aspirations. Combat brings additional trauma—the death of a dear friend. To deal with pain and loss, he retreats into isolation. His connections to others, including at times his wife, are severed. Peter Walsh, too, experiences a split between his social and solitary selves. Tired of navigating the masculine business of marriage, love affairs, imperial posts, social status, and money-

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13 The main character, Katherine, in *Night and Day* refers to this chasm as a “precipice” (419).
making that constitute his social self, he dreams of a private self, a “solitary traveler” (55). As “solitary traveler” he wanders through the city, dreaming and receiving sensory impressions. When he prepares to enter Clarissa’s home, the “visual impressions [of the city] failed him,” and “the soul must brave itself to endure” the tense social atmosphere of the party (161). Both Septimus and Peter realize the split between the “life of solitude and the life of society.”

The social self is constructed from cultural expectations and functions to establish an individual’s permanent social identity, but it often appears one-dimensional and unreal. Clarissa, for instance, creates a one-dimensional social self which she later worries is “not [truly] herself” (166). She fashions a social self when she looks into the mirror and describes “the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party” (36). An upper-class woman is her prescribed social role, and Clarissa constructs an image that conforms to this social self:

That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, on diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to, perhaps; she had helped young people, who were grateful to her; had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her—faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions, like this of Lady Bruton not asking her to lunch. (36)

This constructed self is definite (as Clarissa creates it to be); it exhibits a solid and unchanging “self” to the social world, “the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her.” She thus establishes a seemingly flawless and permanent identity: wife, party-giver, helper of young people, “refuge for the lonely.” This constructed self is one-dimensional, however. Clarissa defines her social self as one “point,” excluding the
diamond’s other faces and “never showing a sign of all the other sides of her—faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions.” This point establishes a permanent but limited and contingent identity. Clarissa desires to be a “radiancy … in some dull lives,” but refracting light in many directions requires a diamond’s translucent and multi-faceted whole. Because she exhibits only one point to the social world, Clarissa feels that when acting as “perfect hostess” (7), she is “being something not herself” (166). Feeling unreal when she inhabits the singular “point,” Clarissa, like Septimus and Peter, effects a split between her social and solitary selves.

The social self intends to establish a fixed identity, but its power is ultimately curtailed by death. Ann Banfield, quoting Orlando, identifies a “Captain self, the Key self” that is nearly analogous to the socially constructed self (Phantom 202). In fact, Banfield claims, “to the Captain self falls responsibility for ‘assembling the diamond shape, that single person’” (203). The Captain self desires singularity and control, but Banfield suggests that its capacity for control is limited by the inevitability of death. The social selves in Mrs. Dalloway are also limited, and ultimately dismantled, by death. Clarissa’s social self can’t fathom that “she must inevitably cease completely … that death ended absolutely” (9); Clarissa’s “fear” (180) and “horror of death” (149) is generated by a social self who desires permanence in a non-permanent world. The

14 At one point, Miss Kilman wishes that she could “unmask” Clarissa, implying that Clarissa’s social self is a façade (122).
15 The narrator in Orlando claims that “Orlando was certainly seeking this [Captain] self” (227). “This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all” (Orlando 227). The “Captain self” is nearly analogous to the social self, in that it desires control over the structure of the self. It has “locked up” the other possibilities for beingness. This is why Clarissa feels that she is “being something not herself” (166).
16 Banfield quotes Mrs. Dalloway here: “strange, she thought, pausing on the landing, and assembling that diamond shape, that single person” (37).
17 Peter worries about “the death of the soul” when the constructed self takes over (57-8). Hussey claims: “the fact of death is significant in the experience that allows for [essential self’s] perception” (28).
socially constructed self offers the illusion of something solid, where in fact nothing solid or everlasting exists. Metaphorical and actual deaths ultimately dismantle this temporary, constructed self. While walking on Bond Street and giving her party, Clarissa realizes that her social self feels “invisible” and “unreal”; these are momentary dissolutions of the constructed self. Clarissa’s near-fatal influenza before the novel opens also weakens her social existence. Finally, the news of Septimus’s death, interjected into her party, allows Clarissa’s constructed, social self to momentarily die. “She felt somehow very like him,” and his release “made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” that is denied by her one-dimensional social self. Clarissa suddenly quotes Cymbeline: “Fear no more the heat of the sun.” When her social self dissolves, fear of its potential dissolution disappears.

A solitary self—free, radiant, and essential—is intuited once the social self has been dismantled. Clarissa recognizes the social self as “apparitions, the part of us which appears, [that] are so momentary” (149), and the solitary self is “the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide” (149). The solitary self is never defined but is characterized as free, radiant and essential. Septimus and Peter yearn for (an illusory) freedom, Clarissa expects to be a “radiancy” when she assembles her diamond, and Peter assumes a “truth” about his soul. This solitary self is also only knowable by the character himself: Peter has a “private name which he called himself in his own thoughts,” alluding

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18 “The search for identity is the ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless,” states Zygmunt Bauman in Liquid Modernity (82).
19 Clarissa’s hair suddenly turned white, a sign of aging and death (36), she is required to rest rather than participate in society (117), and she contemplates mortality (9).
20 Peter and Clarissa characterize Clarissa as cold, especially when she fails Richard “through some contraction of this cold spirit,” induced by the socially constructed role of wife. The heat of the sun allows the cold social self to dissolve.
21 “There is no death,” proclaims Septimus twice, perhaps assuming an eternal essential self (24, 137).
to a solitary self not constrained by social expectations (52). He intuits the existence of this essential self:

for this truth about our soul, he thought, our self, who fish-like inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities threading her way between the boles of giant weeds, over sunflickered spaces and on and on into gloom, cold, deep, inscrutable; suddenly she shoots to the surface and sports on the wind-wrinkled waves (157).

Peter experiences this essential self or "soul," as "truth." It lies hidden beneath the surface of the ocean, obscured even from himself, except for moments in which it "shoots to the surface" of his being. Woolf makes a similar statement in her diary: "The soul swims to the top," she observes (Diary 2:308). The "truth" of this essential self is thus recognized, but it remains "inscrutable"—it can't be explained.

The essential self can't be proven, but death (after dismantling the Captain self) might allow for its perception. Clarissa suspects that the essential self is permanent and might continue after death "on the ebb and flow of things" (9), but its permanence can never be established. Clarissa only wonders if "the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death ... perhaps—perhaps" (149). On the other hand, Clarissa expects that she may "cease completely" and that "death ended absolutely" (9). "[C]eas[ing] completely" and "end[ing] absolutely" indicate a complete cessation of being, consciousness, and movement. Clarissa anticipates an "embrace in death" (180); "embrace" indicates a subject who possesses both consciousness and the potential for movement, so that the "unseen part of us ... spreads wide" (149). Even though Clarissa resents that "she must

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22 Hussey says, "This unnamed name seems suggestive of an essence transcending mere identity" (25).
23 The "soul" is characterized as a "she," or feminine.
24 Hussey concurs: "by comparing passages and noting descriptive homologies it is seen that Woolf often writes about the soul without actually stating it; fish-like, the soul moves beneath the surface of her work, sometimes glimpsed, often hidden, but always there" (xix).
inevitably cease completely,” she also finds it “consoling to believe that death ended absolutely” (9). Death certainly ends the social self absolutely. Perhaps the death of the social self is a relief for Clarissa, but she entertains the possibility that an inexplicable essential self emerges after death.

The “disparity” between the social and solitary selves appears “perpetual,” but each self informs the other within lived experience in the material world. Even as Peter travels as through his dreamscape as “the solitary traveler,” he engages with the material and cultural worlds. He observes only “sky and branches” but “endows them with [culturally constructed] womanhood” (56). He travels through a social environment, “advanc[ing] down the village street where the women stand knitting and the men dig in the garden” (57). And even as he intuits that his essential self resides in the “deep seas,” Peter knows his “soul” desires socialization; it “has a positive need to brush, scrape, kindle herself, gossiping. What did the Government mean—Richard Dalloway would know—to do about India?” (157). That a noumenal self could “brush, scrape, kindle” herself suggests an interchange between the material and noumenal spheres—these active verbs indicate that the soul has distinct materiality. It plays on the “wind-wrinkled waves” of social-cultural existence (157). Clarissa’s selves also inform each other within lived experience, in spite of the disparity between essential self and the “point” she constructs for the world. Her party, for example, is simultaneously a contrived social gathering during which she presents a social self and an expression of essential beingness. Clarissa’s social existence as an upper class woman with the means to throw a party allows her essential self to shine; drawing “the parts” of the multi-faceted diamond “together” into a point allows the entire diamond to “kindle and illuminate” (5).
In spite of Woolf’s reconciliation of contrary social and solitary states, Woolf never alights permanently on a definitive self with an absolute identity; *Mrs. Dalloway* flits over an ever-changing multitude of solitary-social “selves.” Banfield recognizes “what Russell and Woolf call ‘the real Self’ or ‘the true self’” as a “chameleon-like, rainbow self” that changes one moment to the next (*Phantom* 201). Throughout the novel, Clarissa doesn’t hold fast to one subject position; her diamond “point” is a temporary assembly. She feels differently even within the same instant: “she felt very young; at the same time unspeakable aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on” (8). She is capable of inhabiting seemingly different sides of herself within the very same instant. Clarissa is like a Mrs. Brown, “an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what” (“Brown” 11). In their varied states of being, Clarissa and Mrs. Brown both have the possibility of being their “true self … the compact of all the selves we have it in us to be” (*Orlando* 227), in which solitary-social selves wink in and out of being from moment to moment. They become the “rainbow self,” colors flickering in and out of view, but ultimately ephemeral and glimpsed as the whole spectrum of light illuminates particulates in the material world.

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25 Banfield explains sexuality with this rainbow self; she claims that Woolf argues for androgyny and for variegated colors that stand against the unilateral phallus. Additionally, rainbows need light to appear—the “rainbow self” ties in with the illuminated atomized body. Clarissa’s entire multi-faceted diamond might also operate as a prism—her true self uses light to produce a rainbow spectrum of light. The “true self” is discussed in *Orlando*: “she was, to hear her talk, changing her selves as quickly as she drove—there was a new one at every corner—as happens when, for some unaccountable reason, the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self. This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be” (227).
The Atomized Body

While Woolf perceives a split between the social and the solitary self, the physical body has no such split; she conceives of an integrated mind-body that challenges Cartesian duality. However, Woolf does recognize a split between the logical function of the brain and the intuitive nature of the mind-body. The logical brain operates to inscribe culture onto a body that might otherwise exist in a natural, pre-discursive state. Once again, Woolf's thinking does not remain fixed at these two poles—the cultural body and the natural body merge in lived experience.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf theorizes a diffuse and complex human body using the symbolically constructed body of the literary subject. Woolf's readers experience the literary body through a narrative that floats to rest on the consciousness of one character and then another. This "consciousness" includes narrated thoughts, memories, perceived sights and sounds, physical sensations, emotions, and intuitions as the body moves through the urban environment. Clarissa, for instance, in the opening pages of the novel, which largely describe her walk from home to the flower shop, thinks a variety of thoughts—about death, her clothing, her physical appearance, her daughter; remembers her childhood home of Bourton and her friend and former lover Peter; observes people and omnibuses; hears the general "bellow and ... uproar" of London (4); feels "physical pain" in response to hatred (12); intuits "waves of that divine vitality" in the London air (7); and knows that she loves it all, "life; London; this moment of June" (4). In keeping with her criticism of Edwardian realists, Woolf doesn't treat the body from the vantage point of spectator, objectifying it and explicitly describing its environment. Neither the

26 "Consciousness" comes from Woolf's essay, "Modern Fiction" (150). She uses this term to describe what is essential about character in fiction.
London setting nor Clarissa is conventionally described, as they would, for example, be in the Edwardian novel's exposition. Because the narrative inhabits Clarissa's body and all that it symbolically experiences, the reader grasps her elusive "spirit" through the lens of consciousness ("Brown" 11).

The symbolic amalgam that composes the literary body reacts against Cartesian dualism, which treats mind and body as discrete and separate entities; Woolf conceives, instead, of an intertwined mind-body. Most of Woolf's characters experience body and mind in close relationship—as interrelated aspects of one impossible-to-pin-down entity. Clarissa experiences thoughts and emotions almost viscerally: she feels in the "intoxication of the moment that dilation of the nerves of the heart itself till it seemed to quiver, steeped, upright" (170), and the emotional pain on hearing about Peter's marriage is "an arrow sticking her in the heart" (8). Movement and sensation—the "nerves dilate" and the "heart ... quivers"—accompany thoughts and emotions. Clarissa's hatred of Miss Kilman arises from reactive thoughts, whose emotional response inflicts physical pain: "at any moment the brute would be stirring, this hatred, which, especially since her illness, had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine; gave her physical pain" (12). Cartesian thinking would isolate the thought from a physical sensation; the "physical pain" would not be a direct result of the hatred. Woolf, however, recognizes that mind and body are often indistinguishable. And when Clarissa hears of Septimus's suicide, she immediately experiences physical sensation: "always her body went through it first ... her dress flamed, her body burnt" (179). Clarissa assesses her capacities, knowing she has an embodied response to others: "Her only gift was knowing people

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27 See "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and Woolf's example of the exposition of the Edwardian novel.
28 Although Clarissa believes that "her body went through it first," she actually first apprehends the news through her mind as a linguistic message.
almost by instinct, she thought, walking on. If you put her in a room with some one, up went her back like a cat's; or she purred" (8). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the body and the mind are not discrete entities; they are inextricably intertwined.

The mind-body uses logic and language, as well as intuition and physical sensation, to process information, but Woolf recognizes the brain as possessing a distinct function—it uses logic and language to distance itself from mind-body consciousness and to operate in the social world. Mr. Bently valorizes the brain; he wishes to "get outside of his body, beyond his house, by means of thought" (27). Septimus also values the brain: "He could reason; he could read" he tells himself; "his brain was perfect" (86). Peter accentuates his logical faculties and ignores his conscious mind-body that experiences sensation and emotion when he emerges from personal reverie to enter the high stakes, upper class, social atmosphere of Clarissa's party: "the brain must wake now. The body must contract now," he observes (161).²⁹ Peter requires the brain to construct the social self and to engage socially with other guests. Woolf distrusts this function of the brain at the exclusion of the remainder of the body. Clarissa's social self is constructed by the brain, and it feels unreal to her. Woolf values the brain as an important thinking tool, but realizes that it is only one facet of the mind-body amalgam. And ultimately, as we'll see in the next chapter, Woolf values emotion over logic. She might concur with Sally, who asks, "What does the brain matter ... compared with the heart?" (*Dalloway* 190).

²⁹ Woolf is commenting on Peter's perceived split between essential self and social self through allusion to Cartesian dualism. Additionally, this split between the body and the brain is illustrative of Woolf's conceptions of impressionistic language versus empirical language addressed in Chapter 2.
The brain, through language and logic, constructs a rigid social body by inscribing it with cultural codes. Culture, constructed through language, dictates the ways in which people move, dress, speak; what they eat; the air they breathe; how they alter their bodies; how they perceive their bodies; and the ways they interact with their environments. Culture has certainly inscribed itself upon Clarissa’s body. Clarissa feels herself “suddenly shriveled, aged, breastless” when she learns that her husband has attended a social occasion that excludes her. In spite of her “narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird’s,” her wifehood has inscribed her with narrowness and invisibility (10). She recognizes that “often now this body she wore … this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing” (10). The body that has been written on and shaped by culture has become a cultural artifact; she “wore” it like clothing. Clarissa, acting the part of the hostess, inhabits this constructed body rigidly: “oddly enough she had quite forgotten what she looked like, but felt herself a stake driven in at the top of her stairs” (166). The patriarchal cultural norms have inscribed Clarissa’s body with rigidity—she loses mobility. The “clothes” she wears and the “face” she assembles are irrelevant details that Clarissa forgets or discards, but they nevertheless confine or constrict the body.

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30 Michel Foucault’s theory of cultural inscription on the body is a useful to explain some aspects of the construction of the social body in Mrs. Dalloway. Foucault claims that the body is constructed through culture: power “writes” itself on the body to use the body for its own purposes. Johanna Oksala, however, argues that the body is not passively subjected to inscription—the body is active and reactive in the process. Elizabeth Grosz criticizes Foucault for focusing largely on the male body, and ignoring women’s experiences and the materiality of women’s bodies. Judith Butler’s criticizes Foucault for assuming an essential material body even as he claims none exists. While Foucault’s inscription of power is an apt descriptor of how bodies are affected by culture in Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf would differ with Foucault because she admits essential materiality. She focuses on the bodies of both men and women, and, as detailed in Chapter 3, characters collaborate in the construction of their bodies. In some ways her interplay between body and mind offers a more complex paradigm than does Foucault’s model.

31 The fact that they are “her stairs” reinforces the cultural construction. The essential self perceives stairs as a physical manifestation of the sea of materiality, while the social body considers them a possession.
The culturally inscribed body is at first glance distinguishable from an essential, pre-discursive body. This distinction between the cultural garb a body wears versus the essential body is one of the “tensions between civilization and organicism” that Sue Roe suggests exist in Woolf’s fiction (170). Culture certainly changes the body—it forces Clarissa into a wifehood and motherhood that she wears like clothing over what she perhaps perceives as an essential, “natural” self. The essential, pre-discursive body appears in Mrs. Dalloway as well. Clarissa’s body is described as “a creature floating in its element” (170). Here, she is deculturated—she is a “creature,” not a person, almost indistinguishable from its environment, or “element.” The body experiences its environment directly: “the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking” (39).

While the pre-discursive body and the culturally inscribed body appear distinct—the first as tabula rasa and the second as a tablet that has been modified by cultural narrative—both bodies in fact exist as one entity. The body is not confined to rigid structures that culture inscribes upon it, nor does the body exist in essential, pre-discursive form; cultural inscription modifies and informs the body but hardly dictates the totality of its experience. When Clarissa wears the “silver-green mermaid’s dress” at her party, she is “a creature floating in its element” (169). Her body exists materially and “naturally” in the surrounding environment. However, the “mermaid’s dress” is simultaneously an outgrowth of her embodied materiality and an artifact of cultural inscription. Without the dress, a crucial accoutrement for an upper class woman hosting a party, Clarissa could neither enter the cultural environment, nor would she be “a creature floating in [her] element”—the dress allows for both. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, French
phenomenologist, might concur: he claims that, “having a body is, for a living creature, to be interinvolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects” (82). While Clarissa possesses fundamental embodied materiality, her body’s materiality is informed by the cultural environment. The “tensions between civilization and organism” that Roe points to are resolved in such an instance.

This essential-cultural mind-body exists in the world as a location of perception, and perception of materiality occurs in the cultural environment. Woolf’s deconstruction of Cartesian dualism, along with her focus on perception, has prompted critics to suggest a connection between Woolf’s ontology and that of Merleau-Ponty, who, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, defines the body as the “vehicle of being in the world” (82).

Woolf, like Merleau-Ponty, views the body as the “vehicle” for experiencing the world, and characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* experience materiality and the cultural world primarily through auditory and visual perception. They continually hear the sounds of London: “Murmuring London flowed up to” Lady Bruton (10); Big Ben “boomed” throughout Clarissa’s day (4); “the noise [of the Strand, for Elizabeth,] was tremendous; and suddenly there were trumpets … blaring, rattling about on the uproar” (135); and Septimus is always “hearing music” (135), like “some chime (it might be a motor horn) tinkling divinely on the grass stalks” (68). Sights also influence characters. Peter notices the “the cold stream of visual impressions” (161) that flow past him and recognizes his “susceptibility to [such] impressions” (69). Sights influence his thoughts and emotions and make lasting impressions. The “sights fix themselves upon the mind” (63), and when “all is once more decked out to the eye [it] exists again” (23). Seeing the world is linked

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32 “Woolf’s dynamic, participatory vision of the real is very close to the thinking of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who was responding from within the same intellectual milieu as Virginia Woolf,” claims Louise Westling in “Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World” (856).
with the "reality" of its existence. Visual impressions, "for example, the vivid green moss" (63), not only impress the mind, but they assure the mind of the materiality of existence.

Because of its embodied materiality, the body takes in sense data and organizes it according to the cultural environment. It is impossible to say that the body is only one thing. Ann Banfield elucidates Woolf's conception of an "atomized universe" in which "myriad points of space and time ... events, sense-data, crowd the atomist's vision, all characteristically plural" (109). The body is equally pluralistic—it is an atomized body. Before Mrs. Dalloway's inception, the Bloomsbury philosopher Bertrand Russell theorized about atoms, informing Woolf's thinking. Woolf realizes that the body is not only physically atomic in structure, but it is also metaphorically atomic. Just as the multitude of atoms that make up the physical body constantly rearrange themselves in a flickering atomic dance, the atomized mind-body consists of cultural codes, materiality, sensory impressions, memories, emotions, thoughts and physical sensations that exist simultaneously and yet wink in and out of being moment by moment.

**Life: An Unknown Garden of Infinite Variety**

Woolf claims in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" that the most important thing for literature to capture is "the spirit we live by, life itself" (11). But what is "life" exactly, according to Woolf? Certainly, biology and medicine had produced their own definitions of "life" at the time Woolf wrote Mrs. Dalloway. But just as "body" transcends materiality, so does "life." Woolf, again, conceives of two interwoven varieties of "life:"

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33 The phrase "unknown garden" is from Mrs. Dalloway (148), and "infinite variety" from "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (11).
the first is a lifetime constructed from social conventions, and the second is the fluidity and luminosity of an infinite order of beings from “the beginning of [their] consciousness until the end” (“Modern” 150).

Just like socially constructed conceptions of self, “life” has been socially constructed, but a constructed life cannot capture the fullness of lived experience. Clarissa’s life is made up of her daily experiences, social relations, and her relationship to the London environment. Her “life” is reduced to being wife to Richard Dalloway, mother of Elizabeth, mistress of a household, consumer of expensive goods, and hostess of parties. Summing her life up with these roles, Clarissa approaches Peter, “holding her life in her arms” (42). But just as it is impossible to capture Mrs. Brown’s elusive “spirit” with a list of descriptors, Clarissa’s life cannot be equated with this pile of attributes (“Brown” 11). Clarissa guesses that her “true self” lies beneath the socially constructed surface; her essential self has become “obscured in her own life” (180). Caught up in social convention, she has “lost herself in the process of living” (181). Woolf states adamantly that authentic life cannot be rigidly constructed. In “Modern Fiction” she uses the metaphor of language as urban construction: “[l]ife is not a series of gig lamps, symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope that surrounds us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (150). One’s authenticity does not reside in mechanized constructions; rather, life—fluid and luminous—infuses the construction with energy and brilliance.

Clarissa recognizes her socially constructed life as constraining and false, but essential life requires a social context from which to radiate. Woolf values life as

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34 When this essential beingness is ignored, Clarissa recognizes that the “whole” she supposes herself to be are pitiful and weak fragments: “life was that—humiliation, renunciation,” she laments (164). The supposed wholeness of life cannot be realized while holding fast to the socially constructed life.
luminous and fluid lived experience that relies on social construction to guide and contain it. Life, for Woolf, is a "radiancy" (*Dalloway* 36), a "luminous halo," and a "semi-transparent envelope" that constantly surrounds her characters. The "gig lamp" is the lantern attached to a small horse-drawn carriage, or "gig." These mechanically constructed "gig lamps" represent the socially constructed life. On its own, social construction is an empty and artificial container, and the "radiancy" of life, without containment by the gig lamp, would be diffuse and imperceptible—the light would scatter into space. Light requires a container to make it perceptible; the container needs light to infuse it with life. Clarissa, as an upper class wife, creates an artificial social container, namely her party, which allows her to "kindle and illuminate" (5). Light is contained and concentrated at the social gathering, and, in spite of its rigidity and constraint, the party allows life to shine through.

Every individual's experience is a manifestation of life, but life exists in "infinite variety;" even within a single subject, life is infinite. The mutability of the essential self in the social world and its "sequential occupation of different perspectives" (*Phantom* 202) prompt Clarissa to consider why Peter does not "risk [his] little point of view" (164). The "little point of view" is held by the aforementioned "diamond point" or "Captain self," whereas the "rainbow self"—infused with luminosity—flickers and changes perspective moment by moment. Banfield notes that in Woolf's "atomized universe" infinite points of light "indicate occupied perspectives" (*Phantom* 109). Each flickering of consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway* portrays a fleeting vantage point.

The self appears in infinite variety, as does the urban landscape. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf portrays the complexities of urban existence in their variegated
manifestations: London life is "like an unknown garden" (148) or an "enchanted garden" (186), and it contains "endless avenues" (51). Peter, contemplating life's "endless avenues," recognizes how "absorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness, this life" is (159). Clarissa celebrates the mystery and richness of London life in the opening pages of the novel:

In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment in June. (4)

Each of the individuals that Clarissa observes is a separate perception for her, and they can each be assumed to occupy a separate perspective themselves. The music consists of an infinite arrangement of notes, and the movement is the dance of infinite atoms. Furthermore, in the sound and movement Clarissa observes while walking through her beloved city, the "perpetual disparity" between the individual and the social-cultural world no longer exists: nature, the social-organic human, and city are all merged in "this moment" into a wildly diverse London amalgam. In spite of the "tensions between civilization and organicism," Roe observes that in Woolf's fiction, "[t]he mechanized world of city life, the slightly mechanical, slightly organic lilt of the human voice speaking socially, the rhythm of nature, are all fused" (170). This fusion is demonstrated in the passage above. Additionally, this passage recalls the "maelstrom" of modernity described by Marshall Berman. The maelstrom's "state of perpetual becoming" is reflective of Woolf's vision of life as fluid and perpetually changing. This entire

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35 See p.1 n.1
conglomeration of music and movement is an essential force; it is “the spirit we live by, life itself” (“Brown” 11).

Life becomes fused for Clarissa in “this moment,” but because of life’s “infinite variety” and elusive “spirit,” it is impossible to apprehend or express the entirety of life. Although the characters in Mrs. Dalloway are “surrounded by an enchanted garden” of life (186), the garden remains “unknown” (148) to them. The whole of existence—“all [of it] taken together”—can’t be fully apprehended or expressed (22). Life’s complexity and mutability makes it impossible to fully elucidate or explain. Woolf notes, “every moment is center and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it” (“Bridge” 23). Yet, Septimus perceives life’s rich infinitude; he apprehends its “center and meeting place” or “the essential thing” (“Modern” 149). But Septimus cannot express its essence—he proclaims that “all of it taken together meant the birth of a new religion,” but it is a religion without dogma or scripture that only he comprehends (22). Clarissa also apprehends the mystery of life in its varying forms—she notes the surprising fact that “here was one room; there another” (125). However, she recognizes the futility of constructed explanations. “Did religion solve [existential questions], or love?” she asks (125). Religion—and other constructed ideologies—attempt to explain existence with impossibly totalizing narratives, which segment the wholeness and deflate the fullness of life. Life can only be “almost expressed,” yet its richness can in each instance be fully experienced: it is possible “to be, to exist, to sum it all up in the moment” (Dalloway 169).
Reality

According to Woolf, "life" and "reality" are sometimes synonymous: "whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality," each is explained as "the essential thing" ("Modern" 149). Yet, Woolf often uses "reality" as distinguishable from "life." In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf again uses "real" and "reality" to describe oppositional states of existence; she claims a social "reality" and a spiritual "reality." She additionally gestures toward a third reality—material reality—with which the social and the noumenal are intertwined. Life (the luminosity and fluidity of myriad lived experiences in the material and social real) is an expression of a deep, underlying, numinous reality—"the essential thing" that Woolf presumes, but cannot prove, exists.

Woolf assumes a fundamental material reality as the medium of lived experience; this elemental materiality alternatively inspires ecstasy and terror. Clarissa feels embodied ecstasy in "yielding to the charm of a woman" (31) and when she "plunge[s] ... into the "moment of June" (3-4). Others experience terror inspired by the material world. 

\[\text{\textquoteleft\textquoteleft [R\textquoteright\textquoteright eal things were too exciting,\textquoteright\textquoteright Septimus cautions himself (138), and (ordinary) material objects terrify him: }\]

"He started up in terror. What did he see? The plate of bananas on the sideboard" (141). Jacques Lacan explains this terror: humans are driven

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36 Woolf, aware of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and structural linguistics, by the 1920's may have anticipated some of Jacques Lacan's general concepts. Lacan differentiates between "reality" and "real." Reality is fantasy, he says: "everything we are allowed to approach by way of reality remains rooted in fantasy," referring to a conventional use of "reality" that corresponds to Woolf's socially-symbolically constructed conception of reality (XX 95). Lacan's "real" (or "Real," as it generally appears) consists of fundamental materiality. Slavoj Zizek describes it as "the pulsing of the presymbolic substance in its abhorrent vitality" (Awry 14-5), and Mellard describes it as "involv[ing] the confrontation of the 'brute fact' of the phenomenological" (239). "The real is defined as the impossible," Lacan states, because once the subject has crossed the "bar" into the symbolic order, it is no longer possible to directly experience materiality—it is always mediated through language ("XVII" 172). Zizek says we distance ourselves from the Real with the (seeming) "consistency of a symbolic reality" (Awry 95). Woolf's "essential reality" corresponds to Lacan's "Real." For Woolf, essential "reality" is the fundamental pattern of the materiality of existence, consisting of a fluid sea of atoms. Like Lacan, she believes that the experience of materiality is impossible to capture with language.
by fundamental materiality, yet they cannot approach it directly. They have crossed the “bar” into the symbolic order; fundamental materiality is always mediated through language and cultural signs. Yet Septimus is terrified by materiality. He confronts Lacan’s “small object,” in this instance, the bananas. Confrontation by the small object is the only means by which a subject can approach fundamental materiality, or the Real. This small object is an integral part of the subject but is utterly foreign and unknowable, therefore terrifying. Septimus experiences what James A. Mellard describes in a Lacanian reading of *To the Lighthouse* as “a passage through raw existence” (239). Septimus realizes that he cannot control material existence—the overwhelming sea of material reality is unstable; death and dissolution inevitably looms.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the terror inspired by the instability of the material Real prompts characters to construct a fixed, symbolic social reality. Horrified by Septimus’s break from perceived reality, Rezia comforts herself with the “reality” of socially significant objects: “It was so real, it was so substantial, Mrs. Peter’s hat” (141). Clarissa, faced with dissolution—when she feels “herself invisible”—observes her image in the mirror and assigns herself a fixed reality. She attempts to capture and memorialize one drop of water in the ever-changing sea of existence: “as if to catch the falling drop, Clarissa … plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it” (36). She attempts to transfix this moment of experience by pinning down a definite reality—“That was her

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37 *L’objet petit a*, or the “small object,” is introduced by Lacan in “Seminar XI.” It is a remnant of the Real that does not fit into the symbolic order, therefore confronting the subject with raw materiality and often inciting terror. “The subject is presented as other than he is [by the symbolic], and what one [the small object] shows him is not what he wishes to see,” explains Lacan (XI 104). Zizek describes it as “the non assimilable foreign body” or the “primordial foreign body that ‘sticks in the throat’ of the subject” (“Lacanian”). The *objet petit a* is usually within the body of the subject, but it can be associated with one of the body’s orifices. Septimus may have blurred the boundaries between his body and the rest of the world, or he may be apprehending the *objet petit a* orally or visually. The irony of the Real and the small object is that the symbolic order relies on the Real for its perpetual regeneration, yet the small object reveals the inconsistency of the symbolic order.
self—pointed; dartlike; definite”—that is anchored to social existence—“the woman who was that very night to give a party” (36). Peter remembers how, in her youth, Clarissa already attached herself to a symbolic social reality: “these Duchesses, these hoary old Countesses one met in [Clarissa’s] drawing-room, unspeakably remote as he felt them to be from anything that mattered a straw, stood for something real to her” (75). But Peter also relies on a fixed, social reality to alleviate angst about his own character. He comforts himself with material objects imbued with definite social significance: “engaged in sorting out various keys, papers,” he wonders, “where was his knife; his watch; his seals, his notecase, and Clarissa’s letter which he would not read again but liked to think of, and Daisy’s photograph?” (155). These socially significant material objects allay Peter’s anxiety about impermanence. If he can control materiality by sorting through objects, and further, construct social reality from those objects, angst is staved off.

The construction of the social real masks an underlying numinous reality. As stated in the opening of the chapter, Woolf imagines “that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern” (“Sketch” 72). The “cotton wool” is the symbolically constructed reality that humans come to believe is the “real” reality. The “cotton wool” is fuzzy and seemingly impermeable, but underneath, a “pattern” connects everything. Septimus apperceives this “pattern;” other characters perceive that it lies concealed. Peter, in his dream of the solitary traveler, recognizes: “Such are the visions which ceaselessly float up, pace beside, put their faces in front of the actual thing,” suggesting a numinous reality (“the actual thing”) surfaces regardless (56). But, “the actual” reality is concealed by the symbolically-socially constructed “visions” that humans place “in front of” underlying reality. Clarissa “believed … our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so
momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us;” this “unseen part” is “everywhere,” and Clarissa has “odd affinities” with others, even with “people she had never spoken to” (149). The “apparitions” are embodied social beings that obscure “the unseen part” that is connected with all others in an underlying pattern.

The shrouded, numinous pattern of reality manifests itself through phenomenological experience in the material world. Clarissa perceives at her party that “everyone was unreal in one way; much more real in another” (166). Again, the “reality” of the social occasion (and the “unreal” social personas people wear) allow for essential reality to shine through. Woolf presumes that an underlying reality exists, but no overarching pattern, totalizing narrative, or omnipotent entity predetermines the forms this reality embodies. As we have seen, Woolf makes this clear when she states: “There is no God.” Rather, “we are the thing itself,” she believes (“Sketch” 72). Clarissa recognizes this as she strolls along Bond Street: “‘That is all,’ she said, looking at the fishmonger’s. ‘That is all,’ she repeated, pausing for a moment at the window of a glove shop” (11). Woolf’s conception of reality is summed up in Clarissa’s pronouncement. Reality, “the thing itself,” is the individual’s phenomenological perception of materiality (Clarissa “looking”) in the socially constructed environment (“the fishmonger’s ... the glove shop”); the individual’s experience creates a total effect without being totalizing: “That is all” only in this specific moment at this certain location of perception. Through

38 A few of Woolf’s characters express a similar idea: Clarissa says, “not for a moment did she believe in God” (12), and Peter claims that he is “by conviction an atheist perhaps” (55).
39 Later, while mending her dress, Clarissa recognizes, “the whole world seems to be saying ‘that is all’ more and more ponderously” (38).
perception of the social-material world, the individual experiences simultaneous immanence and transcendence.  

“That is all,” realizes Clarissa, but the whole of reality may only ever be perceived through individual fragments of experience. Clarissa’s party is symbol for wholeness, says Bonnie Kime Scott: “Her party, which culminates the novel, serves a concept of unity” (Dalloway lxiv), and Woolf writes in her diary that “the party ... is to be a most complicated spirited solid piece, knitting together everything” (Diary 2:312).

The party becomes the unifying thrust of a novel without conventional plot that draws disparate characters together, and it provides a place in which Clarissa’s fragmented self becomes unified in Peter’s view: “It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was” (190).

Despite its unifying force, the party, as a literary event, can only be conveyed in fragments. Individual characters are isolated in their subjectivities, and fragments of thought and conversation are represented. As an actual event within the novel, the party can only be experienced in fragments from the points of view of subsequently featured characters. Although the party is a unifying occasion, it can only be apprehended through individual words and points of view. With the news of Septimus’s suicide, death interjects itself into the party from the world outside, further fragmenting the party. “[A] young man ... had killed himself ... in the middle of my party, here’s death, she thought ... [and] [t]he party’s splendour fell to the floor,” almost as if a crystal chandelier, magically suspended, had crashed to the floor and shattered (179).

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40 Merleau-Ponty once again expresses homologous ideas. He claims: “the very experience of transcendent things is possible only provided that their project is borne, and discovered, within myself” (Phenomenology 369).

41 Hussey cites a letter in which Woolf says that the only hope for wholeness is to put together fragments of one’s own experience (74).
Such fragments of experience, lived and perceived by the individual subject, are fleeting and contradictory, yet they contribute to the possibility for an overwhelming wholeness. Woolf suggests: “Let us 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” (“Modern” 150). Each “atom” that falls on the mind, perceived in a single instance by one individual, contributes to the “pattern.” Thus, Woolf postulates a unified (but limited and relative) reality that is created through fragments of human experience.42

Because humans experience a splintered reality, they cannot fathom overwhelming wholeness except in brief, exalted moments—ultimately, only mystery remains. Clarissa and Septimus experience moments of rapturous wholeness. Peter, also, “is taken by surprise with moments of extraordinary exaltation” (55). In such moments, these characters apprehend a pattern of reality that (probably) exists. However, one moment gives way to the next, and characters remain no closer to reaching a definitive and essential “centre.” Clarissa realizes, “people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre, which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone” (180). It is unclear whether this centerlessness is illuminating or damning—the characters’ contrary states of meaning and meaninglessness speak to the central tension in Mrs. Dalloway. Characters return from exaltation to isolation and fragmentation. Yet

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42 The fact that the sights and incidences “score” the consciousness indicate both the fact that phenomenological experience influences the subject and also that the mind is “written” by experience, much like, as discussed in the previous “Atomized Body” subchapter, culture writes itself on the body of the subject. Furthermore, Woolf commands, “let us trace the pattern.” For Woolf, the act of writing makes sense of phenomenological perception, and the writer is able to shape her own experience. Chapter 3 discusses the balance between succumbing to external manipulation and creating one’s own experience.
each subsequent moment of lived experience offers renewed possibility for the illumination of a profound reality.

Meaning: Illuminating the Flowers of Darkness\(^{43}\)

Woolf's philosophy of existence oscillates between meaning and meaninglessness; her characters construct superficial meaning to counter the supposed meaninglessness of life, yet at times they intuit a deep, subterranean significance. Meaning can never be proven; Woolf's characters simply suspect that it exists, because for brief and illuminating moments, characters, acting in the world, create and recognize the profound significance of existence.

Superficial significance secures itself to events and objects in the world, and characters identify strongly with the superficial meanings they create. When Hugh Whitbread expresses himself so eloquently in the letter to the *Times*, Lady Bruton wonders, “Could her own meaning sound like that?” (108). Lady Bruton suspects a deep reason for her existence, but hangs significance on a superficial emigration scheme. Hugh has outlined her scheme in what she “felt to be a masterpiece” (108), yet Hugh is only “drafting sentiments in alphabetical order,” which Richard Dalloway recognizes as meaningless, “all stuffing and bunkum” (107). Nevertheless, Lady Bruton has attached herself so firmly to this “meaning” that she believes it to be “that fibre which was the ramrod of her soul, that essential part of her without which Millicent Bruton would not have been Millicent Bruton” (106). Woolf discredits Lady Bruton's insight on her “soul” when she assigns it a “ramrod.” This militaristic image has much to do with Lady

\(^{43}\) The phrase “flowers of darkness” appears in *Mrs. Dalloway* (28).
Bruton's socially constructed self as "the General's great-granddaughter" (102). Richard Dalloway recognizes her as a "well-got-up old woman of pedigree" (102). Lady Bruton sees herself similarly—she identifies strongly with "England ... who was in her blood"—so strongly that its meaning is literally incorporated, or has become corporeal (176). But these constructions have little to do with Woolf's conception of the elusive essential self. The meaning that Lady Bruton assumes is "an essential part of her" (her emigration scheme, her name) is part of the metonymic chain of signifiers that spins endlessly away from the Real, which remains shrouded in mystery.\(^4\)

A deeper meaning of existence, Woolf's "pattern," is created and recognized when the body acts in the material world. Lady Bruton's superficial meaning would change were her name, her noble ancestry, or her imperialist sympathies metonymically replaced. She then "would not have been Millicent Bruton," but she would nevertheless exist symbolically and materially. Stripped of superficial significance, she might plummet toward the Real and its attendant terror. More likely, she will, as Peter did, claim a private name drawn from the Imaginary or semiotic.\(^5\) When Lady Bruton bids goodbye to her visitors and retires upstairs for a rest, she hints at a subterranean meaning to which she "[a]ways ... went back" (109). This foundational meaning is grounded in materiality and body: she "went ponderously, majestically, up to her room ... she was ... drowsy and heavy." She imagines "a field of clover in the sunshine ... with the bees going round and about" (109). Clarissa also intuits a deep meaning connected to the body

\(^4\) See Lacan's "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" for an explanation of how an endless chain of signifiers, propelled by desire, slide over the signified.

\(^5\) Woolf, however, believes it possible to approach this "Real" with language, if not to directly experience it. She expects "sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated," but the "meanings" are nevertheless there ("Craftsmanship" 248). In this regard, she is more aligned with Kristeva, who reinterprets Lacan's work—both Woolf and Kristeva value the semiotic over the symbolic.
and materiality; when she recollects the bodily rapture inspired by her attraction to women, Clarissa perceives that the “world [is] swollen with some astonishing significance,” and “an inner meaning [is] almost expressed” (31). Peter recognizes that through embodied experience he “extract[s] every ounce of pleasure, every shade of meaning, which both were so much more solid than they used to be, so much less personal” (77). The “so much less personal” (and more Real) meaning sinks deeper than superficial attachments; his experience of meaning as “solid” and “pleasurable” grounds it in materiality; and the many “shade[s] of meaning” reside in the mutable “rainbow self” and the “enchanted garden” of life.

Underlying meaning may never be adequately expressed, but it becomes momentarily illuminated through lived experience. Septimus and Clarissa, even though they both despair at meaninglessness, also exclaim that at moments they recognize the meaning of existence. Clarissa experiences a “revelation” (31); she intuits “inner meaning” as a brief illumination: “a match burning in a crocus” (31). But this deeper meaning is only “almost expressed” [emphasis mine] and is apprehended only in brief, illuminated moments of lived experience. Clarissa has such a moment in the midst of her everyday life:

The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and, bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence … saying to herself … how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought (as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only). (28)

The perception of sounds and sights in small, every-day moments illuminate life’s significance. Even if reality and meaning are only briefly apprehended and never fully

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expressed, meaning nevertheless exists as the “flowers of darkness” that bloom in private moments of lived experience.

Flowers, requiring light to grow, ought to wither in the darkness. Yet in Woolf’s paradoxical philosophy, flowers thrive in the darkness; they feed on the subterranean and elusive atmosphere of underlying mystery. Humans, in order to perceive flowers, also need light. Perhaps Woolf recognizes that in dark and subterranean spaces, light and energy exist. Woolf’s characters behold the flowers for brief and illuminating moments, endowing them their beauty, their meaning, and their mystery. Suspecting the flowers exist, blooming in the spaces deep within them and in the vast spaces that surround them, her characters intuit the deep, complete, and meaningful reality that flourishes in the “unknown garden” of life.

47 Woolf was likely aware that atoms consist of electrons buzzing about in a vacuum.
48 Bertrand Russell explains atomic structure: “To the eye or the touch, ordinary matter appears to be continuous; our dinner-table, or the chairs on which we sit, seem to present an unbroken surface. We think that if there were too many holes the chairs would not be safe to sit on. Science, however, compels us to accept a quite different conception of what we are please to call ‘solid’ matter; it is, in fact, something much more like the Irishman’s definition of a net, ‘a number of holes tied together with pieces of string.’ Only it would be necessary to imagine the strings cut away until only the knots were left (qtd. in Banfield 336). Septimus recognizes that such a pattern exists: “sounds made harmonies with premeditation” and “the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds” (Dalloway 22). Clarissa, also, senses that there is “an emptiness about the heart of life” (30). Russell claims that it is atomic structure that stops us from falling into the emptiness: “This is what prevents you from falling through the earth, which, as solid as it looks, is mostly empty space” (qtd. in Banfield 291).
Art arises from the experience of living, from waves of emotion that emanate from a deep and inscrutable source, believes Virginia Woolf. Overcome by these waves of feeling, the human subject confronts the elemental materiality of existence and is alternatively inspired with ecstasy and terror. Woolf uses the structuring capacity of language to give voice to the ecstasy and to contain the terror—language helps Woolf order the world and make a fractured existence whole. Yet Woolf recognizes that language has dual capacity: while compelled to use language to make sense of the world, she realizes that language may never adequately illuminate the completeness and complexity of life. Furthermore, those who value rigid linguistic structure over elemental waves of feeling, worries Woolf, ignore—even annihilate—the life that language is intended to house. The capitalist, patriarchal structures that she critiques in Three Guineas, in particular, are related to rigid linguistic structure and call attention to this phenomenon.

Although Woolf relies on the theories of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein to formulate her ideas on language, she reacts against their logical-empirical approaches; their emphasis on analysis of sense data alone ignores the life and reality that she hopes to illuminate. Woolf does not wholly trust that language can communicate underlying reality, nor can she reject the medium that allows her to make sense of the

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49 From a conversation with friend Joachim Gasquet. See Richard Kendall’s Cézanne (310).
world. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf attempts to reconcile the dual capacity of language by continuing to develop a literary aesthetic most conveniently described as “impressionistic.” Based in part on Roger Fry’s aesthetic philosophy, Woolf’s impressionistic language uses color, light, temporality, and perception to convey moment-by-moment lived experience. Post-impressionism’s emphasis on simultaneity and on visible form as a container for inner significance additionally informs Woolf’s aesthetic. Like the Post-impressionists, Woolf blends structure and fluidity, reason and sensibility, to build a formal linguistic structure that allows elemental emotional significance and experience to shine through.

Hussey paraphrases a letter from Woolf in which she articulates that “beauty is achieved in the failure to achieve it; in other words, in the *effort*” (72). Because language fails to bridge the chasm between lived experience and signification, even with her impressionistic formulation, Woolf doubts final aesthetic success. And yet, in the very process of striving for beauty and in the impossibility of arrival, she succeeds. Her success lies in her creative “*effort*” and in her feeling of lightness and release upon completion of a novel. 50 Success also lies in the hauntingly beautiful lyricism of her prose—an impressionistic, fluid lyricism that devastates, or at least brilliantly overshadows, the structure originally erected to illuminate life’s beauty.

**The Nonverbal Origins of Language and Art**

Although Woolf uses language as her medium, the source of her art precedes language; it arises from pre-linguistic sensation or emotion that Woolf recognizes as

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50 Woolf claims that after completing *Mrs. Dalloway*, she is “more fully relieved of [her] meaning than usual” (*Diary* 2:316).
rhythm. Woolf states in a letter: “style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm … Now, this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it” (Letters 1624:247). Woolf is inundated by a flood of sensory experience, often through sight or auditory perception, provoking “a wave in the mind.” This “wave” or “rhythm” is the creative origin of words. Inspired by sensory experience and emotion; the rhythm eventually “makes the words to fit” the emotion.

Emotion is intuited even before it creates “the words to fit it:” Mrs. Dalloway’s characters often experience emotion and intuit waves of meaning without linguistic explications. In spite of the fact that Clarissa’s husband Richard can’t say he loves her, “she understood; she understood without his speaking” (115). An elderly guest at Clarissa’s party remarks to herself as she leaves: “And she didn’t know their names, but friends she knew they were, friends without names, songs without words, always the best” (186). This elderly woman intuits the feeling and emotion at the party without attaching signifiers to people; she recognizes them as pre-verbal rhythm, “songs without words,” and values such intuitive feeling over conventional signifiers.

For some characters in Mrs. Dalloway, language is not necessary for perceiving emotion and neither is it necessary to attach signification to sound. In fact, perceiving sound without filters of culture or language allows for the embodied experience of elemental rhythm. Septimus, for whom conventional signification has relaxed and

51 For Woolf, “The work of art begins with a pre-verbal rhythm,” claims Mark Hussey (76).
52 Words cannot be equated with emotion. The words “fit” the emotion like a container or a mould. But signifiers are arbitrary—nothing of the original emotion resides in the word itself. Kristeva quotes poet Mayakovsky, who holds a similar conviction. He says “the sound of the sea, endlessly repeated, can provide my rhythm” from which words arise, and when he finds the right word, he presses it down like a “crown on the tooth,” and it “fits” (353).
sometimes altogether disappears, experiences both sound and written language without meaning attached. As an airplane over Regent’s Park forms letters in the air, various onlookers attempt to “read” the letters the airplane spells out. But Septimus doesn’t see “actual words; this is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, the beauty, the exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words” (21). Septimus fails to “read” conventional signifiers, but through sensory experience he apperceives the “beauty” with which Woolf is concerned. Neither can he hear letters; he simply hears sounds:

‘K ... R ...’ said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say ‘Kay Arr’ close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. (21)

Even though, for Septimus, these conventional articulations lack conventional meaning, they nevertheless inspire understanding and emotion (79). For Septimus, sensory experience (the sound of the letters being articulated) inspires pre-verbal rhythm; he hears “waves of sound.” Rather than gathering the force and momentum from which words would arise, the “waves of sound, concussing, broke.” For Septimus, the waves of sound do not acquire conventional meaning but become an embodied, rapturous, and beautifully significant experience.

Sound inspires rapturous experience, and rhythm gives rise to preverbal articulations even before words are created; such ur-articulations arise from emotion and lived experience but are also not attached to signification. Peter Walsh encounters ur-articulations without conventional meaning that nevertheless convey strong emotion. He hears the singing of a homeless woman outside the Tube station and intuits primeval existence from “the voice bubbling up ... with an absence of all human meaning into
The woman’s song is “absent[t] of all human meaning”—the vocalizations are not attached to conventional signifiers. She nevertheless expresses emotion, from which Peter intuits what he believes is an ancient and universal love story: the woman remembers walking with her lover in her youth in May. She sings a timeless song: “Through all ages—when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise … love which has lasted a million years” (79). The sounds she articulates arise from emotion—recollections of a youthful love, but her verbal articulations are not attached to conventional signification. Not only do her vocalizations arise from and express emotion, but Peter assumes they attest to a universal and enduring love.

These rhythmic, ur-articulations are characterized as water, which flows freely but eventually washes out and fails to establish conventional communication. Woolf herself repeatedly recognizes in her diary that her creativity is drawn from a well or comes from submerging herself. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, such articulations “bubbled up” and “issued” forth from the woman singing with a “voice of no age and no sex” (79). The old woman’s voice is an “ancient spring spouting from the earth” (79), singing an “old bubbling burbling song” (80). Such rhythmic, preverbal articulations flow freely from the wellspring of the earth—they gush forth rapturously and enter a great river of experience.

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53 Woolf often uses water images in her diary in relation to her creative output, such as “it seems to have plunged me into the deepest strata in my mind” (Diary 2:323) or “I made up my mind one night to abandon the book---& then one touches the hidden spring” (Diary 2:272). But Woolf realizes she cannot remain submerged if she wishes to communicate.

54 The figure is truly androgynous and timeless, even primordial and non-human. The form we recognize is that of a woman, however; first she is part of the landscape, but then we recognize an external marker of gender, “for she wore a skirt” (79).
Poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (who, like Woolf, believes that words extract themselves from elemental rhythm) also characterizes ur-articulations as water. Kristeva recognizes that, according to Mayakovsky’s formulation, “rhythm incapable of formulation, would flow forth, growling, and in the end would dig itself in” (“Ethics” 354). Ur-articulations flow freely, vocalize for their own sakes, sing. But rhythm washes over everything; unable to contain or explain itself, it eventually expends itself and dies, like the old woman reduced to begging at the Tube station, or like Septimus, who exists in a near-preverbal state and eventually takes his own life.55

Septimus is especially susceptible to the uncontained river of material existence; for him, raw experience without the containment of signifying structures can be terrifying. As explained in Chapter 1, Septimus confronts Lacan’s Real through the small object. Because of its horrifying foreignness, also because of lack of determinacy and shifting references within the symbolic order, “real things—real things were too exciting,” exclaims Septimus (138). Phenomenological experience is “exciting,” but for Septimus it excites extreme anxiety, disorientation, and horror.56 In his horrible moments, “there were the visions. He was drowned, he used to say, and then lying on a cliff with the gulls screaming over him ... he would lie listening until suddenly he would cry that he was falling down, down into the flames” (137). At moments, Septimus, facing the onslaught of uncontained experience in the material world, descends to terror and despair.

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55 Roger Fry, by whom Woolf is influenced, claims in “the Philosophy of Impressionism:” “whether a variety of the human species which thus carefully deprives itself of the warning which sight gives us of the nature of objects with which we are surrounded, must not in the end be submerged in the struggle for existence, I leave to the speculative evolutionist” (20). Woolf terror at fundamental materiality is in part inspired by the deprivation “of the warning which sight gives us of the nature of objects.”
56 Hermione Lee notes that Leonard Woolf repeatedly uses “excited” for Woolf’s state of anxiety (174-6).
The uninterrupted flow of experience can alternatively be rapturous. Lack of conventional signification can lead to an ecstatic disintegration of boundaries between the “self” and the world. Septimus, for whom conventional signification has relaxed, experiences an emotional and physical (even spiritual) fusion with his surroundings:

The leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibers with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched, he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. (22)

Septimus experiences an ecstatic fusion with his surroundings—there is no perceptible difference between his limbs and the “branch” of the tree. Boundaries between the “self” and the world become blurred here, and Septimus experiences himself as an integral and interconnected piece of a fluid and beautiful “pattern” of life. This apprehension of the pattern of materiality of the world becomes “exquisite beauty.” In one sense, Septimus has returned to Lacan’s Imaginary state, merged with the mother and the surrounding environment—while he organizes his experience symbolically, he nevertheless experiences the interconnected processes of life. He exists in a fluid, semiotic relationship to both materiality and signification.

The Duality of Language

Pre-verbal experience certainly inspires both ecstasy and terror; Woolf, who experienced ecstasy and grappled with despair herself, believed that words create structures with which to express ecstasy and contain terror and despair. In her diary and her autobiographical “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf tells how in a few instances in her childhood, words allowed her to construct meaning from discordant lived experience. In
one instance she comprehends the place of a single flower in the immensity of the entire earth. In another, she grapples with violence on the part of her brother. "I make it real by putting it into words," states Woolf.

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what. ("Sketch" 72)

Woolf relies on language to make sense of the world, to unify disparate and disorienting experiences, and to make things whole. Without the ordering system of language, life would remain a confounding amalgam of emotion and sensation. Woolf believes she possesses no other alternative: "Write them down—that's the only way," she commands (Writer's 232). Not only does writing allow her to make sense of the world around her, but she constructs a sense of self from language: in her diary she records, "I thought, driving through Richmond last night, something very profound about the synthesis of my being: how only writing composes it: how nothing makes a whole unless I am writing" (Writer's 207). Not only does she gather together disparate experiences by writing, but she collects her disparate experiences to form a comprehensible "self."57

The ability of words to unify disparate experiences reemerges in the manufactured "thoughts" and "experiences" of Woolf's characters. In Mrs. Dalloway, when characters lack orientation to existence, they build linguistic structure to make sense of the world. Septimus’s wife, Rezia, remains in the "dark" when things have "no names" (23), and in order to make sense of the world, for both herself and her husband, she names concrete objects in their immediate vicinity, constructing a stable reality through words: "Hat,

57 See Chapter 1 for an explanation of the social self and the "rainbow self."
child, Brighton, needle. She built it up; first one thing, then another, she built it up” (142).
Rezia colludes in Septimus’s compulsion to write things down in order to create sense.
Because “real [material] things were too exciting” (138), Septimus orders ideas
symbolically in bold, deterministic statements: “Men must not cut down trees. There is a
God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one
kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down)” (24). Such statements help
Septimus feel that order exists in the sea of materiality, and by determining rules he
creates the illusion that he has a modicum of control. As Septimus strays from
conventional reality, he clutches Rezia, “telling her to write. The table drawer was full of
those writings … he was singing behind the screen. She wrote it down just as he spoke it”
(137). As Septimus is about to be committed to the mental hospital, Rezia decides to “tie
[his writings] … with a piece of silk,” expressing her faith that the collected scraps of
symbolic representation will keep Septimus connected to her, sane and alive (144).

In spite of the power of language to construct a comprehensible and coherent
world, using language is an agonizing process that Woolf worries will never fully realize
or complete its intentions to capture “life” or “reality.” Woolf, in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs.
Brown,” describes “the hideous perils that beset you directly [when] you try to describe it
in words” (3) and laments “the appalling effort of saying what I meant” (12). It is an
arduous process “to go back and back; to experiment with one thing and another; to try
this sentence and that, referring each word to my vision, matching it as exactly as
possible, and knowing that somehow I had to find a common ground between us”
(“Bennett” 12). Although Woolf goes through the exacting process of “refer[ing] each
word to [her] vision,” she worries that words will not capture her “vision” or emotion.
For Woolf, a gap exists between emotion and expression, between lived experience and convention. Emotion comes on “hot and sudden … Of course one cannot [capture emotion as suddenly]; for the process of language is slow & deluding. One must stop to find a word; then, there is the form of the sentence, soliciting one to fill it” (Writer’s 93-4). Not only is written language inadequate to describe reality, but even speech may fail to establish communication. In Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa’s husband imagines telling his wife “I love you;” he determines to “say it in so many words” (113). But when he confronts Clarissa, “he could not bring himself to say he loved her” (115). In spite of Woolf’s belief in the primacy of feeling over words, such passages indicate Woolf’s deep preoccupation with the inability of language to convey feeling (370). Although “emotion makes the words to fit it,” words cannot be equated with emotion—the words simply “fit” the emotion like a mould or a cap, pointing to the emotion but not capturing it.

Woolf’s gap between feeling and expression is homologous to early twentieth-century linguistic theory; in fact, Woolf’s concern with the limitations of language may have been influenced by her contemporaries. Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, in particular, as Bertrand Russell’s protégé, was in close contact with Bloomsbury. Although it is doubtful that Woolf had a close intellectual relationship with Wittgenstein, Russell’s correspondence with him would likely have exposed Woolf to Wittgenstein’s ideas on language. Wittgenstein makes a distinction in his native German between two

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58 In The Years characters misspeak and mis-communicate and fail to express their deeper impulses and feelings; Woolf revisits this theme almost obsessively in this novel. At the party that culminates the novel, Peggy attempts to communicate with her brother, but “[s]he stopped. There was the vision still, but she had not grasped it. She had broken off only a little fragment of what she meant to say” (371). Similar laments are a refrain throughout the novel: “But how could she say it? … it was not what she had meant to say” (370).

59 Banfield cites Woolf as having minimal social and intellectual contact with Wittgenstein, partly based on one of Leonard Woolf’s letters, in which he states that Virginia did not go to Wittgenstein’s lectures
kinds of meaning: \textit{Sinn} and \textit{Bedeutung}. \textit{Sinn} is the pre-expressive, personal, inner meaning, or sense, while \textit{Bedeutung} is the socially agreed upon meaning, or sign, used to represent an idea or object. Wittgenstein assumes that behind every word, or sign, exists a pre-linguistic entity (whether an object or idea) that gives rise to inner meaning. While Wittgenstein’s theory is problematic because ideas are largely formulated linguistically (even Septimus, removed from conventional communication, uses symbolic-linguistic concepts to express his experience), it nevertheless corresponds with Woolf’s conception of personal, inner meaning. Materiality exists in advance of language (as in the case of the human infant), and Woolf considers the experience of materiality as foundational to existence and reality. Therefore, in \textit{Mrs. Dalloway}, Woolf experiments with an inner, pre-linguistic meaning separate from socially-linguistically constructed meaning, as seen in Peter’s “private name” (52) and Lady Bruton’s “own meaning” (108).\footnote{See Chapter I for an explanation of essential (inner personal) meaning and socially constructed meaning.}

The idea of a “private language,” based on individual sensory perception, further prevents communication. Russell, in close communication with Wittgenstein and Woolf, assumes that because no two individuals perceive the world identically, and because individuals rely on sense perception to create and use words, each person uses language differently than every other individual. Some things, therefore, because of highly individualized perception, are incommunicable. Hans-Johann Glock describes Russell and Wittgenstein’s preoccupation with “private language:”

\begin{quote}
The first to accept this conclusion [Locke’s idea that when one person says red for what the other sees as green] was Russell … So possessed was he by the idea that the meanings of our words must be sense-data with which we are acquainted, that he declared it to be a precondition of intersubjective
\end{quote}

\footnote{Banfield also notes that he had differences with Wittgenstein.) As counterevidence, Banfield cites “references to the two discussions in Woolf’s presence of Wittgenstein” from Woolf’s letters” (35).}
understanding that no two people mean the same by their words. The
_Tractatus_ moved along similar lines. (310)

This conception of a private language is highly empiricist, relying on sense data to arrive
at conclusions, and even solipsistic, isolating the individual within the realm of his or her
own experience. Wittgenstein outlines the concept of a "private language" that is
"unsharable and unteachable in principle, because its words refer to what can only be
known to the speaker, namely his immediate private experiences" (Glock 309). 61 In some
cases, because of people's disparate and separate perceptions of the world, exact inner
meaning is incommunicable. Wittgenstein states in _Tractatus_: "Whereof one cannot
speak, thereof one must be silent" (27). If inner meaning cannot be translated to words,
suggests Wittgenstein, it simply remains incommunicable.

As I have shown, a concern with the inability of an individual to communicate
private experience appears in Woolf's fiction. In her despair over the difficulties of
capturing life and emotion with language, she wonders, like Wittgenstein, if the essential
meaning she intuits through embodied experience and emotion must be passed over in
silence. This silence leads to "cold human contacts" and disconnection between
characters in _Mrs. Dalloway_ (57). Septimus, in particular, becomes isolated from those
around him. Woolf, although preoccupied with the possibility of isolation, does not
remain in the same solipsistic state as Septimus. She is compelled to use language to
communicate; a large part of her project becomes finding a way to reconcile the private
nature of experience with her need to communicate.

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61 Wittgenstein claims that the words of a "private language" are not indecipherable to others, rather that
the objects and experiences to which they refer can only be fully comprehended by the speaker. However,
Wittgenstein doesn't consider "private language" a legitimate language: "the use of [a] word stands in need
of a justification which everybody understands," he explains (_Investigations_ 261). Therefore, legitimate
language exists, and language serves to communicate.
The Limits of Logical-Empiricism

Woolf, who holds conflicted attitudes toward language, endeavors to reconcile its duality over the course of her writing career. One thing is clear for Woolf throughout: reliance on empirical observation and logical analysis alone (and its related privileging of linguistic and cultural structures) fail to capture the totality of life. Logic and empiricism are, for Woolf, closely interwoven with patriarchal structure, and in Mrs. Dalloway, she criticizes the logical-empirical approach to language and life.62

Because of Woolf’s skeptical attitude toward patriarchal logic, she sought out alternative influences. Woolf was influenced by logical thinkers: Bloomsbury philosopher Bertrand Russell; by her father, Leslie Stephen; and by structuralist linguist Ludwig Wittgenstein. She was alternatively influenced by friend and art critic Roger Fry. Leslie Stephen and the Bloomsbury philosophers informed Woolf’s conviction that sensory perception uncovers the pattern of reality, but she found their reliance on empirical observation and logical analysis limiting. Fry’s aesthetic philosophy allowed her to integrate sense perception and formal analysis with emotion and multiple perspectives. Fry, although older, had close ties with the Bloomsbury circle. The social and intellectual connections between Woolf and Fry have been well established, as has the influence of Fry’s art criticism on Woolf’s fiction.63 Although Woolf disagreed with Fry on some points, and although she occasionally disparaged painting in favor of

62 Woolf’s criticism of patriarchal logic and structure has roots in patriarchal domination by her father, Leslie Stephen, and her older half brothers. She later connects it to British culture at large in Three Guineas.

63 See Banfield, Hussey and Roe as among the scholars who have written about this connection.
literature, Fry’s ideas “gradually filtered into Virginia Woolf’s writing” (Roe 166), and Woolf recognizes Fry’s “aesthetic guidance” in a letter (Phantom 247).

Woolf and Fry each feel that art arises from emotion and must convey emotion; representation without underlying emotional reality is lifeless. “[G]reat design depends upon emotion,” states Fry (“Futurists” 146), and, as we have seen, Woolf claims that “emotion … creates this wave in the mind” that eventually “makes words to fit it.” Furthermore, Woolf and Fry agree that describing a supposedly universal and unchanging reality in empirical fashion destroys the life and feeling the work of art attempts to capture. Woolf criticizes the realistic renderings of the Edwardian authors: “[T]hey have made tools and established conventions which do their business,” but “[f]or us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death” (“Brown” 11). Thus, the Edwardians, in their logical, empirical renderings of reality, failed “to have looked … at life” (“Brown” 11). Fry, likewise, views traditionally painted representations as not true to the life they attempt to capture. “[R]epresentation is almost essential,” he claims, but if it “persists solely as representation this destroys the unity [of the painting]” (381). Fry describes the difference between old methods of painting and new in “The Philosophy of Impressionism:”

To the older painter the human figure was a separate entity to be studied anatomically and constructed on any part of the canvas amid any surroundings—a separate and self-contained object. A model was observed in the studio; it was drawn with a complete outline enclosing every part and cutting it off from its environment; it was then coloured more or less as it appeared in the studio. (15)

The traditional method of painterly representation, although it attempted to render objects realistically, actually deals in abstraction, because the object is an idealized projection of the artist’s imagination rather than a representation of immediate sensory experience. Fry
resists the “habitual seeing” traditional painters imposed upon their subjects (*Phantom* 267). Woolf and Fry both argue that in traditional literature and painting, artists accepted habitual representations as equal to the life they attempted to represent, failing to look at reality as it appeared before them, thereby ignoring the life and reality that they hoped to capture.

Although Woolf incorporates structuralist and empirical thought on the nature of language and reality into her philosophy, she simultaneously challenges it, and in *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf repeatedly questions the value of logical-empirical thinking at the expense of “life.” Septimus claims at one point that he is a “priest of science” (92); his rhetoric effectively equates science with religion. Woolf is highly critical of scientific empiricism as doctrine. She has Clarissa react against logical empiricism, of men “with their love of abstract principles” (49). Clarissa denounces those who worship logical analysis and structure at the expense of emotion and intuition, such as her husband, who took “what doctors said literally” (117). Peter’s letters to her (probably filled with facts and observations) are “dry sticks” (7). She is exasperated by Peter’s logical exactness, such as when he wants to quantify what “the great motor-cars [are] capable of doing—how many miles on how many gallons?” (48). Clarissa has no desire to quantify gasoline usage: to her “motor cars” are one facet of the beautiful “bellow and uproar” of London life (4). Intuiting the limits of a logical approach, she wonders, “could any man understand what she meant either? about life?” (119).

A logical-empirical approach segments life, claims Woolf. It extends beyond individual men “with their love of abstract principles,” but rather is characteristic of

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64 Leslie Stephen claims that “common sense is the unity consciousness confers on experience” (45), but Banfield explains that “Common-sense vision is selective; Fry’s non-representational formalism refuses to privilege any subject matter, giving even the minutest constituents equal value” (266).
capitalist, patriarchal epistemology. It is not only men who are influenced by patriarchal epistemology—Clarissa certainly takes on patriarchal characteristics. Lady Bruton recognizes Clarissa's tendency to segment and define, remarking that she "had never seen the sense in cutting people up, as Clarissa Dalloway did" (100). Clarissa is horrified by this tendency in herself, exclaiming at one point: "She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that" (8), and she later realizes, "these judgments, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!" (119). Unlike Clarissa, Hugh Whitbread is not aware of his propensity for cutting things up—he uses a metal tool to segment and order Lady Bruton's writing: "producing his fountain pen; his silver fountain pen, which had done twenty years' service," he "began carefully writing capital letters with rings around them in the margin, and thus marvelously reduced Lady Bruton's tangles to sense" (107). Segmentation by patriarchal, capitalist institutions is epitomized by the department store clocks: "Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counseled submission, upheld authority" (100). These conventional time keepers "uphold [patriarchal] authority" and nibble at "what she [Clarissa] loved; life; London; this moment of June" (4).

Rigidity is another characteristic of the logical-empirical approach, and again, this patriarchal characteristic is not confined to male characters. Clarissa stands "straight as a dart, a little rigid in fact" (75). Imagining her party "[s]he stiffened a little" (17), and at

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65 Even language becomes rigid and segmented when it serves only analytical purpose, says Woolf. It often includes concrete nouns, short sentences, and regular syntax. See Appendix A for a detailed analysis of lexis and syntax from passages in To the Lighthouse. In this analysis language is described as "masculine" and "feminine," indicating logical-empirical, patriarchal language and impressionistic language that are closely tied to Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay (modeled on Woolf's parents).

66 Peter similarly uses his knife to segment and define, but he uses it protectively when he feels vulnerable to criticism by Clarissa or by patriarchal expectations of men.

67 See Chapter 1 for an explanation of the culturally constructed body as rigid.
her party “felt herself a stake driven in at the top of her stairs” (166). In some instances she embodies patriarchal rigidity, but she has an embodied reaction against such rigidity when Peter and old Joseph interrupt Sally’s kiss to tell her (in logical, linguistically ordered fashion) “the names of the stars” (35). This “shocking … horrible” interruption is “like running one’s face into a granite wall in the darkness” (35). Peter also recognizes the effect of rigid, patriarchal cultural structures: “Rigid, the skeleton of human habit alone upholds the human frame,” he remarks to himself (48). In fact, bones become a recurring motif in Mrs. Dalloway: Septimus offers Rezia his arm: “a piece of bone” that is “without feeling” (16). Bones, a motif repeated throughout Woolf’s novels, are (physically and metaphorically) necessary to hold up the frame of the body, of literature, of culture, but bones in themselves are rigid, brittle, and unyielding. Such rigidity, whether embodied or embedded in the construction of language or culture, inhibits the fluidity of life.

Most dangerously, according to Woolf, logical-empiricism indicates absolutism. Peter often makes absolute judgments and draws absolute conclusions. In order to make sense of Clarissa’s rejection, he describes the negative effects of marriage on women and pronounces to himself: “So it is, so it is … shutting his knife with a snap” (40). Septimus worships the absoluteness of the word to a more deleterious effect. While he often slips into a preverbal relationship to signification, he conversely worships linguistic structures that order chaotic experience. Septimus has an embodied experience with words when

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68 The lexis here, “rigid,” “stiffened,” and “stake,” also alludes to the phallus. Masculine sexuality connects logical-empiricism to patriarchy. See Chapter 3 for an exploration of Elizabeth’s ambiguous fluctuation between masculine and feminine agency.

69 Richard Dalloway experiences “the rigidity of the old” when he stands before the “shop windows full of colored paste” (110), connecting patriarchal rigidity to capitalism and the “wreckage” of consumer goods it washes up.
Rezia utters the word “time,” and for Septimus, “the word time split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, with his making them hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time” (68). Scott notes that Septimus conceives of words as seeds from which inert objects such as shells and wood chips fall, again indicating rigidity and lifelessness. Septimus wants to immortalize signifying constructs; he wants to assign absolute and never-changing meaning to experience. That is why at times “[h]e could reason; he could read ... his brain was perfect” (86); why he repeatedly refers to immortalized authors Shakespeare, Dante, and Keats; and why he becomes obsessed with “[d]iagrams, [and] designs” (144). His reliance on logical linguistic structure comes at a cost, for although “his brain was perfect ... he could not feel” (86). His determination to be “scientific above all things” annihilates the feeling that Woolf deems essential to life (66).

Absolute thinking often values form over content, and over-reliance on structure, be it social or linguistic in nature, obscures the “the spirit ... of life” such structures are meant to contain (“Brown” 11). When Hugh applies his censorious pen to Lady Bruton’s letter, “drafting sentiments in alphabetical order of the highest nobility,” he produces a logical structure that has no substantial meaning (107). Dr. Holmes and William Bradshaw, agents of patriarchal order who “saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted,” impose logical structure at the expense of life (145). Dr. Bradshaw worships “proportion, divine proportion,” imposing an absolute regimen upon his patients: he orders “rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without

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70 Scott make this observation in “The Word Split its Husk: Woolf’s Double Vision of Modernist Language.” She also notes that Woolf often uses the motif of words as seeds that are cast aside but which later bear new life (unlike Septimus’s words, which are lifeless.)
messages" (97). Clarissa sees “Sir William Bradshaw [as] a great doctor yet [who is] to
er her obscurely evil” (180). William Bradshaw’s logical regimen is hard to argue with, but
Clarissa intuits that his severe regimen is “evil” because it separates the patient from his
or her life. 71

Such absolute thinking about both language and social structure not only ignores
life, butushers in destructive violence and death. In “The Ethics of Linguistics” Kristeva
connects rigid language to totalitarianism; she hypothesizes that when we fail to
recognize that words are simply symbols we run into ethical trouble. And the trouble that
Septimus runs into is the exploitation of young, poor men expended in war and the mis­
treatment of mentally ill veterans by “logical” men such as Dr. Holmes and William
Bradshaw. Dr. Holmes, failing to recognize that all words are only symbols, remarks of
Septimus: “He was attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind” (93). Kristeva
explains this phenomenon: “Murder, death, and unchanging society represent precisely
the inability to hear and understand the signifier as such—as ciphering, as rhythm, as a
presence that precedes the signification of object or emotion. The poet is put to death”
(355). 72 Rigid and segmenting empirical language and epistemology, divorced from the
fluidity of life, can have devastating results. For Septimus, who does not know how to
negotiate the separation between beingness and structure, logic and empiricism become
deathly.

71 William Bradshaw conforms to patriarchal conventions regarding his marriage, profession and lifestyle
(see page 97). Septimus’s rest cure reflects the cures imposed on Woolf herself, which she resented
enormously. (See Lee 179-80.)

72 Once again Mrs. Dalloway parallels “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” Woolf writes: “they have made
tools and established conventions which do their business,” and “those conventions are ruin, those tools are
death” (11). Ordered structures (that “do ... business,” indicating capitalist pursuits) lead to “ruin” and
“death.”
War and patriarchal indifference kill Septimus—he is violated and marginalized by patriarchal society, but with his death, life is regenerated—he becomes the seed cast away, blooming somewhere unexpected. That unexpected place turns out to be Clarissa Dalloway’s party for the wealthy and privileged. Clarissa, hearing of Septimus’s death, exclaims to herself, again quoting Cymbeline, “Fear no more the heat of the sun” (182). Clarissa determines to no longer fear the patriarchal, structuring language and culture nor to dissolve into life’s rhythmic fluctuations; rather, her own vitality resurrected through Septimus’s death, she resolves to face experience, beautiful and terrible. She resolves to exist within the perpetual erecting and collapsing of signification, even if meaning for her remains indefinitely postponed.

**Woolf’s Impressionistic Aesthetic**

Woolf, desiring her fiction to “sink deeper and deeper away from the surface, with its hard separate facts,” rejects empiricism in favor of illuminating the emotion awash in moments of lived experience (“Mark” 39). Woolf’s need to reconcile the gap between experience and signification leads her not only to reject logical-empirical thought, but also to develop a literary aesthetic based partially, in form and in principle, on Fry’s aesthetic assessment of the Impressionist painters. Fry, in “The Philosophy of Impressionism,” cites the Impressionists as representing the world as it appears to the eye in each moment rather than representing abstracted or idealized forms. Borrowing in part from Fry’s philosophy, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf continues her project of creating a literary aesthetic that can be characterized as “impressionistic.” In order to
do this, Hussey notes that, like the Impressionist painters, “perception, light, form and color became her materials” (70).73

Fry explains the Impressionist method as representing the surrounding world as the eye actually perceives it, rather than representing idealized abstractions. In “The Double Nature of Painting” he notes that while the untrained human eye only recognizes “a flat mosaic of colored blobs” in the environment, consciousness confers symbolic meaning upon the blobs of color (384). Consciousness and the pattern-making, critical part of the mind should not interfere with authentic representation of the image. Impressionist painting undertakes an “analysis of the nature of experience itself” (“Impressionism” 13), assigning “truth to visual impressions only and renders no allegiance to the truth of external facts” (“Impressionism” 20). Post-impressionist painter Paul Cézanne concurs: “For an Impressionist to paint from nature is not to paint the subject [or object of perception], but to realize sensations” (qtd. in Richel 191). The representation emerges from sensation rather than from abstracted ideals. Woolf, in impressionistic fashion, undertakes to perceive and represent the world as it appears to each character in *Mrs. Dalloway*.74

Both Fry and Woolf claim that representations of material reality not only arise from sensation, but they are also contingent upon the particular perspective of the viewing subject. Fry claims that part of the Impressionist project is “ceasing in fact to attempt the impossible feat of eliminating the human factor in experience” (14). No object is knowable except through the viewer’s senses; therefore Fry concludes: “all our

73 Roe also characterizes Woolf’s writing as having “floods of light and color” (168); roe describes Woolf as “building forms in space, creating color and evoking light in writing” (171).
74 See Chapter 1 for an explanation of body and phenomenological perception; characters perceive and represent the world from the perspective of their embodied subjectivity.
knowledge of the objects of external nature is not really a knowledge of those objects but only of the mutual interaction that takes place between them and ourselves" (Fry 13). It is impossible, therefore, for the artist to create a representation independent of his or her perspective. Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, had made it his project "to detect the permanent order which underlies the infinite variety of the universe as revealed to our perception" (69-70). He "believe[d] in a set of permanent relations independent of our individual consciousnesses" (45). Stephen assumes an absolute and unchanging reality that is revealed and provable through observation. Woolf agrees with Stephen that a pattern of reality exists and that sensory perception allows for its apprehension, but she simultaneously reacts against Stephen. She believes that while consciousness is shaped by sights (and other phenomenological perceptions), it in turn confers a temporary and contingent pattern of reality on the world. Any representation of an object is mediated through the viewer's own perceptive capacities. Woolf makes it clear that no permanent order necessarily exists and that adhering to an illusory and predetermined order rather than encountering immediate experience fails to capture the emotion and life that she values as fundamental to art. Therefore, in Mrs. Dalloway, "life" is not described "objectively" by an omniscient narrator. No narrator explicitly details a novelistic reality that exists outside of and independent from its characters. The narrative rather inhabits the "bodies" of its characters and sees the world through those characters' "eyes."

Representations are contingent not only upon the visual perceptions of the viewer, but also upon the fleeting circumstances surrounding the viewing; objects in the world.

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75 This echoes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology that Woolf's philosophy so closely resembles. See Chapter 1 for an explanation.
76 See Chapter 1 for an explanation of the interchange between perception of materiality and the creation of reality.
77 See Chapter 1 for an explanation of the "body" of the literary character.
cannot be represented apart from the moment in which they are observed. Fry insists in “The Philosophy of Impressionism” that no one object can be identically or authentically represented in two separate moments of time. He explains that “the human figure … is not the same inside the studio that it was outside, is not the same at 5P.M. that it was at 2 P.M. It is in each case only a momentary group of sensations in the perpetual flux, existing in necessary relations to its surroundings and an inseparable part of them” (16). Claude Monet’s haystack and Rouen Cathedral series, for instance, depict the identical scenes, but depending on the time of day each is painted, color and overall impression differ. “[The Impressionist] realises that he cannot paint the same river at two different times,” says Fry (13), nor can he paint the same haystack or cathedral two times. He is concerned only with what appears before him “at the particular moment” (16).

The emphasis on the “moment” in Mrs. Dalloway echoes the Impressionists’ concern with temporality. Life is portrayed in fleeting yet vividly experienced moments. Clarissa rapturously experiences “this moment in June” as she walks through the streets of London (4), and exclaims, “Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it, here, this instant, now, in the sun, in Regent’s Park, was enough” (77). “[E]very moment,” each “instant” is different and rapture-inspiring; each instance of experience is fleeting, as well. The airplane that appears over Regent’s park writes a message in the sky with smoke words. But even seemingly solid signifying constructs are temporary: “Only for a moment did [the letters] lie still. Then they moved and melted and were rubbed out in the sky” (20). The smoke words, like Monet’s haystacks and Fry’s rivers, can never be identically re-created in two separate moments.
Also like the Impressionist paintings, Woolf’s fiction is infused with color and light. Clarissa’s impression of the flower shop exemplifies Woolf’s vibrant use of color and investigates the relationships between color, temporality, and light:

And then, opening her eyes, how fresh like frilled linen clean from a laundry laid in wicker trays the roses looked; and dark and prim the red carnations, holding their heads up; and all the sweet peas spreading in their bowls, tinged violet, snow white, pale—as if it were evening and girls in muslin frocks came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer’s day, with its almost blue-black sky, its delphiniums, its carnations, its arum lilies was over; and it was the moment between six and seven when every flower—roses, carnations, irises, lilac—glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds.

Clarissa receives an impression of a “moment” that may have occurred on a summer evening in her youth: “the moment between six and seven when every flower ... glows.” In this moment, she apprehends a vibrant abundance of color: “dark and prim the red carnations,” “sweet peas ... tinged violet, snow white, pale,” and flowers that glow “white, violet, red, deep orange.” Perception of the flowers relies on vision, on Clarissa “opening her eyes” and seeing how the flowers “looked.” Light allows the flowers to be visible, to “glow” so that they “burn ... softly, purely.” The light in this moment is not direct daylight—it is rather the “blue-black” atmospheric light of the evening sky. This corresponds with Fry’s explanation of Impressionist use of color: traditional painters painted the “local colour” of objects, often ignoring colors arising from incidental light, light striking an object from various angles, and atmospheric light (“Impressionism” 16). Furthermore, Fry characterizes “shadow not as the absence of light, but as illumination from a source of light which is so weak as only to make its peculiar colour manifest when the source or sources of greater intensity are cut off” (“Impressionism” 18). The shadows about the flowers rely on atmospheric light emanating from the “blue-black” sky. The
“peculiar colour” of each flower paradoxically becomes enhanced.\textsuperscript{78} This flower shop passage leaves the reader with an impressionistic wash of color enhanced by the atmospheric light of a summer evening.

\textbf{Woolf\textquotesingle s Literary Rainbow and Granite}\textsuperscript{79}

Observing and recording color and light as they appear to the viewer in each moment certainly result in more authentic representation of the external world than paintings of previous periods, but critics claim that Impressionist representations remain awash in sensation, not revealing underlying meaning. Impressionists recorded what Roe, perhaps relying on Fry\textquotesingle s criticism, describes as \textquoteleft disconnected, sensual glimpses\textquoteright (179). Fry certainly commends the \textquoteleft Impressionist … [for] accept[ing] the totality of appearances,\textquoteright but he nevertheless faults the Impressionist painters for failing \textquoteleft to deliver any intelligible message\textquoteright (73). The Impressionists\textquotesingle \textquoteleft receptive, passive attitudes towards the appearances of things often hindered them from rendering their real significance … emotion and associations … were omitted,\textquoteright claims Fry (82). Fry believes that the overwhelming wash of perception, even though it accurately depicts moments of experience, doesn\textquotesingle t comprise the totality of existence. \textquoteleft [E]motion and associations\textquoteright cannot be ignored—they lie beneath the surface of things. Just as Woolf recognizes that meaning fails to be established in an uncontained wash of phenomenological perception, Fry believes that the wash of color in Impressionist paintings ignores inner significance.

\textsuperscript{78} See Chapter 1 for the philosophical implications of the \textquoteleft flowers of darkness.\textquoteright

\textsuperscript{79} When reflecting on the difficulty of writing biography, Woolf suggests, \textquoteleft think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of a rainbow-like intangibility\textquoteright (\textquoteleft Biography\textquoteright 229). Usually Woolf writes about \textquoteleft granite and rainbow,\textquoteright but I have inverted the phrase, privileging light and color over solid structure.
Fry, like Woolf, assumes an underlying reality or “real significance” that manifests itself in the material world and is illuminated through experience with forms in the world. A structure exists behind and within materiality but is not necessarily evident to the undiscriminating eye. Painting and literature should render momentary impressions of lived experience and also articulate this inner significance. Fry complains that in Impressionist paintings “[T]he emotion and associations such as trees may be made to convey ... were omitted” (82). The “treeness,” or essential beingness, of a tree ought to shine through the painting (82). Woolf, while valuing phenomenological experience and momentary impression as fundamental, certainly believes that an inner meaning manifests itself in forms in the world. Without recognition of form, the “treeness” of the tree would be indistinguishable from other phenomena. For this reason, Clarissa’s flower shop passage offers a momentary, impressionistic glimpse of her visual experience and simultaneously burns with inner significance. The flowers bloom on the page in a sensual array of color, yet each flower “glows” and “burns” with individual meaning—its “roseness,” “carnationness,” or “lilacness.”

For this reason, both Hussey and Roe characterize Woolf as more strongly influenced by Post-impressionist than by Impressionist painting. Fry’s 1910 exhibition of Post-Impressionist painters at the Grafton Gallery may have been influential in Woolf’s thinking; in fact, it is widely acknowledged that Woolf’s oft-cited proclamation, “in or about December, 1910, human character changed,” alludes to the Grafton exhibition.

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80 See Chapter 1 for an explanation of Woolf’s conception of underlying, numinous reality.
81 In The Years, published twelve years after Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf’s philosophical convictions have been more fully developed. Eleanor looks at a chair and sees the hard, functional material structure and the shimmering atomic structure.
82 One sees the theme of the beingness of objects revisited in Woolf’s short story, “Solid Objects,” in which the main character becomes enthralled with the materiality of “ordinary” objects.
Woolf's Post-impressionistic aesthetic places equal importance on form (be it linguistic structure or physical structure) and on emotion and inner significance. It is only through recognition of forms in the world (such as the individual flowers) that essential beingness, inner significance, and the pattern of reality may shine forth. According to Woolf, forms in the world become imbued with reality and significance through human perception. It is the artist's job to recognize and depict these forms (never adhering too rigidly to their contours), allowing for the diffuse fluidity of objects' underlying reality to shine through their tangible materiality.84

Fry's thinking follows similar lines: he places equal importance on "vision" and "design." Vision includes sensory perception and the imaginative capacity of emotion, characterized as the "disinterested contemplation [of the surrounding world] that belongs to the imaginative life" (Vision 26). "Design," on the other hand, confers coherence and unity upon representations of "vision," allowing deep significance and emotion to be conveyed. Design, based on the "physical and physiological nature" of human perception of the material world, consists of formal elements: line, mass, space, light and shadow, and color (Vision 26). Conscious use of these formal elements confers meaningful structure upon the wash of sensory input. Fry says, "objects created to arouse the aesthetic feeling we have added consciousness of purpose," and in this way the viewer "passes from pure sensations to emotions aroused by means of sensations" (Vision 26). Design—the conscious architecture of formal elements in the physical world—allows elemental emotion and meaning to shine through.

83 Fry brought the French Post-impressionist paintings to Britain, exhibiting them in the Grafton Gallery. He coined the term "Post-impressionist."
84 See Chapter 1 for an explanation of material reality and underlying, numinous reality.
Post-impressionists place emphasis on the formal architecture of design, not with the aim that objects become represented in supposedly "realistic" fashion, but with the aim that inner significance shines through forms in the material world. Paul Cézanne, the Post-impressionist painter to whom Woolf is often compared, also claims that the Impressionist paintings are "nebulous and vague," and Fry claims Cézanne sought to add "architecture to the Impressionist idiom" ("Double" 385). Architecture becomes an idiom that Woolf uses, as well. For Woolf, the dead architecture of Edwardian literary language is to be avoided, but a novel must be built from linguistic structure in order to be intelligible. While Woolf intends to convey momentary lived experience, never alighting on anything permanent, she still crafts her novels using an architectural structure because without structure, expressive articulations, just like color, would be washed away. The architecture is not foregrounded, however—it is a temporary vehicle for emotion. Even though Jacob's Room has structure, Woolf intends that it won't be visible; only the emotional inner significance will shine through. She uses an architectural metaphor to explain: "the approach will be entirely different this time," she writes, "no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humor, everything as bright as fire in the mist" (Diary 14).

Mrs. Dalloway, written not long after Jacob's Room was completed, has a similar Post-impressionistic structure. The scaffolding of the novel exists, but is not rigid or obvious, and the feeling shines through.85 Point of view floats easily from character to character, sometimes alternating between the free indirect thought of more than one character within the same sentence. Although Woolf carefully orchestrates the free

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85 See Chapter 1 for an explanation of the architectural structure of the "gig lamp" as a metaphor for linguistic form.
indirect thought, its ambiguity allows it not to remain fixed and rigid but rather to create meaning through loose associations. The novel is divided into segments, or “chapters,” as well, but they aren’t delineated in traditional fashion. Line breaks indicate the start of a new “chapter,” as does the movement of the narrative from one character to another. The narrative shifts easily, however. The characters cross paths or encounter one another, leaving the reader with the impression of loosely connected lives. Septimus and Clarissa, while only loosely connected, have clearly orchestrated parallels in the language they use, the language used to describe them, and in arcs of their lives.\footnote{Anna S. Benjamin’s article, “Towards an Understanding of the Meaning of Virginia Woolf’s ‘Mrs. Dalloway,’” outlines many parallels between Septimus’s and Clarissa’s lives.} The party is clearly constructed as a culminating literary event. But it is loosely constructed. Each of these carefully formed novelistic choices allows the life to shine through the linguistic structure. Linguistic formalism becomes Woolf’s architecture, the granite upon which she lays the foundation of the novel, but the granite is overlaid by the multiplicity of sparkling rainbow possibilities for life that shine through the text.

**Simultaneity**

Reliance on formal architecture aligns Woolf with the Post-impressionists; a concern with temporal simultaneity does as well. Impressionism is concerned with accurately representing each moment of experience; Post-impressionism sees each moment of experience as simultaneous and layered. Roe claims the Post-Impressionists “depict a vision of simultaneity” meant to draw attention to the “shifting uncertainties within the human psyche … [that swing from] bliss to despair and back again.” She cites Vanessa Bell’s “portraits without faces” and Picasso’s “multiplicity of dimensions within
a single face” as examples (179). Like the figures in the paintings, *Mrs. Dalloway*’s characters exhibit a multiplicity of emotional dimensions. Peter exhibits “shifting uncertainties” of simultaneous emotions when “for a moment” he asks: “What is this terror? what is this ecstasy?” (190). Both emotions are experienced simultaneously.87 Both Septimus and Clarissa have simultaneous feelings as well: Septimus is “the happiest man in the world, and the most miserable” (81), and “Clarissa felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged” (8).

To be sure, Woolf privileges the moment of experience in *Mrs. Dalloway*, but the moment of experience often consists of simultaneous, layered perceptions and recollections. Although Clarissa, while in the flower shop, claims to recall one “moment between six and seven,” various temporally separate moments are layered within a moment of Clarissa’s experience. Clarissa’s fifty-year old self moment in the flower shop and a moment from her youth are superimposed. Additional “moments” are layered on top of the experience through the use of associated images. The “girls in muslin frocks [who] came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer’s day” (13) are linguistically associated with fifty-year-old Clarissa’s attraction to women, which she experiences as “a match burning in a crocus” (31) and with twenty-year-old Clarissa’s love for Sally Seton “wearing pink gauze” and arranging flowers on a summer evening (34).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, simultaneous feelings and memories coexist within individual characters, and a generalized pattern of simultaneity exists between characters as well.

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87 Even the syntactic-graphological form that Woolf employs demonstrates simultaneousness. Although Peter poses two separate questions divided by a question mark, the second question is not capitalized to create a separate sentence—the two emotions are fused within the structure of the sentence and within Peter’s single instance of emotional experience.
Richard and Hugh stand on the street corner while Lady Bruton naps at home: “Richard Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread hesitated at the corner of Conduit Street at the very moment that Millicent Bruton, lying on the sofa, let the thread snap” (110). Here, Woolf depicts a global “vision of simultaneity” in which three characters have spatially separate experiences “at the very [same] moment.” “Conduit Street” functions as a conduit for experiences remote in space but simultaneous in time. Even though Millicent Bruton supposes that she has “let the thread snap,” a temporal-spatial thread (architecture of the numinous reality) connects these characters in this simultaneous moment. Such conduits echo an entry from Woolf’s diary: “I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment—” (Diary 2:263). Although these “caves” run mysterious and solitary, they “connect,” and “each comes to daylight at the present moment.” Her characters’ disparate and separate experiences are simultaneously recognized in the world in the light of immanent experience.

The Moment of Comprehension

In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf continues the development of a powerful and lyrical literary aesthetic that reconciles the dual capacity of language: its inability to express the

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88 “In Norfolk, of which Richard Dalloway was half thinking, a soft warm wind blew back the petals; confused the waters; ruffled the flowering grasses. Haymakers, who had pitched beneath hedges to sleep away the morning toil, parted curtains of green blades; moved trembling globes of cow parsley to see the sky; the blue, the steadfast, the blazing summer sky” is another instance in the same paragraph in which a simultaneous occurrence is described (110).
89 Woolf uses thread as motif for connection between people in the novel.
90 Woolf describes Fry as assessing a painting in a “moment of comprehension” that integrates reason and sensibility.
fullness of life and its ability to collect “the severed parts” and “make it [life] whole” (“Sketch” 72). Her conflicted attitude toward language is tragically evident in her suicide note: “If I could I would tell you what you and the children meant to me, I think you know” (Woolf qtd in Years xxiii). In her note, she alludes to the supremacy of feeling over words; the feeling remains present even without words to articulate it—and yet Woolf is compelled to articulate the feeling using words. Had she not, her feelings would have spilled into the abyss—her family would not have known. So in spite of her misgivings, Woolf does believe in the “enormous resources of the English language [and] the power it bestows … of communicating feelings” (Dalloway 173).

While Woolf certainly worried about the possible validity of Russell’s conviction that meaning must be relegated to privately understood realms, she nevertheless believed that language could forge connection. She also shared Wittgenstein’s concern with the incommunicability of certain experience but refused to believe that inner meaning must be passed over in silence. Wittgenstein explains his position in a letter to Russell: “The main point [of the Tractatus] is the theory of what can be expressed by propositions—i.e. by language—(and, which comes to the same thing, what can be thought), and what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown; which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy” (qtd. in Grayling 18-9). Woolf manages to express what “cannot be expressed by propositions” not by using structured linguistic propositions, but by using a poetic, impressionistic language that has much in common with Fry’s aesthetic philosophy. She illuminates pre-linguistic inner meaning (Wittgenstein’s Sinn) using conventional signification (Wittgenstein’s Bedeutung), and thus approaches (or transcends) “the cardinal question of philosophy” with her own philosophical insights.
Woolf's philosophical insights include belief in an underlying pattern of existence that is both created and momentarily illuminated through lived experience. But sensory experience alone leads to an unintelligible wash of sensation. It is through a balance of emotional-visual sensibility and reasoned linguistic formulation that Woolf arrives at her aesthetic. Woolf recognizes Fry's similar approach:

While he [Fry] was arguing about the theory of art in the abstract his eye was ranging over the picture ... then there was a moment of fusion, of comprehension ... how was it done? By the union, it seemed to me, of two different qualities, his reason and his sensibility. (“Fry” 89)

Through conscious, reasoned linguistic formulation that nevertheless has its origin in emotion and sensation, Woolf experiences “the power which adds the supreme flavour to existence,—the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly in the light” (Dalloway 77). Thus Woolf, like Fry, has “a moment ... of comprehension” through art. While writing, she apprehends a complete reality, momentarily illuminated. Woolf's impressionistic prose momentarily reconciles the gap between the “luminous halo of life” and the artificial container erected to capture it. It moulds a form for experience but never adheres too closely to that form. It allows experience to sing, light to shine through, waves to wash over the text without becoming unintelligible, too diffuse, or too submerged.

Woolf's readers, as well, through contact with her prose, experience “a moment of comprehension.” Alluding to her Modernist contemporaries, Woolf explains that “[t]heir books, then were incomplete as books, and required that the reader should finish them, actively and practically, for himself” (“Brown” 5).91 Hussey elaborates: “the whole

91 Woolf refers to her Modernist contemporaries as the “Georgians,” listing “Mr. Forster, Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Stachey, Mr. Joyce, and Mr. Eliot” (“Brown” 1). Although she doesn’t include herself, she ought to be included in retrospect.
that cannot be directly communicated is formed in the intersubjunctive relationship between the literary art and the reader" (72). Just as Woolf's "effort" allows her to arrive at beauty, the reader's active participation in the text—her lived encounter with the words—allows her epiphanic moments of comprehension and elucidates a complete and beautiful reality. Woolf's impressionistic language paradoxically allows the significance of the text to be "reached easily, instinctively, in the dark, with one's eyes shut ("Brown" 11).

3
WRITING THE BODY, RE-WRITING THE WORLD

"The artist is a receptacle for the emotions that come from all over the place: from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing shape, from a spider's web."

—Pablo Picasso

Doris Kilman, Elizabeth Dalloway's tutor, suffers from "the infliction of her unlovable body" (126). "She could not help being ugly; she could not afford to buy pretty clothes," she laments. "[H]er career was absolutely ruined and was it her fault?" she asks. Elizabeth may simply be mollifying Miss Kilman, but when she answers "Good gracious ... no," Elizabeth points to a larger cultural dynamic (127). Veneration of British aristocracy, capitalist consumer values, and gendered behavior expectations are among the grand narratives that characters in Mrs. Dalloway read in the cultural text around them. These narratives inscribe themselves upon the bodies of Woolf's characters, affecting their thoughts, feelings, physical bodies, and behaviors in the world. Miss

92 See Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views (10).
Kilman, although a peripheral character in the novel, is nevertheless an emblematic representation of problems in British society. Gender, class, nationality, and a culturally conceived notion of body coalesce into a narrative that she comes to adopt as her own story, resulting in a profound self-loathing. Miss Kilman resists these challenges with rebellious discourse and a radical ideological split between flesh and spirit.

Like Miss Kilman, other characters in the novel resist hegemonic cultural power by "writing" personal narratives; characters are not entirely subject to manipulation by power. Using material from shared discourse as well as from individual lived experience, characters continually re-inscribe the world around them with novel meaning. The extent to which such personal narratives successfully resist cultural inscription and re-inscribe the culture with innovative significance—the degree to which characters become subject to power or gain personal and political agency—depends in part on class and gender. A character's social position may allow her to maintain a balanced and reciprocal relationship between her "susceptibility to impressions [of the urban environment]" (Dalloway 69) and her tendency to "make up the better part of life" (Dalloway 53).

Woolf's large body of work certainly resists conventional British narrative, and it effectively re-inscribes British discourse with newly fashioned stories and ideas. Important among these ideas is that culture mustn't exercise monolithic control over the individual, nor may the individual exist in an essential or natural pre-discursive body—our socially written selves are often indistinguishable from our essential selves. Peter Walsh observes this relationship from the veranda of his hotel before he sets off for Clarissa's party. The fluid, evening sky is ready to fade, to die, to give way to night, but
the city—brilliant and energetic—refuses to let her go. Peter imagines the dialogue between the sky (Woolf’s “life”) and the city (structures erected by modern culture):

I resign, the evening seemed to say, as it paled and faded above the battlements and prominences, mounded, pointed, of hotel, flat, and block of shops, I fade, she was beginning, I disappear, but London would have none of it, and rushed her bayonets into the sky, pinioned her, constrained her to partnership in revelry. (157-8)

While the relationship between culture and “life” is most times not this violent (“bayonets … pinioned her”), “life” often remains fiercely resistant to the dictates of culture, and the relationship between the two is always enmeshed and dialectical. Miss Kilman’s radical split between flesh and spirit, between the material-cultural world and the essential “spirit” of life, is in fact illusory. Woolf makes clear that the architecture of modern culture and the life of the body are inextricably intertwined in moments of brilliant and fleeting lived experience.

**Grand Narrative and Poetic Re-visioning**

Londoners in the novel are subject to grand British cultural narratives of aristocracy and capitalism; such grand narratives prompt characters to assign cultural content to phenomenological perception. Signs of aristocracy and empire are read universally by characters, and capitalist narrative inscribes itself on the bodies of consumers. However, characters’ divergent lived experiences elicit a diverse array of stories about events. Furthermore, characters need not remain subject to the commercial environment. Phenomenological perception of commercial entities and the subtle meanings attached to experience may release such entities from their commercial purposes.
Each Londoner in *Mrs. Dalloway* is susceptible to impressions received in the urban environment. Such impressions are experienced through individual locations of perception, but each character’s participation in the monarchical British grand narrative anchors their perceptions to shared cultural material. Early on in the novel, as Clarissa visits the flower shop, an important “motor car” passes along Bond Street, making its presence dramatically known with a “violent explosion” (presumably emanating from “those tyres of motor cars”), which Clarissa experiences as “a pistol shot in the street outside!” (13). Those outside, “who, of course, stopped and stared, had just time to see a face of the greatest importance against the dove-grey upholstery” (13). For each onlooker, the car and the face signify English aristocracy, “the majesty of England, of the enduring symbol of the state” (16). Strangers are drawn into a common story: “in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire” (17). These cultural signs are invoked through the presumed presence of aristocracy and its attendant narratives of martial patriotism and empire.

In response to sensory experience in the urban environment, each character uses shared cultural narrative to create an individualized and divergent story. In spite of having experienced a symbol of unifying cultural fiction, the various narratives with which characters explain the event do not tell a unified story; characters spin off into multitudinous and incompatible personal realities. The various “rumors [that] were at once in circulation” explain that the car is “the Prince of Wales’s, the Queen’s, [or] the Prime Minister’s” (14). People begin to create divergent stories about the car: for instance, “Edgar J. Watkiss ... said audibly, humorously ... The Prime Minister’s kyar” (14). Clarissa imagines: “The Queen going to some hospital; the Queen opening some
bazaar” (16), and “Shawled Moll Pratt with her flowers on the pavement wished the dear boy well (it was the Prince of Wales for certain)” (18). In spite of having perceived the same car, these disparate characters each create a separate fiction.

The aeroplane that next captures the Londoners’ attention inspires similarly disparate interpretations, each according to capitalism’s grand narrative. Confronted with a new sound and sight, the Londoners’ attention immediately becomes diverted from car to airplane. Suddenly, “[t]he sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd” (19); the airplane “was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky!” (20). As people look skyward to see “smoke which curled and wreathed upon the sky in letters,” they interpret the smoke letters, once again creating divergent, individualized stories: “‘Glaxo,’ said Mrs. Coats in a strained, awe-stricken voice, gazing straight up, and her baby, lying stiff and white in her arms, gazed straight up … ‘Kreemo,’ muttered Mrs. Bletchly, like a sleepwalker … ‘It’s toffee,’ murmured Mr. Bowley” (20). Although each of these characters creates her own “story,” these stories rely heavily on capitalist meta-narrative (each assigns the letters a brand name or product; each reads the smoke words as an advertisement).93

These characters are highly subject to the commercial environment—capitalism’s narratives are written on the body, rendering the body nearly lifeless and primed to purchase consumer goods. In response to their interpretations of the smoke words, characters’ bodies become zombie-like and lose agency. Their voices lose range and

93 Here I link the airplane with industry, advertising and capitalism. Scott, in her article “The Word Split its Husk,” links the presence of the airplane with “Western imposition on the East” and calls the airplane “a futuristic machine, an instrument of the recent war,” linking it with empire and militarism (378). All are manifestations of patriarchy.
power: they “mutter” and “murmur” or use a “strained, awe-stricken voice.” Their bodies lose mobility and agency, as well. Mrs. Coates “gazed straight up,” as did her baby, “lying stiff and white in her arms.” Their bodies are rigid and their gazes are fixed. Mrs. Bletchly is “like a sleepwalker,” unconsciously moving her body at the behest of an underlying narrative. The spectacle in the sky above them turns them into passive, almost lifeless, observers. They also become passive consumers. Mrs. Coates stiffly gazes up to read “Glaxo” (a milk-based baby formula). The baby’s body is “stiff and white” in her arms. The poetic associations between words that Woolf employs create a linguistic connection between the baby and the formula. The baby’s body is “written” in the same language as the formula that her mother contemplates purchasing.

Others resist the airplane’s “message”: they make associative connections with the airplane, inscribing personal meaning upon the experience. Mrs. Dempster doesn’t read the aeroplane’s capitalist narrative. It causes her to reflect on her life and reminds her of her longing “to see foreign parts” (27). Mr. Bently associates the aeroplane with “Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory” and reads the airplane as “a symbol … to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought” (27). Septimus, largely disconnected from cultural narrative, simply discerns “beauty, this exquisite beauty” (21). A “seedy-looking, nondescript man” contemplates religion and pamphleting on the steps of the Catholic church as the airplane passes overhead (27). He

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94 See an explanation of the rigidity of patriarchy in Chapter 2.
95 Scott notes that “efforts at decipherment produce ugly words—trade names,” and she observes that the effect of the sky writing is “stultification by the word” (378). I wouldn’t agree that a generalized use of “word” always produces such a deadening effect. Words used in the imposition of commercial power onto a susceptible subject certainly can be deadening, but in other scenarios, such as those described in the following paragraphs, words (even if generated by capitalism) have a more subtle and emancipatory function.
96 Scott, in an annotation at the end of the novel explains that Glaxo is a “[b]rand name for a babies’ formula milk product (DB). Its ads must have succeeded, because the firm grew into a large international pharmaceutical company that still exists” (199).
considers the cross rather than the aeroplane, but the aeroplane nevertheless enters his consciousness: through linguistic association, "a cross, the symbol of something which has soared beyond seeking and questing and knocking of words together," imagines the seedy-looking man (28). The cross is a "symbol" to this man, just as the aeroplane was to Mr. Bently. The cross, like the aeroplane, "soared" and is "knocking ... words together." The man's subterranean linguistic patterning creates loose associations between the cross and the aeroplane; this man also borrows from experience in the world to write a revelatory personal narrative.

Phenomenological perception of the aeroplane and the linguistic conflation of commercialism, empire, and spiritual release effects a change in the aeroplane, and its "beingness" becomes privileged over power. When the airplane first appears overhead, it is loud and oppressive—it "bored ominously into the ears of the crowd" (19), but at the end of the passage, "it was still. Not a sound was to be heard above the traffic" (28). The man prepares to enter the refuge of the church, and his intention to do so releases the aeroplane from its targeted commercial purposes: "Unguided it seemed; sped of its own free will" (28). Like the cross, the airplane "has become all spirit, disembodied, ghostly," no longer engaged in the "knocking of words together." Even as the airplane is a real, material object whose purpose is to subject Londoners to commercial bombardment, stories woven from experience with the airplane render the airplane phenomenological, even spiritual. It no longer spells out an advertisement, but simply creates letters, "like something mounting in ecstasy, in pure delight, ... white smoke looping, writ[es] a T, an O, an F" (28). Through the characters' unconscious inscription of personal story onto real objects, the airplane momentarily becomes as beautiful and ephemeral as the smoke.
letters it produces. Life—the variegated “traffic,” or pattern, of urban existence—is privileged over commercial power at the end of this passage.

Claiming the Leather Armchair

Each character in *Mrs. Dalloway* narrates from a subjective point of view; each “makes up the better part of life” from individually perceived fragments of the London environment (53). However, gender and class determine how successfully characters use made-up stories to navigate their social existences and create personal and political agency. Furthermore, the individual stories people create often attempt to resist grand narratives of capitalism and inscription of gender onto the body. Characters create meaning for themselves outside of the meaning imposed on them by shared discourse.  

Hugh Whitbread is so comfortably situated in phallogocentric discourse and patriarchal power that he has no need to resist such structures; in fact, these structures define him and dictate his behavior. Hugh Whitbread claims a comfortable social position: “he’d found his job—married his Honorable Evelyn; got some little post at Court, looked after the King’s cellars, polished the Imperial shoe-buckles, went about in knee-breeches and lace ruffles,” living in a house filled with “linen cupboards, pillow-cases, old oak furniture, [and] pictures” (72). Sights, for Hugh, don’t inspire anxiety or self-questioning; he is only mildly susceptible to pleasant visions. During lunch at Lady Bruton’s he sees “jocund visions before musing eyes” (102). He muses about the pleasant sights that arise before him, but his musings are not profound; “he [simply] ruminated. It was his habit. He did not go deeply. He brushed surfaces” (100).

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97 Michel Foucault claims “Where there is power, there is resistance” (*History* 95).
Because he is non-analytical, Hugh Whitbread, who ought to possess profound agency because of his wealth, masculinity, elegant appearance, and social class, is supremely subject to the commercial urban environment. As he strolls along Harley Street, he admires the department store clocks:

[T]he clocks of Harley Street ... announced, genially and fraternally, as if it were a pleasure ... to give the information gratis, that it was half past one. Looking up, it appeared that each letter of their names stood for one of the hours; subconsciously one was grateful to Rigby and Lowndes for giving one time ratified by Greenwich, and this gratitude ... naturally took the form later of buying off Rigby and Lowndes socks or shoes. (100)

He must buy later, thinks Hugh Whitbread, naturalizing the marketing-consumer dynamic. Ironically, the information offered is not “gratis”—the clocks offer the information “as if it were a pleasure,” but they expect, as does Hugh, that the store will be paid in exchange. “[T]he admirable Hugh” is not so admirable; he is highly susceptible to commercial impressions, responding passively to marketing and becoming subject to the commercial environment (5).

Cultural narrative has been written for Hugh, inscribing his body with comfortably situated passivity; he therefore mustn’t write an alternative narrative. “Hugh had the most extraordinary, the most natural, the most sublime respect for the British aristocracy” (71); indeed, this reverence for aristocracy has been naturalized. He is entirely aligned with power. Hugh’s “very well-covered, manly, extremely handsome, perfectly upholstered body” (6) reflects his position in society—he serves as a showpiece for the British upper class, a handsome and well-placed piece of furniture. Even Hugh Whitbread’s name indicates the ability of culture to write his body. His name has

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98 Scott cites “Messrs. Rigby and Lowndes” as “an imaginary department store. She claims that “the the days when not everyone had a wristwatch, stores did provide a real service in offering public clocks” (Dalloway 209).
connotations of tabula rasa—his body is a blank slate upon which culture writes itself. Additionally, white bread, highly refined (and highly prized), is also largely tasteless and nutritionless, indicative of Hugh’s emptiness and superficiality. At Lady Bruton’s lunch, he “div[es] into the casserole,” and Lady Bruton recognizes that Hugh has become “slow” and “fat” (104). In such a manner, “blind ... [to] everything ... except self-esteem and comfort” (184), involving much pleasure and no pain, aristocratic culture has inscribed itself upon his body.

Because of his working-class origins and his vulnerable position as a shell shocked veteran, Septimus neglects to locate himself centrally in patriarchal discourse and culture in spite of valorous attempts to do so. He could have remained in his home town of Stroud and taken up a trade, or else, after hard work as a clerk in London, he would perhaps “in ten or fifteen years, succeed to the leather arm-chair in the inner room under the skylight with the deed-boxes round him” (83).99 Septimus is not comfortable in the roles society has scripted for him. He fails in his attempt to find a place in society—his marginal status and his poetic aspirations locate him far from the center or “inner room” of patriarchy and capitalism, and his seat in the “leather arm-chair,” had he striven for it, remains provisional after years of hard work (83). But Septimus desires to be a poet; he “had left home, a mere boy ... because he could see no future for a poet in Stroud” (82). Because there are few avenues for a working-class boy to become trained as a poet, Septimus “was, on the whole, a border case, neither one thing or the other, might end with a house at Purley and a motor car, or continue renting apartments in back streets all his life; one of those half-educated, self-educated men whose education is all

99 Stroud is “a market town and center for the cloth industry in Gloucestershire” (Dalloway 206).
learnt from books borrowed from public libraries, read in the evening after the day's work” (82).

Septimus is a “border case,” not only because of his uncertain social position, but also because as a young man he resided on the border between logic and imagination; logic compels him to conform to cultural narratives and his imagination resists them. Septimus originally attempted to find a place for himself in patriarchal society through adherence to cultural narrative—by working as a clerk, by being “one of the first to volunteer” for the war, by loving Miss Isabel Pole, and later, by marrying Rezia. He also attempts to conform to patriarchal society by using logic; when his friend Evans died in the war, he had “congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably” (84). But his logical response to Evan’s death proved not to be an adequate coping strategy; at times his logic provoked extreme anxiety—at moments, “the panic was on him—that he could not feel” (85). As an antidote to logic and its attendant panic, Septimus, before the war, had studied literature and “written” narratives personal enough to border on the fantastical. Encouraged by his tutor, Isabel Pole, who asked, “Was he not like Keats?” (83), he had imagined himself a great working class poet. When he enlisted in the army in order to “save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square,” his personal imaginings proved to be tragically alienated from socio-political realities (84).

When Septimus returns to England after the war in a tenuous psychological state, resulting from trauma incurred during combat, he is profoundly alienated. He cries out about “human cruelty—how they tear each other to pieces” (137), and he locates “human cruelty” or “human nature” (90) in the figure of Dr. Holmes. Both Dr. Holmes and Dr.
William Bradshaw, caricatures of patriarchal abstraction and disconnection, perpetuate his alienation: Dr. Holmes by jovially insisting that nothing is wrong with Septimus, and Bradshaw by imposing his rigid regimen upon Septimus, which includes protracted separation from his wife.

Septimus realizes that “[h]e was in their power” (144) and resists the ministrations of these doctors (and most of human kind) through stories created with exaggerated forms of two tools he had long practiced: hyper-logic and solipsistic fantasy. He again attempts to locate for himself a logical, stable center by “being scientific above all things”—and he explains his hallucinations with empirical evidence: “Why could he see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men? It was the heat wave presumably, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world” (66). His other modes of resistance are wildly divergent signifying practices. Rather than interpreting Shakespeare through cultural consensus (to the degree this is possible), Shakespeare sends Septimus a “secret signal,” a “message hidden in the beauty of the words” (86). The gulf between convention and Septimus’s too-personal meaning becomes apparent when “Nature” appropriates Shakespeare; Nature “signified … her determination to show … through … Shakespeare’s words, her meaning” (136). Septimus’s imaginative faculties allow him to intuit deep meaning, but it is a “secret” meaning, devastatingly divorced from conventional understanding.100

Such fantasy, composed of highly individuated signifying practices, allows Septimus to experience sublimity, but it also produces paranoid and alienating visions.

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100 See Chapter 2 for an explanation of inner meaning, or Bedeutung, according to Wittgenstein.
Septimus recognizes essential meaning in highly personalized interpretation of often conventionally interpreted literature—he bridges the gulf between essential beingness and language with which Woolf is so concerned, recognizing Nature’s essential “meaning” in “Shakespeare’s words” and in “some laughing hint like that gold spot that went around the wall” (136). Septimus’s perception of the “gold spot” allows Nature’s “life” to shine through Shakespeare’s words. In spite of his intuition of essential meaning, Septimus’s stories fail to explain the horror of war. His fantastic story about Evans, who, despite having died in the war, “answered from behind the tree … [who] sang among the orchids … [who] was actually walking towards them” (68), and who later becomes the “voice from behind the screen” (91), avoids direct confrontation with death, war, and “human cruelty.” Septimus’s fantasies bring him close to “reality” and “life” and simultaneously confound his ability to connect with others or make sense of war’s tragedy.\footnote{See Chapter 1 for an explanation of Woolf’s terms: “life” and “reality.”}

Finally, Septimus’s fantasies alienate him from society and preclude him from functioning in the “real” world, namely the world of shared cultural practices. Even his elevated name ends up being a fantasy. “London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith; thought nothing of fantastic Christian names like Septimus with which their parents have thought to distinguish them” (82). In spite of his grandiose aspirations and revelations, Septimus achieves little success in navigating this “real” socially constructed world and resisting its power with his own narratives.

Septimus’s social behavior has been scripted; his body has been inscribed by culture, as well. Woolf asks as she introduces Septimus, “the world has raised its whip;
where will it descend? (14). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, it descends on the body of Septimus. Hussey notes that masculinity is inscribed on his body “when he is urged by his employer, Mr. Brewer, to develop ‘manliness’ (by playing football!)” (13). Enlisting for war is another indicator that “manliness” inscribes itself on his body, and Hussey notes that “[w]hen his friend Evans dies in battle, Septimus sees an opportunity to display his manliness to the world by showing no feelings” (13). His body has been “manipulated, shaped, trained” (*Discipline* 136) by power; it has been used as a tool by the “prying and insidious ... fingers of the European War” (84), and although he returns from the war largely physically unscathed (“he was still under thirty and was bound to survive. He was right there. The last shells missed him” (84)), Septimus is certain at moments that his body has been mutilated: “the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock” (66). The result of violent inscription by power upon the body is, for Septimus, excruciating.

At other moments, Septimus experiences embodied ecstasy, a kind of *jouissance*; his final effort at resistance is to claim the body that produces and sustains his rapture. He recognizes pleasures of material existence: “Food was pleasant; the sun hot” (90). Again, just before he dies, he recognizes embodied joy and pleasure: “Life was good. The sun hot” (146), and not long before he dies, he again feels rapture:

> watching the watery gold glow and fade with the astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wall-paper. Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths. Of the air; the sound of water was in the room and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far way on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more. (136)

Rezia observes, “for though he had no fingers, could not even do up a parcel, he had a wonderful eye,” perhaps alluding to an injury sustained in combat (140).
This rapture is inspired by phenomenological experience: sights and sounds become “treasures” poured over his head—only a thin border exists where the world stops and his body begins. His heart in his body speaks to him. However, he perceives his body as an object separate from “himself” when he notices “his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves.” Because “Holmes was coming” (145), he must escape “human nature.” He had wondered earlier “why should he kill himself for their sakes?” but he recognizes that for “those who are about to die are alone, there was … an isolation full of sublimity” (90). Clarissa, likewise, paradoxically recognizes this sublimity as “an embrace in death” (180). When Clarissa hears about Septimus’s suicide, she wonders if he had “plunged holding his treasure,” and indeed he has, because his last form of resistance, when logic and fantasy fail him, is to fling his body out the window (180). His body, capable of rapturous embodied experience yet disconnected from himself and others, becomes an object of resistance: his treasure.103

**Ambiguous Boundaries**

Clarissa and Elizabeth each find a way to resist oppressive patriarchal constructs and inscription on their bodies through personal narrative and lived experience. Clarissa and her daughter Elizabeth, as women, each find themselves outside the phallogocentric center; the culture asks them to assume the position of other. Yet, as upper class women, they successfully (yet also tenuously) navigate their positions in society through personal narrative. Septimus’s social position places him on precarious borders that lie on the...

103 Although Septimus has lost his life, he may have instigated political change. A discussion ensues at the party regarding the needs of shell-shocked soldiers.
periphery of phallogocentric discourse and culture, but wealth and class allow Clarissa and her daughter Elizabeth access and mobility. Clarissa recognizes Richard as the “foundation of it all” (27) (the house, the wealth, the dress, the flowers, the party), and Elizabeth, “in her very well cut clothes” (131), used to privilege, “stepped forward and most competently boarded the omnibus in front of everybody” (132). Furthermore, when told it was “[a]nother penny ... to the Strand,” Elizabeth impulsively spends “another penny then. She would go up to the Strand” (133). And yet, because of their gender, Clarissa and Elizabeth are located outside of the phallogocentric center (albeit to different degrees because of the differing cultural and political circumstances with which either grew up). Peter recognizes the weight of the cultural constructions that disproportionately affected women in his youth: “the whole pyramidal accumulation which in his youth had seemed unmovable. On top of them it had pressed; weighed them down, the women especially” (158). Clarissa and Elizabeth each find a way to shift this seemingly “unmovable” cultural “accumulation.”

Through Clarissa’s ambiguous relationship to the object of desire, Woolf sets up a tension between immediate experience with the body’s jouissance on one hand and the cultural constructions that impose themselves upon the body. Although she marries Richard and had entertained a relationship with Peter, Clarissa remains attracted to women. Her marriage with Richard is a failure sexually, for “she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet ... through some contraction of this cold spirit, she had failed him” (31). Clarissa finds walking with Peter “adorable” (6) and wonders, “why did I make up my mind not to marry him?” (40), knowing at the same time how “intolerable” (6) his criticism and their arguments were. In
her youth, she passionately loved her friend Sally Seton; when Sally kissed her on the lips, Clarissa recalls “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” (35). As an older woman, Clarissa continues to experience embodied rapture inspired by women:

she could not resist yielding to the charm of a woman ... [and] she did undoubtedly feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for a moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. (31)

As mentioned previously, “meaning” is “almost expressed” in this instance through embodied female erotic experience—the physical experience is “swollen with some astonishing significance,” and in a heightened “moment” of feeling the “thin skin,” or border, that separates inner meaning from the symbolic is ruptured: life becomes momentarily illuminated and thus “almost expressed.” But even as Clarissa discloses her response to women, she judges the appropriateness of her arousal: “She resented it, had a scruple picked up Heaven knows where” (31). But in fact, it is quite clear where she has picked up this scruple—she has inherited the Victorian cultural injunction against lesbian love and female sexual gratification that persisted well into the twentieth century (and that she would have come of age with). She claims these strictures against lesbian love are “sent by Nature (who is invariably wise)” (31). The imposition of culture onto her embodied response to women has almost become naturalized.

Although she is emotionally intimate with Peter and physically attracted to Sally, the inscription of feminine norms on Clarissa’s body preclude her from marrying an undependable man or having an affair with a woman. The heterosexual marriage plot has
been spelled out for her, and Clarissa, in spite of compelling attraction to Sally, is more strongly compelled to marry Richard. As Woolf observes in *Three Guineas*, marriage was “the one profession that was open to” women of Clarissa’s generation, and for an upper class young woman such as Clarissa, marrying a man like Richard, predictable and wealthy, seems her only option (25).

The novel finds Clarissa in midlife, and while Clarissa has followed the marriage plot, she is dissatisfied with it. Marriage and childbearing have defined and shaped her; now that she is slightly distanced from both her husband and almost-grown daughter, the body that has defined her sense of self feels strangely insubstantial:

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 anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (10)

Clarissa’s marriage was dictated to her by culture and has offered her superficial meaning and structure. At her age, she no longer has a script to follow beyond the fact that her husband’s name now all but defines her. “[T]his being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” leaves her body not only “feeling ... suddenly shriveled, aged, breastless” (30) but “invisible.”

Clarissa’s defense against this experience of unembodiment is to use personal narrative to resist culture. This personal narrative sometimes narrowly defines her sense of self and sometimes invokes spontaneous upwelling of embodied rapture, or *jouissance* and creates the world around her. When she returns home from her excursion to Bond Street during which she felt so “unseen; unknown.” As noted earlier, she recreates a physical-social self:

She pursed her lips when she looked into the glass. It was to give her face a point. That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when
some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to. (36)

This fixed, one-sided "self" feels solid and definite—it counters her feeling of insubstantiality: she can play the part of "perfect hostess" from this position (7). But this rigid self excludes her multifaceted lived experience. Her love of "life" often manifests itself in physical rapture; Clarissa experiences "plumes like pampas grass in a tropic gale in her breast" (45). Clarissa's joy arises from phenomenological experience, "how one sees it," and she narrates a story of "life" based on her perceptions. "For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it around one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh," Clarissa marvels (4). The way that Clarissa "sees" the world has dual import: not only does she perceive her environment, but the way in which she "sees it ... making it up ... building it" entails a creative vision that she powerfully manifests in the world. Through her creative narrative "the presence of this thing which she felt to be so obvious became physically existent" (118). Clarissa builds life up and then is "tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh." No story that Clarissa creates remains fixed over time.

Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth also creates and disassembles her own narratives. Like other characters, Elizabeth resists cultural expectations by narrating her own stories; like Septimus, her stories place her on a border. While Septimus vacillates between extreme, far-reaching borders, she walks an ambiguous boundary from which she may

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104 Just as the names of other characters interpellate them as subjects, Elizabeth is imbued with identity through her name. Queen Elizabeth I was identified alternatively by her "two bodies": virgin queen and masculine monarch. Elizabeth Dalloway straddles the border between coy passivity and regal, androgynous agency, just as Queen Elizabeth did.
choose to step into a scripted female role or onto the largely unwritten territory of modern twentieth-century woman. Elizabeth had been born into early twentieth-century culture, a very different culture from that of her mother’s childhood, and yet the vestiges of Victorian culture are nevertheless impressed upon her. Elizabeth is described by her mother as “stately” and “serene,” but Clarissa worries that Elizabeth is “really awfully bored” by young womanly things, and she worries “[t]hat she did not care more about it—for instance her clothes” (132). Cultural inscription onto Elizabeth’s body “was beginning.... People were beginning to compare her to poplar trees, early dawn, hyacinths, fawns, running water, and garden lilies ... and she had to go to parties” (131). She is expected to make an appearance at such parties, to be lovely and well dressed, and to advertise herself for marriage. But such expectations “made her life a burden to her, for she so much preferred being left alone” (131). Clarissa’s daughter Elizabeth has little interest in attending her mother’s party.

A simple form of resistance for Elizabeth is “being left alone,” severing connections to her mother and Miss Kilman, each of whom impose cultural expectations on her. After escaping from the oppressive love of Miss Kilman, she is “delighted to be free,” and she decides to take an omnibus ride along the Strand, an artsy and populous street in London (132). The Strand—literally from the old English for “shore” and physically the former shore of the Thames—is a border between “nature” and “culture”

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105 Rachel Bowlby notes: “When Elizabeth Dalloway steps out and takes the bus up the Strand on a fine June day in 1923, everything seems to suggest that she is the bearer of new opportunities for her sex” (70).
106 While Foucault claims that power inscribes itself upon the body, power is not necessarily concentrated in the hands of the few who exercise political control. Power, as it becomes inscribed on various individuals, alters their behavior so that they in turn become agents of power, inscribing it upon others. In this way, Clarissa and Doris Kilman become agents of cultural inscription of Elizabeth in spite of the fact that they are subject to power themselves.
107 Even her choice of street to explore differentiates Elizabeth from her mother: while her mother shops on fashionable Bond Street for the evening’s party, Elizabeth immerses herself among the variety of people on the Strand.
(between a conception of "body" as essential and pre-discursive and body constructed through culture and language). In fact, nature and culture merge in Elizabeth's view. The mass of people streaming down the Strand becomes organic matter swept down a river of life: "this life; this procession, would wrap them all about and carry them on, as in the rough stream of a glacier the ice holds a splinter of bone, a blue petal, some oak trees, and rolls them on" (135). This ambiguous border between nature and culture is an apt locale from which Elizabeth narrates her possibilities as a twentieth-century woman.

Elizabeth's stories resist the inscription of traditional femininity onto her body, but her resistance is by no means conclusive. "Comparing women to poplars," she observes, is "very silly" but also "exciting, of course" (133). Her narratives vacillate between action and passivity, between traditionally masculine agency and feminine submissiveness, between unembodiment and embodiment, between aloofness and connection, between professional aspirations and laziness. At the beginning of the passage, Elizabeth indicates her ambiguous stance as she watches the omnibuses: "But which should she get on to?" she wonders (131-2).

Elizabeth vacillates between passivity and assertive agency. She tells herself: "She had no preferences. Of course, she would not push her way. She inclined to be passive" (132). However, she immediately contradicts this story when she "[s]uddenly ... stepped forward and most competently boarded the omnibus, in front of everybody ... [and] took a seat on top" (132). Here she exhibits assertiveness and agency. She imagines the omnibus a "pirate ... [which] started forward, sprang away ... reckless, unscrupulous,

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108 See Chapter 1 for an explanation of the mind-body amalgam and the integration of the cultural and the pre-cultural bodies.
109 Bowlby claims that "Elizabeth's destiny, then, is far from certain in either its evaluation or its outcome" (75).
bearing down ruthlessly, circumventing dangerously, boldly snatching a passenger, or ignoring a passenger, squeezing eel-like and arrogant in between, and then rushing insolently all sails up Whitehall” (132). Riding atop this “pirate,” Elizabeth assumes a rebellious and traditionally masculine sexual agency that is reiterated throughout the passage: she “mounted the omnibus” and seats herself “on top;” as she continues on foot, “[s]he penetrated a little further” (134).

But Elizabeth’s penetration of the city is tentative: she is “like someone penetrating on tiptoe” (134). Likewise, Elizabeth does not identify wholly with her pirate. She rather fancies herself “like the figurehead” of the ship. This role of figurehead is again ambiguous. She is fully embodied (in traditionally feminine fashion) when “to each movement of the omnibus the beautiful body in the fawn-colored coat responded freely like a rider … for the breeze slightly disarrayed her” (132). This “fawn-colored coat” recalls Miss Kilman’s description earlier in the passage, “to whom [Elizabeth] had been a fawn in the open, a moon in a glade” (132); such a description, coupled with the detail of the “fawn-colored coat,” inscribes Elizabeth with passivity and traditional markers of femininity. But within moments her female body becomes a lifeless object: “her cheeks [had] the pallor of white painted wood; and her fine eyes, having no eyes to meet, gazed ahead, blank, bright, with the staring incredible innocence of sculpture” (133). The “gaze” that she casts over the Strand allows her a detached mastery of her surroundings—she sweeps up the sights around her and assimilates them into her story. Elizabeth’s detached gaze allows her to enjoy the anonymity of the crowd; she “liked the geniality, sisterhood, motherhood, brotherhood of this uproar,” but it is a generalized geniality, a distanced and abstracted love, in which she need not directly encounter the other (134).
Elizabeth’s stories allow her to navigate the changing expectations of women in the 1920’s—she imagines herself as a new style of woman. She may indulge in such imaginings because of her family’s wealth. In spite of family obligations and traditional expectations of women, the penny earned by her father gives her freedom. She may travel any direction in the city; she can choose any profession she wishes, for “every profession is open to women of your generation,” Miss Kilman tells her (133), and this “made her quite determined, whatever her mother might say, to become either a farmer or a doctor” (134). However, the attainability of such professional aspirations is questionable, in spite of changes in British law and in spite of the wealth and connectedness of Elizabeth’s family. In part, because as Bowlby notices (83), her wishes that “[s]he might own a thousand acres and have people under her” (133) is more childhood fantasy than realistic professional goal, and in part because Elizabeth admits to herself that “she was, of course, rather lazy” (134). Her desire to work in a formerly male sphere may arise as much from rebellion against her mother as from genuine desire.

When she remembers obligations to her mother, she shrinks—culture closes in—her “revelation” settles back down on “the sandy floor” (134). Really, she is not free; she lives in the house that culture has constructed for a young woman of her social class. She doesn’t only possess disinterested love for humanity, she also remains connected to her mother. She realizes: “She must go home. She must dress for dinner. But what was the time?—where was a clock?” (134). When she recalls her obligations, she not only searches for guidance from clock time, a regulated, cultural structure, but she also reverts from fluid language to short, choppy, simple syntax indicative of patriarchal-empirical

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110 The British 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act opened professions to women. It is referenced in *Three Guineas*: “the right to earn one’s living ... was conferred upon us less than twenty years ago, in the year 1919, by an Act which unbarred the professions” (16).
writing.111 Again in choppy syntax, Elizabeth realizes, “it was later than she thought. Her mother would not like her to be wandering off alone like this. She turned back down the Strand” (135). Because of cultural and familial obligations, she now literally swims against the stream of life. As she turns toward home, the vibrancy of the Strand fades:

> a puff of wind ... blew a thin black veil over the sun and over the Strand. The faces faded; the omnibuses suddenly lost their glow. For although the clouds were of mountainous white so that one could fancy hacking hard chips off with a hatchet, with broad golden slopes, lawns of celestial pleasure gardens, on their flanks, and had all the appearance of settled habitations assembled for the conference of gods above the world, there was a perpetual movement among them. Signs were interchanged, when, as if to fulfil some scheme arranged already, now a summit dwindled, now a whole block of pyramidal size which had kept its station inalterably advanced into the midst or gravely led the procession to fresh anchorage. Fixed though they seemed at their posts, at rest in perfect unanimity, nothing could be fresher, freer, more sensitive superficially than the snow-white or gold-kindled surface; to change, to go, to dismantle the solemn assemblage was immediately possible; and in spite of the grave fixity, the accumulated robustness and solidity, now they struck light to the earth, now darkness. (135-6)

In this passage, the fading vibrancy of the Strand has made way for a novel revelation.

Gazing up at the clouds, Elizabeth recognizes that structure is conjured up from elemental rhythm, and such structure is easily misrecognized as “pyramidal,” “settled habitations” that remain “fixed at their posts” and “kept their stations inalterably.” The clouds seem brittle; one could “fancy hacking hard chips off with a hatchet.” But Elizabeth suddenly perceives that their “grave fixity” is not permanent, for “there was a perpetual movement among them,” in fact, “nothing could be fresher, freer, more sensitive superficially than the snow-white or gold-kindled surface ... [and] to dismantle the solemn assemblage was immediately possible.” She realizes that not only are her pirate stories passing fancies, but the social structures and accompanying ideologies to which human beings so

111 Refer to Chapter 2 for an explanation of “patriarchal-empirical writing,” and see Chapter 1 for the segmenting, patriarchal function of clocks.
adamantly adhere are in actuality ephemeral; they have the possibility to collapse and be rebuilt moment by moment. A playful slippage of signifiers ensures a not-too-rigid structure, for “[s]igns were interchanged” and the “conference of the gods” is always altering the medium of its discourse. If structure and culture are indeed transitory, she need neither completely rebel against her mother nor submissively fit the role Clarissa imagines for her.  

Realizing this, she chooses to go home to her mother and to the party she admits to disliking. She attends Clarissa’s party, playing a feminine role, “with her hair done up in the fashionable way, in the pink dress” (165). Willie Titcomb, of course, thinks: “She was like a poplar, she was like a river, she was like a hyacinth,” and while speaking with him Elizabeth retorts internally: “Oh how much nicer to be in the country and do what she liked! She could hear her poor dog howling, Elizabeth was certain” (184). Willie Titcomb bores her, but she is somewhat susceptible to the compliments of her father. Richard wonders, “Who is that lovely girl? And suddenly he realised that it was his Elizabeth, and he had not recognized her, she looked so lovely in her pink frock!” When Richard tells his daughter “he had wondered, Who is that lovely girl?” Elizabeth has mixed reactions to her father’s approval: even while her father’s compliment “did make her happy,” she imagines “her poor dog … howling” (189).

It is not clear if Elizabeth will continue to recognize cultural constructs as ephemeral and transitory, nor is it clear which path she’ll choose: traditional feminine, modern woman, or an ambiguous combination of both. But ultimately, because of her

112 Since Judith Butler sees no possibility to reverting back to a “natural,” pre-discursive body, perhaps such deconstructionist “play” will allow the transcendence of current forms of cultural inscription that Butler hopes for. “The culturally constructed body cannot be liberated to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasure, but only to an open future of cultural possibilities,” claims Butler (qtd. in Oksala 120).
fleeting recognition of the ephemeral nature of social structures, she isn’t forced into any position; on this day, she chooses to return home and live in the structure erected around her. She chooses to do so lightly and with confidence: after her excursion to the Strand, Elizabeth heads home to her well-to-do borough, her parents’ home, and Clarissa’s party. She “[c]almly and competently … mounted the Westminster omnibus,” exercising choice and ultimately assuming androgynous agency (136).113

EPILOGUE

As I conclude my thesis, I am able to step away from it and assess whether my vision for the project matches the outcome. I feel satisfied that I made connections between Woolf’s ontology, her concerns with language, and her social criticism. These concerns had initially jumped out at me while reading Mrs. Dalloway, but before taking on this project I had not been able to articulate their many subtle overlaps. I additionally enjoyed the many close readings I engaged in; interacting with the language in Mrs. Dalloway itself was profoundly satisfying, and the close examination of Woolf’s language added depth and substance to my argument.

That said, were I to continue to develop this project, I would make the connections between ontology, language, and social-political existence more explicit and pronounced. I would continue studying the work of other scholars and return to the text of Mrs. Dalloway itself. Ideally, I would narrow the focus of my argument. My main

113 Woolf advocates an androgynous mind in A Room of One’s Own: “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” (2146). Famously, Woolf’s novel Orlando features an androgynous protagonist who experiences life as both a man and a woman.
focus would be an idea that I consider central to my argument but which I failed to develop in adequate detail: namely, the connections between Woolf’s aesthetics and questions of ethics. Although I treated the connection between aesthetics and ethics lightly in my thesis, I am deeply convinced that the rigid and brittle linguistic structures that Woolf criticizes are analogous to rigid and brittle convictions about the way that society ought to function. Patriarchy and fascism, in particular, which Woolf strongly criticizes, build rigid and exclusionary ideological boxes that exclude alternative forms of being and expression. As hinted at when I brought Kristeva’s “The Ethics of Linguistics” into the conversation, not only are other forms of being excluded by rigid ideology, but the fear of “otherness” experienced by those inside the box often leads to violence directed against those on the periphery. I see part of Woolf’s project—and I framed my argument with this idea in the Introduction—as envisioning alternate possibilities for political and creative existence. In order to do so, Woolf uses the concept of fluid and perpetual construction and deconstruction throughout her works on a variety of levels. “[T]hink[ing]” about “this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves” (Guineas 77) allows for the “dismantl[ing] [of] the solemn assemblage” (Dalloway 136). Utilization of more ideas from Three Guineas would have helped to draw out these parallels.

This project nevertheless points to important ethical questions, and the text of Mrs. Dalloway remains highly relevant eighty-five years after its publication. Almost a century later, economic and imperial power has shifted from Britain to the United States. Woolf saw the beginnings of advanced global capitalism, but it would take a few more decades before scholars theorized about its full implications, many of which are still unfolding. Soldiers returning to the United States from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for
example, inflicted with post-traumatic stress syndrome, are but one of the many effects of
global capitalism. This is one of the many reasons why Woolf is still relevant: Woolf’s
social criticism, exemplified in her depiction of shell-shocked veteran of the Great War,
Septimus Warren Smith, prompts readers to continue to “think” about the United States
“civilization” (and by implication of military and economic imperialism, the global
civilization) in which we find ourselves.

It is especially important now because of the enmeshed nature of capitalism’s
influences in the lives of citizens. The conflation of advertisement and aesthetics, hinted
at in the “aeroplane” scene, has become the fabric of everyday existence. Jean
Baudrillard asserts that the Real no longer exists, that the United States operates in a
hyperreality in which capitalism’s fictions mask people’s disconnection from the basic
material realities of production—in fact, amidst the operations of daily life, the reality of
production does not even exist. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in *Liquid Modernity*,
claims that traditionally it has been the wealthy who are anchored to land and the poor
who are nomadic; he explains that we now live in a world where the poor cling tightly to
their meager assets while the ultra wealthy (and their capital) travel fluidly across
international boundaries. However, we must realize that under the surface liquidity lies a
tightly controlled ideological structure that, as in the case of the recent financial crisis,
can come tumbling down like a house of cards.\textsuperscript{114}

Bauman’s conception of a liquid modernity is inspired by a line from Karl Marx:
“all that is solid melts into air” (*Manifesto* 38). A century and a half ago, Marx had

\textsuperscript{114} The ideological structure did not entirely come tumbling down like a house of cards in the case of the
recent financial crisis—it persists strongly, especially because those who collaborated in the “collapse”
were propped up financially. It was slightly eroded, however; and there is no doubt that pulling the wrong
card could instigate its collapse.
envisioned an inverse metaphor to Bauman’s. He saw the ruling class as the solid structure and the potential for revolution as the seething liquid mass within: “small fractures and fissures [exist] in the dry crust of European society … Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock” (“Speech” 427). Supposedly fixed economic structures could easily be undone, claimed Marx, and the creative potential of the people was the liquid seething within. He continues: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify” (Manifesto 38). Although Woolf’s concerns extended well beyond socialist ideas, she advocates this perpetual state of becoming—the continual erecting and collapsing of structure.

Marshall Berman also re-contextualizes Marx’s quote, “all that is solid will melt into air,” in the book by that title. He explains his purpose: “I define modernism as any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it” (5). This is also one of Woolf’s purposes. Clarissa observes an effect of modernity: “This late age of the world’s experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears” (9). But there is also love “[i]n people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jungle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead” (Dalloway 4). Mrs. Dalloway explores this dual relationship with modernity. In doing so, it simultaneously illuminates the “pattern” of the world’s underlying “reality,” the patterns by which authors model their
fiction, and the patterns of social-political-economic organization. Her work continues to offer sparkling insights about the structure of our society that "burn" through the "mist."
APPENDIX A

Virginia Woolf's Conception of Gendered Language
As Manifested in Character Thought

The following is a stylistic analysis of passages from *To The Lighthouse* that are spoken by male and female characters. It turns out that the male Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Tansley use rigid, segmenting and confining logical-empirical language, while Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe use fluid, impressionistic language. In the analysis, I refer to the two types of language as "masculine" and "feminine," partly because they are attributed to archetypical masculine and feminine characters Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. In actuality, either gender may use either type of language, as evidenced in *Mrs. Dalloway* and in the Lily Briscoe character. These types of language are connected to biological sex only because of gendered cultural expectations. A better characterization of the two types of language may be "patriarchal" and "anti-patriarchal."

While reading various novels by Virginia Woolf, I've intuited that Woolf holds conceptions of what constitutes masculine versus feminine language. She views male language as rigid, segmented, and confining, whereas female language is fluid, sensory, and connected to the body. I therefore hypothesize that Woolf's male and female characters use language in ways that exemplify her conceptions of gendered language. I have chosen four passages from *To the Lighthouse* with which to investigate this hypothesis. The first two passages are excerpted from the thoughts of academic, arch-

115 These characteristics are framed in the larger discourse as logical-empirical (masculine attributes) and phenomenological-impressionistic (feminine attributes).
116 I make the assumption that thoughts are constructed through language—both actual, extra-textual thoughts and the "thoughts" of literary subjects. Therefore, although Woolf writes characters' thoughts in these passages, I also refer to these thoughts as "language use," "language," or even "speech".
masculine Mr. Ramsay and the beautiful, eternal feminine Mrs. Ramsay. The second two passages include the thoughts of Charles Tansley and Lily Briscoe, each a houseguest at the Ramsay’s. I chose these particular passages not because I was certain they would yield the linguistic evidence necessary to prove my thesis, but rather because Woolf explores gender relations in To the Lighthouse with each of these pairs of characters. If character portrayal reflects Woolf’s concern with gender, then any example of Woolf’s skillfully crafted character-thought must reflect this concern as well. Although these passages may not be the most illustrative or representative examples of gendered speech, they easily invite comparison: they are of serendipitously similar length and structure, and each pair concerns itself with one narrative event. I have included the excerpted passages in the body of this paper for easy reference. Following each excepted pair of passages, I analyze the linguistic features of syntax, lexis, and phonology to determine whether differences do indeed exist between the speech of the male and female characters.

The first passages occur before and after an encounter in which Mr. Ramsay feels inadequate and seeks reassurance from his wife. Each passage includes two paragraphs, and each is approximately one-and-a-quarter pages long. Mr. Ramsay “speaks” first:

He stood stock still, by the urn, with the geranium flowing over it. How many men in a thousand million, he asked himself, reach Z after all? Surely the leader of a forlorn hope may ask himself that, and answer, without treachery to the expedition behind him, “One perhaps.” One in a generation. Is he to be blamed then if he is not that one? provided he has toiled honestly, given to the best of his power, and till he has no more left to give? And his fame lasts how long? It is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies how men will

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117 Woolf never discloses the first names of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay; these characters have no identity outside their marriage, and Mrs. Ramsay has no identity outside of her husband’s. Charles Tansley and Lily Briscoe are referred to as Tansley and Lily in the subsequent pages of this paper because that reflects how they are referred to in the novel, with the female being addressed less formally.
speak of him hereafter? His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years. And what are two thousand years? (asked Mr. Ramsay ironically, staring at the hedge). What, indeed, if you look from a mountain top down the long wastes of the ages? The very stone one kicks with one’s boot will outlast Shakespeare. His own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still. (He looked into the hedge, into the intricacy of the twigs.) Who then could blame the leader of that forlorn party which after all has climbed high enough to see the waste of the years and the perishing of stars, if before death stiffens his limbs beyond the power of movement he does a little consciously raise his numbed fingers to his brow, and square his shoulders, so that when the search party comes they will find him dead at his post, the fine figure of a soldier? Mr. Ramsay squared his shoulders and stood very upright by the urn.

Who will blame him, if, so standing for a moment, he dwells upon fame, upon search parties, upon cairns raised by grateful followers over his bones? Finally, who shall blame the leader of the doomed expedition, if, having adventured to the uttermost, and used his strength wholly to the last ounce and fallen asleep not much caring if he wakes or not, he now perceives by some pricking in his toes that he lives, and does not on the whole object to live, but requires sympathy, and whiskey, and some one to tell the story of his suffering to at once? Who shall blame him? Who will not secretly rejoice when the hero puts his armor off, and halts by the window and gazes at his wife and son, who, very distant at first, gradually come closer and closer, till lips and book and head are clearly before him, though still lovely and unfamiliar from the intensity of his isolation and the waste of ages and the perishing of the stars, and finally putting his pipe in his pocket and bending his magnificent head before her—who will blame him if he does homage to the beauty of the world? (35-6)

At this point in the narrative, Mr. Ramsay complains to his wife that he is “a failure” (37). Mrs. Ramsay reassures him, and he leaves “[f]illed with her words ... looking at her with humble gratitude, restored, renewed” (38). In contrast, Mrs. Ramsay feels depleted of energy as she muses about the encounter with her husband:

Immediately, Mrs. Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself, so that she had only strength enough to move her finger, in exquisite abandonment to exhaustion, across the page of Grimm’s fairy story, while there throbbed through her, like the pulse in a spring which has expanded to its full width and now gently ceases to beat, the rapture of successful creation.
Every throb of this pulse seemed, as he walked away, to enclose her and her husband, and to give to each that solace which two different notes, one high, one low, struck together, seem to give each other as they combine. Yet, as the resonance died, and she turned to the Fairy Tale again, Mrs. Ramsay felt not only exhausted in body (afterwards, not at the time, she always felt this) but also there tinged her physical fatigue some faintly disagreeable sensation with another origin. Not that, as she read aloud the story of the Fisherman’s Wife, she knew precisely what it came from; nor did she let herself put into words her dissatisfaction when she realized, at the turn of the page when she stopped and heard dully, ominously, a wave fall, how it came from this: she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband; and further, could not bear not being entirely sure, when she spoke to him, of the truth of what he said. Universities and people wanting him, lectures and books and their being of the highest importance—all that she did not doubt for a moment; but it was their relation, and his coming to her side that, openly, so that any one could see, that discomposed her; for then people said he depended on her, when they much know that of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible. But then again, it was the other thing too—not being able to tell him the truth, being afraid, for instance, about the greenhouse roof and the expense it would be, fifty pounds perhaps, to mend it; and then about his books, to be afraid that he might guess, what she a little suspected, that his last book was not quite his best book (she gathered that from William Bankes); and then to hide small daily things, and the children seeing it, and the burden it laid on them—all this diminished the entire joy, the pure joy, of the two notes sounding together, and let the sound die on her ear now with a dismal flatness. (38-9)

It is clear from these two excerpts that Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay experience life quite differently. The differences are perhaps shaped by the way each uses language. Their language use indeed is quite different. Firstly, the syntax of each character’s “speech” varies greatly. Mr. Ramsay’s paragraphs include a total of twenty sentences, while Mrs. Ramsay’s include only six sentences—Mr. Ramsay utters more than three times as many

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118 Here, I make the assumption that language constructs experience and experience generates language. M. M. Bakhtin states: “language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well” (63).
sentences as Mrs. Ramsay within selections of approximately the same length.\textsuperscript{119}

Therefore, his sentences are shorter. A few, such as \textit{His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years}, are quite short. Sentences such as this one follow a simple subject-verb-object format. Such short, choppy sentences segment ideas into discrete units, separating ideas—and experiences—from one another. Mr. Ramsay’s sentences get longer and more complex near the end of his passage—but only as he approaches Mrs. Ramsay’s soothing beauty. Mrs. Ramsay’s six sentences, on the other hand, are long, wandering, and complex. Here is one example:

\begin{quote}
Not that, as she read aloud the story of the Fisherman’s Wife, she knew precisely what it came from; nor did she let herself put into words her dissatisfaction when she realized, at the turn of the page when she stopped and heard dully, ominously, a wave fall, how it came from this: she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband; and further, could not bear not being entirely sure, when she spoke to him, of the truth of what she said.
\end{quote}

The core meaning of the sentence is as follows: At first she did not know where [the “disagreeable sensation”] came from, and she did not verbalize it when she did realize: she did not like to feel better than her husband and could not be sure she told him the truth. This is a complex sentence consisting of three independent clauses, each joined with a semi colon. The last independent clause has a compound predicate. The second predicate in that clause, \textit{and further, could not bear not being entirely sure, when she spoke to him, of the truth of what she said}, is foregrounded because of the unconventional use of a semi colon to join it to the other predicate. Such an unconventional use of a semi colon occurs three times in the original excerpt—each time it signals a pause before Mrs.

\textsuperscript{119} In both examples, I am aware that I always address the speech-thoughts of the male character before that of the female character, in what could be construed as a privileging of male over female. The only reason I do so is because chronologically, the male speaks first in the passages I’ve chosen, and I maintain this parallel structure for clarity’s sake.
Ramsay considers an unpleasant truth relating to her husband. Additionally, transitional phrases, adverbial phrases, and prepositional phrases are interjected into this complex sentence, so that the core structure of the sentence is almost washed away—the result being an impressionistic sea of words from which a central idea surfaces indirectly. Thus, Woolf effects a fluid, borderless, feminine language through Mrs. Ramsay’s wandering, associative syntax.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s passages include the identical, foregrounded graphological-syntactical parallelism: each passage includes two parenthetical phrases. Mr. Ramsay’s read: *(asked Mr. Ramsay ironically, staring at the hedge) and *(He looked into the hedge, into the intricacy of the twigs.)* Mr. Ramsay’s first parenthetical phrase is foregrounded as a sentence fragment connected to the previous question, symbolizing his broken emotional state and segmented thinking. And as an “aside” description of Mr. Ramsay’s actions, an additional function of the parenthetical phrase could be the narrator commenting on Mr. Ramsay. I find it more likely that Mr. Ramsay comments on himself here, standing outside himself, narrating his performance—his desired view of himself. The second parenthetical phrase could again be narrator commentary, but is more likely Mr. Ramsay’s self-conscious commentary on his own performance as a tortured intellectual. Mrs. Ramsay’s parenthetical phrases perform quite different functions. Her first, *(afterwards, not at the time, she always felt this)*, explicates her feelings. Syntactically, it is included in a long, complex sentence—again indicative of fluid, open language in which thoughts, action, and feeling blend together. The second parenthetical phrase, *(she gathered that from William Bankes)*, is a reference to a male authority—she adopts Bankes’s ideas as her own.
Not only does the syntax of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s sentences differ, but so does the lexis contained therein—most notably the content nouns. Mr. Ramsay’s selection contains seventy-eight such nouns, and Mrs. Ramsay’s selection contains sixty-eight. Mr. Ramsay’s selection includes almost fifteen percent more content nouns than Mrs. Ramsay’s, indicating his language may be more concrete than hers. In some cases Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s language share lexical fields (even though the lexis contained within each is quite different); in other instances, lexical fields used by the male and female characters are entirely unrelated.

The first lexical field common to both characters is “body.” Mr. Ramsay segments the body: he speaks of limbs, fingers, brow, shoulders, head, lips, toes, and bones. Boot, pipe and pocket are segmented extensions of (and male accoutrements for) the body. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, uses holistic, feeling-oriented language: body, fatigue, sensation, strength, exhaustion, origin, rapture, and pulse. Finger is the only discrete body part, used to symbolize Mrs. Ramsay’s state of exhaustion after consoling her husband. Both characters also use “quantifiers.” Mr. Ramsay uses two thousand years, thousand million, one, year, and ounce, segmenting time and weight into discrete quantities. Generation, ages, figure, and uttermost indicate Mr. Ramsay’s grandiose masculine striving for achievement (which demands quantification); with generation and ages he places himself within the continuum of intellectuals, comparing himself to figure[s] such as Shakespeare. Uttermost indicates his striving to be the best, to conquer the mountain top, to shine amongst the stars. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, uses moment, second, width, and time. Moment and second (although often used to identify a discrete segment of time) also indicate existence in the fluid present. Width and time
speak to a manner of evaluating without actually quantifying. She uses one specific monetary term, *fifty pounds*, but only in relation to her worries about Mr. Ramsay.

“Nature” terms are used differently by each character as well. Mr. Ramsay uses *geranium, twigs, hedge, light, and stars.* *Geranium, twigs and hedge* certainly belong to nature, but again, each is segmented. The *geranium* is confined to the urn, the *twigs* are pieces of a larger plant (much like the segmented, isolated body parts), and a *hedge* is planted and maintained in orderly fashion to delineate property. *Light* and *stars* alone indicate limitlessness: Mr. Ramsay yearns for unattainable intellectual brilliance. Mrs. Ramsay’s “nature” words include *wave, spring, petal, and creation.* *Wave and spring,* both water images, connote creativity and fluidity—the opposite of Mr. Ramsay’s confined or segmented nature words. *Petal* also relates to creativity and movement, unfurling as the flower blossoms (or closes at night). *Creation* exemplifies Mrs. Ramsay’s role in her family: she supports and renews her husband, and she births and nurtures her children. A last shared lexical grouping is “family.” Mr. Ramsay uses *wife* and *son;* he views them through a *window,* fixing them with his gaze (possessing and objectifying them). Mrs. Ramsay uses *relation* and *children* and twice uses *husband.*

While Mr. Ramsay makes himself the subject (*bending his magnificent head before her*), Mrs. Ramsay considers the feelings of her family members. She is concerned with *relation[s] over possession.* My analysis of these shared lexical fields leads me to conclude that through language, Mr. Ramsay segments his thinking, his body, his environment, and his family into discrete parts, whereas Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts indicate a fluid, sensory, embodied manner of thinking and being.
The opposite lexical fields of "death" and "life" belong respectively to Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, again supporting my hypothesis, because death indicates rigidity, and life indicates fluidity. Mr. Ramsay uses wastes, waste, perishing, death, urn, bones, stone, and cairns. The urn, evoking associations of ashes, and as such, of death, contains geraniums (and containing flowers in an urn symbolizes the constraining function of male language). Mr. Ramsay stands "stock still" next to the urn, again connoting rigidity and death. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, uses words that belong to "life:" pulse, creation, rapture, origin, and spring. Two remaining lexical fields are entirely disassociated from one another: Mrs. Ramsay uses "sound" words: ear, sound, notes, wave, and resonance, while Mr. Ramsay uses words connoting "military/exploration" and "male achievement."

Since Mr. Ramsay's fields overlap, I've listed them together: expedition, post, soldier, search parties, followers, armour, mountain top, party, men, power, fame, hero, leader, strength, best, and Shakespeare. Mrs. Ramsay's words are sensory, while Mr. Ramsay's words are conquest oriented. Her "sensory" language indicates fluidity and embodiment (merging with one's surroundings), while his "conquest" language attempts to dominate the surrounding world, segmenting and later defining it.

Phonological differences between the characters' speech exist as well; Mr. Ramsay's speech contains more alliteration and assonance than Mrs. Ramsay's. Mr. Ramsay uses the following twelve alliterative sequences within sentences: stock-still; many, men, million; hope, himself; lasts, long; little, light; fine, figure; so, standing; perceives, pricking; sympathy, someone, story, suffering; closer, clearly; perishing, putting, pipe, pocket; and bending, before, blame, beauty. Mrs. Ramsay has six instances (half as many as Mr. Ramsay) of alliteration: fold, fell, fabric, finger, fairy, full; physical,
fatigue, faintly; bear, being; books, being; and discomposed, depended. Mrs. Ramsay uses alliteration near the beginning of the passage when she experiences embodied feeling. This melodic, fluid, alliterative language ceases as worries about her husband beset her. Mr. Ramsay also uses assonance more frequently than Mrs. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay uses five pairs of words containing assonance: intricacy, twigs; climbed, high; stiffens, limbs; over, bones, and waste ages as compared to Mrs. Ramsay’s one instance: openly, discomposed. The frequency of Mr. Ramsay’s alliteration and assonance runs counter to my expectations, because I associate such phonological features with Mrs. Ramsay’s fluid language. However, Mr. Ramsay’s pointed poetics reveal the pomposity of his academic aspirations; by its very nature, poetic language is tightly controlled and constructed. Mr. Ramsay’s use thereof supports my hypothesis that Woolf’s masculine language is rigid and controlled.

This analysis of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts, although limited in scope, convincingly demonstrates that in these instances Woolf’s main characters use language in ways that can be described as either masculine or feminine. Mr. Ramsay’s language segments—he feels isolated yet strives for traditional masculine achievement. Mrs. Ramsay’s fluid, sensory language allows her embodied feeling, yet her “borderlessness” often leaves her feeling overextended. Additionally, Mr. Ramsay views himself as the subject of discourse and views his wife as the object. Mrs. Ramsay likewise views her husband as the subject and adapts herself to his needs—her fluidity and “borderlessness” serves this purpose.

Wondering if To the Lighthouse characters outside this central Ramsay pair exhibit similar linguistic traits, I examined the language of another set of male and female
characters: Charles Tansley and Lily Briscoe, houseguests at the Ramsay’s. Like Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley is an academic, but he does not boast of a beautiful wife and large family. Lily Briscoe is a painter; she is not married and questions gender norms, even as she feels compelled to conform to them. The following passages of (mostly) free indirect thought, each about ten lines long, are taken from a scene at the dinner table at the Ramsay home.

Charles Tansley is irritated by the small talk at the dinner table. He inflates his feelings of inadequacy into self righteousness, blaming the women:

For he was not going to talk the sort of rot these people wanted him to talk. He was not going to be condescended to by these silly women. He had been reading in his room, and now he came down and it all seemed to him silly, superficial, flimsy. Why did they dress? He had come down in his ordinary clothes. He had not got any dress clothes. “One never gets anything worth having by post”—that was the sort of thing they were always saying. They made men say those sorts of thing. Yes, it was pretty well true, he thought. They never got anything worth having from one year’s end to another. They did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat. It was the women’s fault. Women made civilization impossible with all their “charm,” all their silliness. (85)

Lily Briscoe bristles at Charles Tansley’s contempt for women. In a passage of free indirect thought she describes Tansley’s “meager fixity, that bare unloveliness,” implicitly commenting on the brittle and rigid masculinity that manifests itself in Woolf’s “masculine” language (85). She perceives Tansley’s contempt and questions it, describing its insidious effects on her:

He was really, Lily Briscoe thought, in spite of his eyes, but then look at his nose, look at his hands, the most uncharming human being she had ever met. Then why did she mind what he said? Women can’t write, women can’t paint—what did that matter coming from him, since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it? Why did her whole being bow, like corn under a wind, and erect itself again from this abasement only with a great and rather painful effort? She must make it once more. There’s the sprig on
the table-cloth; there’s my painting; I must move the tree to the middle; that matters—nothing else. Could she not hold fast to that, she asked herself, and not lose her temper, and not argue; and if she wanted revenge take it by laughing at him? (86)

A grammatical-syntactical analysis of the Tansley-Lily passages most strongly confirms my initial hypothesis. Each paragraph is approximately ten lines long, and yet Tansley’s paragraph contains almost twice as many sentences: Tansley has thirteen and Lily seven. The fact that Tansley has more sentences crammed into the same number of lines indicates that his ideas, like those of Mr. Ramsay, are segmented, discrete, and confined. Sentences, such as *It was the women’s fault*, are short, direct, and choppy and leave little room for ambiguity. And almost every sentence follows simple subject-verb-object format. Similarly, his one compound sentence, *He had been reading in his room, and now he came down and it all seemed to him silly, superficial, flimsy*, consists of two independent clauses that follow subject-verb-object format. The one interrogative sentence *Why did they dress?* is also short and choppy, with subject-predicate sentence structure. The sentence in which he includes a direct quote of the women, *“One never gets anything worth having by post”—that was the sort of thing they were always saying*, is foregrounded because of its syntactical variation and its use of a supposed direct quote. But after the quote concludes, the sentence follows a simple subject-verb-object format. Pronouns become important in distinguishing between this particular male and female language as well. Tansley’s first sentences almost all begin with *he*. Such sentences, without varied beginnings or structure, become rigid and brittle. Furthermore, through Tansley’s foregrounded repetition of *he*, Tansley—like Mr. Ramsay—creates himself as the subject. The remaining sentences begin with *they*; this generalizing

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120 Tansley attributes this utterance to the women, using the generalizing word *always* and collective pronoun *they*, even though Mr. Bankes speaks these words.
reference to all women reduces them from subject to "other." Tansley’s grammatical and syntactical choices reflect Lily’s criticism of him—his preciseness, his determination to make things sure, his “meagre fixity”—and they also conform to Woolf’s conception of a rigid and brittle masculine language.

Lily Briscoe’s thoughts, on the other hand, flow through seven long, complex sentences that span ten lines of print. Long sentences create a sense of fluid and borderless language, and their complexity heightens this sense. Two of Lily’s sentences use subject-verb-object format, yet they extend beyond this simple structure. He was really ... the most uncharming human being constitutes the subject-verb-object framework of the first sentence, but the sentence is complex because the indirect thought includes interjected commands—but then look at his nose, look at his hands—and a reference to her thoughts from a previous paragraph in the form of a prepositional phrase—in spite of his eyes. Simple subject-verb-object structure appears in this sentence: There’s the sprig on the table-cloth; there’s my painting; I must move the tree to the middle; that matters—nothing else. The sentence is made up of independent thoughts that don’t remain segmented with distinct end markers and capital letters—they are strung together with semi colons and a dash. Even the rest of her sentences, all interrogative, are complex. Therefore, the only short, simple sentence in this passage is foregrounded as an internal deviation. She must make it once more, a sparse, forced command to herself, articulates the enormous effort required to resurrect herself after being cut down by Tansley’s chauvinistic statements. She must literally erect herself again—she must build herself up—she must become rigid and masculinized in order to survive his patriarchal onslaught. Not surprisingly, the subsequent string of independent clauses follows a
clipped subject-verb-object format and is lexically concrete, focusing on content nouns sprig, table-cloth, painting, and tree. She forces herself into the more rigid boundaries prescribed not only by patriarchal culture, but also by masculine language.

Lexical differences between Tansley’s and Lily’s language show differences between male and female language, although their lexis aren’t divided into distinct or opposite lexical fields. Tansley’s lexis is sparse—he uses few content nouns. Those he uses are largely concrete: room, women, men, clothes, and people refer to tangible, everyday objects. Ironically, he also uses content nouns devoid of real content: sort, thing and anything are each repeated at least once. Lily uses abstract content nouns, being, abasement, and effort, as well as words (like Mrs. Ramsay) belonging to the lexical field of “nature:” corn, wind, sprig, and tree. Also like Mrs. Ramsay, she expresses embodied feeling through language: her whole being bow[ed], like corn under a wind.

In contrast to Lily’s fluid language, Tansley’s simple syntax and lexis indicate logical language that segments life into discrete components: men vs. women, reading vs. dinner conversation, dress clothes vs. ordinary clothes… Tansley is determined to define the world around him and make himself important. Ironically, his clipped little sentences appear logical, but he actually uses imprecise language. He twice uses the nebulous pronoun it without precedent: It was pretty well true and it was the women’s fault, and he repeatedly uses the generalizing pronoun they to refer to all women. Lily exhibits precise thinking and intuits “truth” in spite of her fluid, borderless language. She sees the falsity in Tansley’s stories: Women can’t write, women can’t paint—what did that matter coming from him, since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it?, and she effectively articulates the effect of Tansley’s
insecurity on her state of being. This brief linguistic analysis of Tansley and Lily’s speech further demonstrates that Woolf writes the speech of her male and female characters differently. Tansley’s clipped, rigid language attempts to determine fixed meaning, but he actually tells falsehoods and sometimes speaks of nothing. Lily, like Mrs. Ramsay, uses fluid, embodied speech, but in response to Tansley’s pronouncements restricting her artistic aspirations, her language becomes forced and masculinized. 121

While this stylistic analysis is limited in scope, it demonstrates that in the passages on which I’ve concentrated, Woolf’s male and female characters do indeed use language that can be characterized as “masculine” or “feminine.” Both male characters use rigid, segmented language that results in (or is a result of) a segmented, confined way of living in the world. Both female characters use fluid, sensory language that indicates a borderless, embodied way of being (unless influenced by the men). But the men remain rigid and limited and view themselves as subjects, and the women are pliant and easily influenced, often ignoring their potential agency in favor of supporting men. 122 It is not clear whether language, thought, or culture determines this gendered way of being, but gendered language clearly has corollary psychological and social effects. I do not believe Woolf determines these experiences to be essentially tied to biological sex. While she appears to value a fluid, “feminine” relationship with language, her questioning of gender norms, her critique of patriarchal structures, and her advocacy for women’s rights imply

121 Few differences in phonology exist in the speech of Tansley and Lily. Instances of alliteration are negligible in both passages. Foregrounded repetition of vowel sounds in assonance-like fashion, however, exists. Each character uses a particular vowel sound frequently: Tansley uses /a/ thirteen times and Lily uses /i/ twelve times. The relative pitch of these two sounds is different, so Tansley’s low back vowel /a/ can be construed as more masculine, whereas Lily’s mid vowel /i/ sounds lighter and higher—perhaps more feminine.

122 My analysis of these passages is consistent with Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, which posits the man as subject and the woman as helpmate.
that she doesn’t believe women need remain confined to any specific language use or behavior. Her character Lily Briscoe wonders if things could be different: Lily “knew … it behooves the woman … to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself; as indeed it is their duty … to help us, suppose the Tube were to burst into flames … But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things?” (91). Lily, although constructed (by Woolf, and like Woolf) through language and culture to fit a feminine mould, understands that an alternative to the conventional “code of behavior” exists (91).
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