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Rethinking the Woman as Mother and Artist in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*

Senior Honors Project
By
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On the occasion of what would have been her father's 96th birthday, two years after completing *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf imagined what her life would have been had her father survived:

He would have been 96, 96, yes, today; & could have been 96, like other people one has known, but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books – inconceivable.¹

The influence of Leslie Stephen on his daughter's life and career has been much studied, and rightfully so – Woolf's conflicted relationship with Leslie Stephen was of great concern to her.² Woolf never, however, poses herself the same hypothetical concerning her mother, and perhaps this – and the fact that Julia Stephen died nine years before her husband, when Virginia was only thirteen – accounts for the lack of critical attention that has been subsequently paid to the influence of Woolf's mother on her writing. Woolf said that she based the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* on her parents³. Indeed, Leslie Stephen was, like Mr. Ramsay, self-conscious, domineering, needy, and self-dramatizing. To Virginia and her older sister Vanessa, their father was “the tyrant of inconceivable selfishness.”⁴ Woolf wrote of her father's relationship to her mother that he was “difficult, exacting, dependent on her” (*MB* 83). Woolf

¹Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols., ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), Volume 3, pg. 208. Hereafter abbreviated as *D*.

²Hermione Lee recognizes the importance of the paternal conflict in Woolf's work in her biography, *Virginia Woolf*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), hereafter abbreviated as *VW*. Lee identifies a conflict in Woolf's work “of the twentieth-century daughter, torn between the sympathies she feels arising from ‘the mysterious kinship of blood’, and the quarrel of the generations” (*VW* 50).

³Before she began *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf wrote that she wanted “to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers (sic)” (*D3* 18).

⁴Virginia Woolf, “Reminiscences,” *Moments of Being*, 2nd edition, ed. Jean Schulkind (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985 [1907]), 56. *Moments of Being* hereafter abbreviated as *MB*.

describes her father's idea of woman's role as "part slave, part angel" (*MB* 146): the effect of such a powerful personality on Virginia Stephen intensified after Julia's death, when Leslie transferred his dependency to his stepdaughter Stella – and then to Vanessa, following Stella's death.

Likewise, Julia Stephen corresponds almost perfectly to Mrs. Ramsay in her resemblance to the Angel in the House, a concept taken from Coventry Patmore's poem of the same name and which has come to stand as a symbol of the ideal Victorian woman. Like Mrs. Ramsay, Julia Stephen embodied the virtues of duty, subservience, self-sacrifice, and other qualities Patmore deemed proper for a Victorian mother and wife. Lily Briscoe, as the female artist figure in the novel, mirrors Woolf herself – Lily is forty-four at the end of the novel, Woolf's age when she finished writing it. In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay's dutiful mother serves as a foil to Lily Briscoe's independent artist. Much of *To the Lighthouse* deals with the effect of this conflict on Lily's ability to complete her painting. What did it mean for Virginia Woolf, who declares in *A Room of One's Own* that "we think back through our mothers if we are women,"⁵ to have a mother who almost perfectly resembled the Angel in the House – and who, furthermore, seemed to stand in such direct opposition to almost everything Virginia Woolf has come to represent for modern feminism?⁶

In her essay "Professions for Women," which was published in 1931 and grew out of a

⁵Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (San Diego: Haracourt, 1981 [1929]), 76. Hereafter abbreviated as *RO*.

⁶ Lee says of Julia Stephen that: "She was opposed to female suffrage and thought women should only be educated for domestic careers. The Romantic Pre-Raphaelite image we have of Julia – as virgin, young mother with child, mater dolorosa, muse, beloved – is a political image, embodying the acceptable roles for a beautiful middle-class woman in the nineteenth-century." (*VW* 85)

Woolf wrote in "A Sketch of the Past" that her mother "had signed an anti-suffrage manifesto, holding that women had enough to do in their own homes without a vote." (*MB* 120).

lecture given to the Women's Service League, Woolf details her struggle with The Angel in the House. Woolf's description of the Angel closely parallels the function Mrs. Ramsay and Julia Stephen served for their husbands:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.⁷

How much of her own mother did Virginia Woolf have in mind when she wrote those words?

The phantom Angel certainly contains echoes of Julia Stephen's self-sacrifice. If Woolf thought of her own mother as the Angel in the House, then the passage above fits into the context of a larger pattern in Woolf's work: Woolf often frames her feminism – specifically her discussion of women's opportunities for creative expression – in terms of a binary opposition between mother and artist. In "Professions for Women," as elsewhere, Woolf places the Victorian mother/Angel in a position opposed and antagonistic to that of the female artist:

Directly...I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: "My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own...." And she made as if to guide my pen. (DM)

Thinking of Julia Stephen as parallel to Mrs. Ramsay – and therefore as the Angel in the House – renders Woolf's description of the necessity of killing the Angel rather shocking:

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing... Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer. (DM)

⁷Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, find the information for this. Hereafter abbreviated as DM.

In the passage above, Virginia Woolf speaks of a “phantom,” an imaginary woman, the idea of whom impedes the female artist’s uncensored expression of her creativity. That phantom is in part the ghost of her own mother. Woolf recognized that her father’s survival would have ended her literary career before it began. Had her mother not died when Virginia was still young, her life as a novelist, essayist, reviewer, and public intellectual would have been similarly aborted.

What then, does the female artist do with the mother figure?⁸ The death of Julia Stephen was undoubtedly a traumatic experience for Virginia: her first nervous breakdown came directly after her mother’s death. Woolf’s ambivalence about her mother’s influence on her – at times Woolf presents her as an obstacle, at others an inspiration – complicates the relationship between artist and mother. If “killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer,” then what does it mean that Woolf’s two-best known novels – *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) – largely celebrate the woman as hostess and mother? Must the female artist kill the mother in order to create, or can motherhood and art be reconciled? In this paper, I will explore Woolf’s treatment of those questions and their implications for Woolf criticism – and for feminist literary criticism in general.

In *To the Lighthouse*, at least, the answer to the first question would seem to be yes – the woman writer must “kill” the mother figure, for Woolf kills Mrs. Ramsay, the mother in the novel. The death of the mother in *To the Lighthouse* serves as a liberation for the artist, both in the novel itself and in Woolf’s own life. Lily can complete her painting only after the death of Mrs. Ramsay, whose memory haunts and obsesses Lily until she kills her symbolically, by

⁸ I am indebted here again to Hermione Lee, who poses this same question in the biography.

finishing the painting. Likewise, it is only after Woolf kills the lingering memory of her mother by writing *To the Lighthouse* that she can free herself of her mother's ghost – Woolf says that she used to think of her parents daily, “but writing the Lighthouse laid them in my mind” (D3, 208). Woolf writes in “A Sketch of the Past”:

Until I was in the forties – I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse*, but am too casual here to bother to do it – the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings.... when [*To the Lighthouse*] was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.⁹

Virginia Woolf did away with the memory of her mother by writing *To the Lighthouse*. Until Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse*, her mother had remained an audible, visible presence in Virginia's life, but by writing the novel, Woolf both silences and eliminates her mother: “I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her,” wrote Woolf. In writing a novel about her mother, Woolf in effect exterminates her mother's lingering phantom.

Because Woolf intended the character of Mrs. Ramsay to represent her mother, Woolf's writing of *To the Lighthouse* represents an act of mastery. When Woolf gave Mrs. Ramsay thoughts, feelings, and a voice, she exerted control over and authored her mother's history in a moment of dominance that parallels the killing of the Angel in the House in “Professions for Women”: “Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her,” wrote Woolf of the Angel. This literary dominance of her mother, a kind of doing away with, represented a liberation for Woolf: it was only after she purged her mother's memory from the conscious level of her psyche that Virginia Woolf was able to embark on the series of lectures, essays, and books for which she is now most

⁹Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” *Moments of Being*, 2nd edition, ed. Jean Schulkind (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985[1939-40], 80-1.

remembered by – and most useful to¹⁰ – feminism. Woolf's struggle to rid herself of her mother's persistent memory – and the subsequent effect of her success on her literary career – places the mother and artist in a conflicting relationship, a binary opposition.

To the Lighthouse contains a similar mother/artist binary. At one end of the binary lies Mrs. Ramsay, mother of eight children, who embodies traditional Victorian values about women as submissive, dependent, and domestic. Lily Briscoe occupies the other extreme as the independent, unmarried artist. Certainly the mother and the artist represent the two main characters of the novel: Mrs. Ramsay dominates "The Window," the first and longest section of *To the Lighthouse*, but the narrative focus shifts to Lily in the final section, as her endeavor to complete her painting supercedes both the novel's and her own previous preoccupation with Mrs. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay's death in the middle section and the subsequent shift of attention to Lily's eventual completion of her painting suggests a symbolic death of conventional Victorian values – the Angel dies out, making it possible for women like Lily Briscoe to express themselves creatively and, by extension, to enter the public sphere. To understand the relationship between mother and artist in *To the Lighthouse* solely in the terms of a simple and complete opposition, however, would be to ignore the critical ways in which Woolf complicates the relationship between mother and artist – or between mother and art – and the ways she resists a simple answer to the question of whether or not female artists must kill the mother in order to create.

On the external level of plot, Woolf positions Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe as polar

¹⁰This idea of Woolf's usefulness to, and perhaps manipulation by, feminism is taken up more fully in Laura Marcus's essay "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf," from *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers, (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

opposites. Mrs. Ramsay successfully performs the various duties of the housewife: nurturing caregiver, attentive spouse, and charming hostess. Mrs. Ramsay mothers the many people staying at the Ramsay's summer home in the Hebrides to such an extent that she feels overwhelmed by their coming "to her, naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that; one wanting this, another that; the children were growing up; she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions."¹¹ Mrs. Ramsay directs her attention with exceptional devotion to her children. After Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley tease James about the impossibility of visiting the lighthouse the next day, it falls to Mrs. Ramsay to soothe the injured feelings of her youngest child: "Perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing," says Mrs. Ramsay "compassionately," while "smoothing the little boy's hair" (*TL* 15). Mrs. Ramsay again utilizes her nurturing skills during the only other major disruption of family life in the first section, which takes place in the nursery: "What was the matter?" thinks Mrs. Ramsay upon entering the room to find her children awake and arguing.

It was that horrid skull again. She had told Mildred to move it, but Mildred, of course, had forgotten, and now there was Cam wide awake, and James wide awake quarrelling when they ought to have been asleep hours ago....It was nailed fast, Mildred said, and Cam couldn't go to sleep with it in the room, and James screamed if she touched it. (*TL* 114)

Mrs. Ramsay resolves the situation by wrapping her shawl around the skull, so that it still remains in the room for James but is not visible to Cam. Mrs. Ramsay then lulls Cam to sleep by telling her stories of how "lovely it looked now; how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird's nest..." (*TL* 115).

Mrs. Ramsay's mothering duties extend to her husband as well. Mr. Ramsay depends

¹¹Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1981 [1927]), 32. Hereafter abbreviated as *TL*.

upon his wife to uphold his wavering ego, his fragile sense of his own self-worth. He constantly comes to her for validation and assurance of his professional ability, as in the following scene:

He wanted sympathy. He was a failure, he said. Mrs. Ramsay flashed her needles. Mr. Ramsay repeated, never taking his eyes from her face, that he was a failure. She blew the words back at him. "Charles Tansley..." she said. But he must have more than that. It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius... (TL 37)

Mrs. Ramsay provides her husband with the sympathy he desires until, "Filled with her words, like a child who drops off satisfied, he said, at last, looking at her with humble gratitude, restored, renewed, that he would take a turn..." The simile of a child nursing at the mother's breast emphasizes the element of mothering in the Ramsays' marriage. Mrs. Ramsay's sympathy and encouragement nurture and sustain her husband's flimsy ego, much as a mother's breast milk nourishes a helpless infant. That Mrs. Ramsay's sympathy nourishes her husband's self-esteem suggests that Mrs. Ramsay must perform the role of both mother and wife for her husband. But the breast-feeding metaphor also carries the grotesque implications of vampirism, as if Mr. Ramsay draws the life-force out of his wife: after she satisfies her husband's need for sympathy, Mrs. Ramsay felt "exhausted in body," a feeling she carries with her throughout the novel (TL 39). Woolf's characterization of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* anticipates her claim in *A Room of One's Own* that "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35). Mrs. Ramsay *is* that looking-glass; she serves to reflect and enlarge her husband's image of himself.

If Mrs. Ramsay represents The Mother in the novel, then Lily Briscoe offers an image of the anti-mother. Lily embodies the antithesis of Mrs. Ramsay in many ways: to begin with Lily lacks Mrs. Ramsay's nurturing, maternal instinct. As Lily sets up her easel to paint ten years

after Mrs. Ramsay's death, Mr. Ramsay approaches Lily with his characteristic need of reassurance: "And then, and then – this was one of those moments when an enormous need urged him, without being conscious what it was, to approach any woman, to force them, he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy" (*TL* 151). Lily knows what Mr. Ramsay expects of her, what Mrs. Ramsay would probably have expected of her, were she still alive: Lily thinks to herself that "Surely she could imitate from recollection the glow, the rhapsody, the self-surrender, she had seen on so many women's faces (on Mrs. Ramsay's for instance) when on some occasion like this they blazed up...into a rapture of sympathy, of delight..." (*TL* 150). Lily refuses to indulge Mr. Ramsay, however, even when he releases "such a groan that any other woman in the whole world would have done something, said something – all except myself, thought Lily, girding at herself bitterly, who am not a woman, but a peevish, ill-tempered, dried-up old maid, presumably" (*TL* 151). The word "presumably" suggests that Lily does not actually believe herself a "dried up old maid." Lily will not mimic the "self-surrender" of Mrs. Ramsay to her husband. Because Lily is "an independent little creature" (*TL* 17), unmarried and passionate about her own work, she refuses to perform the role of mother and wife necessary for sympathizing with Mr. Ramsay. This suggests an opposing, mutually exclusive relationship between the female artist's necessary independence and the surrender of the self necessary for successful motherhood.

Mrs. Ramsay and Lily also oppose each other in their ideas about marriage and art. Mrs. Ramsay disparages Lily Briscoe's career as an artist and thinks that she would be better off devoting her attentions to procuring a suitable husband. Mrs. Ramsay believes that "an unmarried woman has missed the best of life" (*TL* 49). Lily thinks to herself how "Mrs. Ramsay cared not a fig for her painting" (*TL* 49); when the idea comes to her of how to finish her

painting, she thinks, “now she could stand up to Mrs. Ramsay” (*TL* 176). Mrs. Ramsay says of Lily Briscoe that “With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face, she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously...” (*TL* 17). Mrs. Ramsay privileges marriage to painting; she suggests that one cannot take Lily’s art seriously because Lily would never marry. Lily, however, does take her painting very seriously. She thinks of her art in the language of violence and revolt:

Such she often felt herself – struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: ‘But this is what I see; this is what I see,’ and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her. (*TL* 19).

Lily just as determinedly ignores Mrs. Ramsay’s constant command to “Marry, marry!” (*TL* 174). As she tries to finish her painting toward the end of the novel, Lily remembers an incident at a dinner party when Mrs. Ramsay was still alive. Lily “had been looking at the tablecloth, and it had flashed upon her that she would move the tree to the middle, and need never marry anybody, and she had felt an enormous exultation. She had felt, now she could stand up to Mrs. Ramsay...” (*TL* 176). The text links Lily’s right to independence from marriage directly to her art: Lily “need never marry anybody” *because* “she would move the tree to the middle” and thus complete her painting. The sequence of Lily’s thoughts suggests that motherhood – or at least marriage – cannot coexist with art. A woman must choose one or the other, and Lily prefers art.

In her reading of the connection between the first and last sections of the novel as a “transformation,” Jane Goldman supports the opposing mother/artist binary of *To the*

Lighthouse. Goldman says:

If the first part [of the novel] presents a study of old order, pre-war, values (the promotion of marriage and children as the social norm, careers and intellectual pursuits as the public domain of men, and domestic duties as the private realm of women), then the final part shows their considerable erosion: Lily Briscoe the artist (along with others) dissents from the pre-war, marital prospectus pushed by Mrs. Ramsay, the housewife, whose death in the

intervening years comes to stand for the passing of those values.¹²

Goldman's reading uses the language of binary opposition: she pits the first of half of *To the Lighthouse* against the second; tradition against Modernity; the mother against the artist. While this interpretation proves useful for understanding the novel, its danger lies in the invitation to understand the mother/artist relationship in *To the Lighthouse* in the oversimplified terms of a simple, opposing binary.

Goldman's reading of another scene later on in the essay, however, serves to deconstruct that binary: returning to the incident of the skull in the nursery, Goldman says that Mrs. Ramsay's solution to the problem, her decision to wrap her shawl around the skull, "bears the seeds of social and artistic progressiveness. Her green shawl imposes a Post-Impressionist colourist solution to the play of light and dark of skeletal structure."¹³ Goldman introduces the idea of the creative elements of Mrs. Ramsay's personality and her expression of those creative elements within the domestic sphere. At the end of the novel, Lily remembers a scene on the beach with Mrs. Ramsay and Charles Tansley, the young scholar and protege of Mr. Ramsay's with whom Lily does not get along, primarily because he constantly derides her painting with the taunt that "Women can't paint, women can't write." One day, however, Charles Tansley suddenly begins to treat Lily nicely, and the two share a moment of happiness together on the beach. Lily thinks of the moment now that "it seemed to depend somehow upon Mrs. Ramsay":

That woman sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite...something... which survived, all these years complete, so that she dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of

¹²Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 69.

¹³Goldman, *Feminist Aesthetics*, 174.

him, and there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art. (*TL* 160)

In Lily's memory of the scene, Mrs. Ramsay acts as artist: she brings together; she assembles; she creates. Mrs. Ramsay's extraordinary social ability – the same element of her personality she employs in her care for and protection of her children, and in her ability to restore her husband's self-esteem – here transcends the normal realm of everyday life and transforms the moment for Lily into something as lasting, tangible, and moving as "a work of art." Mrs. Ramsay "resolved everything into simplicity," she distills the moment by filtering out the "angers" and "irritations"; she then assembles what is left over into something meaningful, simple, and memorable.

Lily goes on to explore the creative element of Mrs. Ramsay's social abilities more deeply. The moment, she remembers, consisted of

This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying 'Life stand still here'; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said." (*TL* 161)

Here Lily explicitly compares Mrs. Ramsay the mother to herself, Lily Briscoe the artist. That she should attach such importance to Mrs. Ramsay's participation in the moment presents some difficulty initially because Mrs. Ramsay does not actually assume an active role in the scene; she merely sits off to the side and writes letters while the rest play on the beach. Lily indicates, however, that she believes Mrs. Ramsay responsible for the scene because she has assembled its component parts: "herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together." Mrs. Ramsay creates the scene in a very literal sense, just as a painter combines different shades of paint on the canvas to form a picture.

But the creation of art entails more than a mere combination of “This, that, and the other.” What element of Mrs. Ramsay’s bringing together of all these different people does Lily find so incredible? For Lily does find the moment incredible; she likens that scene on the beach to a revelation, an “illumination,” a “miracle.” The memory of the scene so affects Lily that it moves her to cry out aloud, “Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!” (TL 161). Woolf then punctuates the long, intense paragraph of Lily’s recollection of the scene with this final sentence: “She owed it all to her.” The ambiguity in the sentence is initially troubling: what does Lily mean by “it”? Since the recollection of the scene occurs to Lily while she attempts to complete her painting, perhaps Lily refers to her own art. Lily’s comparison of Mrs. Ramsay’s “making of the moment something permanent” to Lily’s corresponding attempt to “in another sphere...make of the moment something permanent” explicitly connects both women’s actions. Mrs. Ramsay takes all the “miserable silliness and spite,” “the chaos” of daily life, and she gives it shape; she invests it with meaning. Lily calls a paintbrush “the one dependable thing in a world of strife, ruin, chaos” (TL 150). Mrs. Ramsay comes to represent that paintbrush for Lily: “in the midst of chaos there was shape,” and Mrs. Ramsay *is* that shape. Mrs. Ramsay imposes order upon chaos; she does with her life what Lily wishes to do with her painting.

Hermione Lee has written of *To the Lighthouse* that “the only satisfactory conclusion in the novel is an aesthetic one,”¹⁴ meaning that Lily’s completion of her painting represents the only tangible success. But the novel also contains another, earlier success: the dinner party. As the dinner begins, Mrs. Ramsay already considers it a failure: “Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on

¹⁴*The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1977), 122.

her" (*TL* 83). Mrs. Ramsay considers the assembling of a dinner party an act of creation, the success of which hinges on a connection between the participants, a connection which cannot be achieved if "they all sat separate." This particular party, however, does succeed – especially the Boeuf en Daube, which Mr. Bankes calls "a triumph" (*TL* 100). "He had eaten attentively," says the narrator. "It was rich; it was tender. It was perfectly cooked. How did she manage these things in the depths of the country? he asked her. She was a wonderful woman." In putting together a good dinner party, Mrs. Ramsay achieves more than a mere social success: she creates a "still space that lies about the heart of things, where one could move or rest"; she momentarily suspends the disorder of daily life and creates a space of peace. The dinner party represents a kind of collective creative expression, as if Mrs. Ramsay creates a place of sanctuary wherein she suspends the normative rules that govern human interactions, that separate people from each other; this sanctuary enables the members of the party to forge a connection that transcends the normal experience of everyday life. Lily Briscoe uses the word "vision" to describe her moment of artistic inspiration. Mrs. Ramsay also experiences a vision: she thinks to herself that "...at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings..." Mrs. Ramsay resembles the artist in her ability to see through the outer layers and into a place of meaning.

Virginia Woolf's own theories and thoughts about writing prove useful for thinking about Mrs. Ramsay as artist and creator. Virginia Woolf believed that life was made up of two kinds of moments, which she termed "being" and "non-being." She describes this non-being as a sort of "cotton wool":

A great part of every day is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner; writing orders to Mabel; washing; cooking; bookbinding. (*MB*, 70.)

Then there were the moments of “being,” which could often be triggered by what Woolf calls “a shock,” or “a blow,” moments when she realizes 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. (*MB*, 72)

These revelatory moments, says Woolf, often serve as starting-points for her writing. “All artists I suppose feel something like this,” she says (*MB*, 73). Mrs. Ramsay’s moment of vision, of “unveiling” everyone else at the dinner table, resembles one of Woolf’s “moments of being.” Life seems to pause momentarily for the artist – “Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said” – so that she can decipher the underlying pattern hidden behind the chaos of daily life.

Mrs. Ramsay’s ability to bring people together, to create communal spaces like the dinner party within which individuals can interact with and connect with one another, can be thought of as her version of creative expression – her art. “There is a coherence in things, a stability,” thinks Mrs. Ramsay when she realizes that her dinner party will be a success (*TL* 105). Those two elements of Mrs. Ramsay’s art – coherence and stability – echo what Lily Briscoe seeks to achieve in her painting. After William Bankes happens to glance at Lily’s easel, they discuss what her painting means to her. “What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, ‘just there’? he asked” (*TL* 52). Lily explains it to him by saying, “if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness”:

It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken. (*TL*, 53)

Lily’s picture is abstract – Mrs. Ramsay and James are, after all, represented by a purple triangle – but it is a symbolic representation of reality. Her painting is not an unstructured collection of

splashes on canvas; it is a deliberate, ordered, and unified whole. “The question” of Lily’s painting, thinks William Bankes, was “one of the relations of masses, of lights and shadows...” Mr. Bankes’s scientific training as a botanist perhaps leads him to overemphasize the scientific, mathematically proportional element of Lily’s painting, but Lily nonetheless holds that element in mind when she paints: “A light here required a shadow there,” she tells Mr. Bankes. Lily takes “this, that, and the other” and balances the light and dark; she imposes order upon chaos. Her paintings represent a way of “resolv[ing] everything into simplicity,” just as Mrs. Ramsay does during the moment on the beach and at the dinner party.

Lily’s ambivalence towards Mrs. Ramsay and her effect on her art also serves to deconstruct the mother-artist binary in *To the Lighthouse*. At times Lily seems to have overcome the effect of Mrs. Ramsay’s memory on her:

Mrs Ramsay has faded and gone, [Lily] thought. We can over-ride her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us. Mockingly she seemed to see her there at the end of the corridor of years saying, of all incongruous things, “Marry, marry!” And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes. They’re happy like that; I’m happy like this. (TL 174-5)

Lily feels that Mrs. Ramsay was “limited” and “old-fashioned”; her idea that women must marry has proven incorrect because Lily is “happy like this,” as an unmarried artist. Lily declares herself purged of her obsession with Mrs. Ramsay and free to pursue her art, but at other times Mrs. Ramsay continues to haunt Lily:

Oh, Mrs Ramsay! she called out silently, to that essence which sat by the boat, that abstract one made of her, that woman in grey, as if to abuse her for having gone, and then having gone, come back again. It had seemed so safe, thinking of her. Ghost, air, nothingness, a thing you could play with easily and safely at any time of day or night, she had been that, and then suddenly she put her hand out and wrung the heart thus. (TL, 178-9)

Here Lily reveals that Mrs. Ramsay’s memory continues to hold sway over her. That this

passage comes just three pages after the one I quote above reveals that Lily's feelings toward Mrs. Ramsay are far from definite. Lily's profound ambivalence concerning Mrs. Ramsay resists the simple reading of Mrs. Ramsay as the embodiment of traditional Victorian values in *To the Lighthouse*. What Lily calls "the astonishing power Mrs. Ramsay had over one" (TL 176) continues to affect her deeply: "She owed it all to her," says Lily. Mrs. Ramsay presents an obstacle to Lily's art, but she can also represent inspiration, one of the "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (TL, 161).

Laura Marcus also briefly touches upon the subject of Mrs. Ramsay as artist.¹⁵ Marcus writes:

Whereas, for example, earlier critics tended to celebrate Mrs. Ramsay's 'creativity' in human relations and her ability to harmonise the domestic sphere (the 'spinsterish' Lily's passion for her art being seen as a lesser form of creativity), recent critics have seen the portrait of Mrs. Ramsay as less positive. Feminist critics have pointed to the ways in which she upholds systems of marriage and a 'separate spheres' ideology of masculinity and femininity which severely disadvantages women...

Marcus's statement reveals that existing Woolf criticism limits the relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily to an either/or, a binary opposition. The portrait of Mrs. Ramsay is either positive or negative; Lily's art is either a lesser or a higher form of creativity than Mrs. Ramsay's. This either/or reading of the relationship between mother and artist is wholly inadequate for understanding *To the Lighthouse*, for nothing in the novel – no relationship, no emotion, no individual character – can be supported by so simple a structure. As James realizes at the end of the novel, "nothing was simply one thing" (TL 187). Mrs. Ramsay represents the perfect Victorian wife, but she is by no means the one-dimensional Angel Woolf described in "Professions for Women. Mrs. Ramsay possesses "a mind of her own"; she harbors desires and

¹⁵ Marcus, "Woolf's Feminism," 228.

an imagination. Mrs. Ramsay thinks at one point that “it was a relief when [the children] went to bed. For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself” (*TL*, 62). Mrs. Ramsay’s rich inner life finds expression only when she finds herself relieved of the burdens of her duties as mother:

When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. And to everybody there was always this sense of unlimited resources, she supposed; one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel, our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish.... Her horizon seemed to her limitless. There were all the places she had not seen; the Indian plains; she felt herself pushing aside the thick leather curtain of a church in Rome. (*TL* 62)

In her vivid imaginings of traveling to India and Italy, Mrs. Ramsay associates herself with Lily and Augustus Carmichael – the painter and the poet, the two artists in the novel. Woolf concludes Mrs. Ramsay’s imagined scene with “They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability.” Here we find the two main elements of both Mrs. Ramsay’s and Lily’s artistic expression: “a summoning together,” and “stability.” Mrs. Ramsay and Lily both order and draw out meaning from the world.

As a dutiful Victorian wife, Mrs. Ramsay does in part advance the idea of ‘separate spheres,’ but she recognizes the limitations of confinement to her sphere, a realization which breaks through into her thoughts at the dinner party:

But what have I done with my life? thought Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table, and looking at all the plates making white circles on it.... They had that – Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle – she, only this – an infinitely long table and plates and knives. (*TL*, 82-3)

Mrs. Ramsay understands the reasons for her own confinement and recognizes its limitations. While here she envies the newly engaged Paul and Minta their bliss, she later thinks that “these lovers, these people entering into illusion glittering eyed, must be danced round with mockery”

(100). While men like her husband are free to explore the world and roam “the Indian plains,” Mrs. Ramsay’s scope of experience is limited to “an infinitely long table and plates and knives.” In her moment of artistic inspiration, Mrs. Ramsay even derives aesthetic pleasure from something purely domestic – the arrangement of the fruit bowl on the dinner table:

Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene... (*TL* 109)

Despite her sense of domestic unhappiness, Mrs. Ramsay extends the boundaries of the domestic sphere by transforming her dinner table into a place of connection, beauty, and creativity. Perhaps, then, we should reconsider our perception of Mrs. Ramsay merely as the Angel in the House – the embodiment of traditional Victorian values, an obstacle to female artistic expression – and think of her instead as a woman possessed of the artistic spirit who finds a way to express herself creatively despite the limitations of the domestic sphere.

If Mrs. Ramsay embodies the Angel in the House, then Clarissa Dalloway represents what Peter Conradi calls “the metaphysical hostess,” which he identifies as “the local demi-goddess of the cult of personal relations, the demi-goddess of accommodation and reconciliation”¹⁶. Clarissa does not embody the conventional Victorian ideals of The Mother to the extent that Mrs. Ramsay does – she does, after all, only have one child, Elizabeth, whereas Mrs. Ramsay has eight. Instead, Clarissa represents The Wife. The post-War, upper-class British society that Clarissa inhabits demands that a woman perform the role of hostess, that she succeed

¹⁶ Peter Conradi, “The Metaphysical Hostess: The Cult of Personal Relations in the Modern English Novel.” *ELH*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2 (Summer, 1981), 433.

in the social arena, and Clarissa does so exceptionally well. She possesses a special skill at throwing parties – parties which benefit her husband Richard, for she often invites influential people who might help advance his career in the government; the Prime Minister himself attends the party at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Peter Walsh, Clarissa’s friend and former lover, declares that Clarissa gives parties “all for [Richard],” that “she made her drawing-room a sort of meeting-place; she had a genius for it.”¹⁷ Even Clarissa’s dinners, thinks Peter Walsh, are for her husband. “There she would sit at the head of the table,” he says, “taking infinite pains with some old buffer who might be useful to Dalloway...or in came Elizabeth and everything gave way to her.” Clarissa possesses a special skill for orchestrating parties; like the dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*, Clarissa’s party signifies a triumph of the woman as hostess, as architect of communal social space.

If Clarissa inhabits the domestic end of our spectrum in *Mrs. Dalloway*, then Septimus fills the role analogous to Lily Briscoe’s in *To the Lighthouse* – that of the artist. Septimus is not an artist in the same sense that Lily is: whereas the text identifies Lily explicitly as a painter, Septimus does not express his creativity through any professional or socially recognized channels. Before he goes off to War, Septimus falls in love with a woman named Isabel Pole who lectured “in the Waterloo Road upon Shakespeare” (*MD* 85). Septimus “thought her beautiful, believed her impeccably wise, dreamed of her, wrote poems to her”; she compares him to Keats and corrects his poetry in red ink. Someone who happened to come into Septimus’s room on any given night during this time, says our narrator, would have

found him writing; found him tearing up his writing; found him finishing a masterpiece at three o’clock in the morning and running out to pace the streets, and visiting churches,

¹⁷Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1981 [1925]), 77. Hereafter abbreviated as *MD*.

and fasting one day, drinking another, devouring Shakespeare, Darwin, *The History of Civilization*, and Bernard Shaw. (*MD*, 85)

Before Septimus volunteers to fight in World War I, his days consist mainly of writing, reading voraciously, drinking, and wooing a woman: behavior Byron himself would have been proud of. Indeed, Septimus volunteers to fight for a purely romantic purpose: the text tells us that Septimus “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (*MD* 86).

Septimus’s modes of artistic expression are transformed during the War. He returns shell-shocked and disenchanted with literature: “Here he opened Shakespeare once more,” our narrator tells us, but finds that “That boy’s business of the intoxication of language – Antony and Cleopatra – had shrivelled utterly” (*MD* 88). Language and poetry cease to inspire Septimus; however, his traumatic experiences in the War fail to completely extinguish his creativity. In fact, Septimus’s insanity opens up to him a world of beauty and spirituality which remains sealed off to others. When an airplane writes in the sky above Regents Park, the people on the ground try to guess what product the airplane advertises; Septimus, however, sees only “beauty, this exquisite beauty,” something he feels so deeply that “tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness” (*MD* 22). Septimus possesses a kind of sixth sense; the city and all its happenings speak to him in a language to which everyone else is deaf.

Septimus personifies inanimate objects, giving them human qualities and aesthetic value. As he lies on the couch in his apartment, he watches the “watery gold glow and fade with the astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wall-paper” (*MD* 139). As he lies there, it seems to Septimus that “Every power poured its treasures on his head.” The room

around him comes to life as sensory images blend together in a cascade of beauty. Septimus's life spills over with such visions. Lily and Septimus both represent artists who experience significant transformations that affect their work: for Lily, Mrs. Ramsay's death liberates her so that she can finally complete her painting. For Septimus, the transformation also represents a liberation, but of a different kind: his traumatic experiences in the War render him unable to participate in the normative world of symbolic representation. Unlike Lily, the society in which Septimus lives does not recognize his modes of creative expression as art; the doctors who treat Septimus dismiss his expression of his visions as the rantings of a madman.

Septimus was a poet before he went to the war; he remains a poet, in a sense, after he returns, because he translates his fantastic visions into art by channeling his unconscious creative impulses into something tangible and concrete, like words or sketches. We can call Lily an artist because she paints; her creations conform to a conventional definition of "high" art. Septimus's creations are not so easily defined as art because they do not fit conveniently into any predetermined artistic genre, like painting or sculpture. Septimus transcribes his apocalyptic visions and messages of universal truth onto paper. Both Lily and Septimus detect an inherent chaos in everyday life: Lily lives in a "world of strife, ruin, chaos" (*TL* 150); for Septimus "the world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames" (*MD* 15). Septimus, however, senses much more danger in the chaos of daily life than Lily does. Like Lily Briscoe's, Septimus's creations take the form of an attempt to impose order upon that chaos. He draws, pages and pages of "Diagrams, designs, little men and women brandishing sticks for arms, with wings...sea pieces with little faces laughing out of what might perhaps be waves: the map of the world" (*MD* 147). These diagrams, designs, and maps represent an attempt to measure and order his universe; like Lily's "relations of masses, of lights and shadows," Septimus's drawings are

attempts to impose order upon a disordered existence.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe fights to protect her creations from some unidentified adversary; she imagines herself “struggling against terrific odds...to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her” (*TL* 19). These “thousand forces” might be Septimus’s dreaded “human nature,” the unspecified “they” of his fears, as in “They scour the desert. They fly screaming into the wilderness. The rack and the thumbscrew are applied. Human nature is remorseless” (*MD*, 98). Septimus shares Lily’s sense of unnamed danger; he too struggles to protect his creations from an unidentified, intangible force. For Lily, the unnamed opposition is simply “a thousand forces,” but Septimus identifies his enemies as living creatures, capable of scouring, flying, and screaming. For Septimus, danger is much more concrete and urgent: when his wife Rezia informs him that his doctors might confine him to a home for threatening suicide, Septimus immediately orders her to bring him his creations, his drawings and dictations: “Burn them!” he tells her (*MD* 147). Whereas Lily explicitly expresses the fear of having her creations taken from her only once, for Septimus that fear is constant.

Like Septimus, Lily experiences visions: “She took up once more her old painting position...becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children – her picture” (*TL* 53). Septimus and Lily express their visions in very different ways. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf allows Lily a moment of connection concerning her art, when she discusses her painting with William Bankes. Although Bankes at first regards Lily’s reduction of “mother and child...objects of universal veneration” to “a purple shadow” with suspicion (*TL* 52), Bankes does come to understand the exactness of the balance between light and dark in her picture: “He considered.

He was interested.” (TL 53). And in the final scene of the novel, Lily’s completion of her painting represents a triumph, but a somewhat painful one: “It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (TL, 209).

Septimus, however, never experiences any similar moment of connection. Dr. Holmes and William Bradshaw regard Septimus’s visions as distasteful and inappropriate, and Septimus’s urging of Rezia to burn his drawings reveals that he recognizes the danger of their disapproval. Septimus eventually commits suicide; his apparent reason for doing so is to avoid being locked up in a home, but a deeper reason is his inability to reconcile his involuntary artistic vision with any satisfactory form of creative expression. Unlike Lily Briscoe, who preserves her “vision” in the final scene of *To the Lighthouse*, Septimus does not get to be the successful artist in *Mrs.*

Dalloway: Woolf assigns that triumph instead to Clarissa, the metaphysical hostess.

As with Mrs. Ramsay and her dinner parties, Clarissa uses the social aspect of her duties as wife as a forum for artistic expression. Parties represent Clarissa’s creations, her art. After an encounter with Richard, Clarissa “suddenly feel[s], for no reason that she could discover, desperately unhappy” (MD 120). After some thought, Clarissa discovers the reason for her unhappiness: “Her parties! That was it! Her parties! Both of them criticised her very unfairly, laughed at her very unjustly, for her parties. That was it!” (MD 121). Clarissa then allows her thoughts to stray, and decides that “What she liked was simply life. ‘That’s what I do it for,’ she said, speaking aloud, to life” (MD 121). That the most important part of Clarissa’s thoughts here should hinge on two unspecified pronouns – “*That’s* what I do *it* for” – introduces the possibility of multiple meanings: perhaps Clarissa gives parties because “What she liked was simply life,” a reading which suggests that party-giving enriches Clarissa’s life, or simply makes her feel more alive. Another possibility could be that giving parties *is* – or at least represents – life to Clarissa,

that she derives from the excitement and human contact of parties a sense of vivacity, of humanity. Or perhaps Clarissa regards her parties as living things. The meanings of each of these readings vary greatly, but they all share two common elements: the first is that for Clarissa, the giving of parties is inextricably linked to life: parties, therefore, are essential to Clarissa. The second is that party-giving represents a transcendent experience for Clarissa; whereas Peter and Richard think of her parties as “foolish” and “childish,” for Clarissa they result in a kind of sublime experience, one which surpasses the customary daily experiences which her life affords.

Clarissa later provides a detailed explanation of the transcendent experience of giving parties:

Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. (*MD* 122)

In a moment of almost god-like omniscience, Clarissa imagines a metaphysical plane of continuous existence; on this plane, everyone in her microcosm is linked. That Clarissa “felt quite continuously a sense of their existence” evokes an image of water, as if the connections between humans on this plane are governed by a kind of wave-theory: every particle in a body of water is connected because a disturbance at one point sets into motion a series of waves that will eventually disrupt the entire body. Physically, however, geographical distance separates “So-and-so in South Kensington” from “some one up in Bayswater.” Clarissa’s parties are an attempt to merge the imagined and real planes of existence, to surpass the physical realm of separation between human beings and move into a transcendent moment of connection.

Clarissa’s parties, then, arise from her vision of the connectedness of people; she thinks of her parties as “a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely

to come to, perhaps” (*MD* 37). At another point, Clarissa declares to herself that a party is “an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?” (*MD* 122). The idea of an offering made to an unknown recipient resembles a prayer; Clarissa approaches her parties with an almost religious reverence. Her parties do not take place solely in the human, physical realm; a successful party necessitates the incorporation of a supernatural element. Clarissa’s parties are creations, offerings with no purpose except to bring people together, to connect. Clarissa uses the social arena of the domestic sphere, as does Mrs. Ramsay, as a domain for “merging and flowing and creating” (*TL* 83).

At the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, a novel that is so much about the inability of people to communicate and connect with each other, Woolf allows Clarissa to experience a moment of intense solidarity and connection with Septimus. After Lady Bradshaw tells Clarissa of Septimus’s suicide, Clarissa withdraws alone to a room to contemplate his act. She imagines the moment of Septimus’s death and considers his possible reasons for committing suicide: “But why had he done it?” (*MD* 184). Clarissa senses that Septimus was an artist: she contemplates “the poets and thinkers,” and wonders if Septimus “had had that passion.” She fears that Septimus “had gone to Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor yet to her obscurely evil... capable of some indescribable outrage – forcing your soul, that was it” (*MD* 184-5). Clarissa understands that Bradshaw would have denied Septimus expression of his creativity, that he would have forced his soul into submission, and that this would have represented a fate worse than death for Septimus. “Death was defiance,” she thinks (*MD* 184). “Death was an attempt to communicate.” Clarissa perceives in both Septimus’s life and death an attempt to communicate, to connect, to create.

Clarissa goes on to compare Septimus’s preservation of the dignity of his art with her

own life. She wonders, “But this young man who had killed himself – had he plunged holding his treasure?” (*MD* 184). The treasure she refers to is Septimus’s art, his dignity, his ability not to conform to society’s conventions. Clarissa then compares Septimus’s preservation of the dignity of his art to her own:

Somehow it was her disaster, she thinks, her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. (*TL*, 185)

While Septimus dies “holding his treasure,” Clarissa is “forced to stand here in her evening dress,” a symbol of her role as hostess and her confinement to the domestic sphere. At the beginning of the novel, Clarissa and Septimus both feel isolated and disconnected from others. The end of the novel relieves this sense of isolation because Septimus’s death “made [Clarissa] feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” (*MD* 186). Clarissa’s last thoughts in the novel are of connection, not isolation: “She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter” (*MD* 186). Clarissa’s understanding of the possibility for human connection springs directly from Septimus’s suicide; Clarissa can “[come] in from the little room” in which she had been isolated during her party only because Septimus dies. If the death of the mother makes possible the artist’s moment of revelation in *To the Lighthouse*, then the death of the artist enables the mother’s epiphany in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Mrs. Dalloway acknowledges the restrictions of domesticity, as when she walks up Bond Street and experiences the condition of “being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (*MD* 11). But Clarissa’s unhappiness makes itself much more externally visible than Mrs. Ramsay’s in *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay rarely doubts her choices; for Clarissa, doubt seems to be a perpetual condition. The first part of *To the Lighthouse* probably takes place during the last few years of the nineteenth century, and the last section

some time after the First World War. *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, takes place after World War I. In *Mrs. Dalloway* the Angel in the House has already died, and has been replaced by the metaphysical hostess. Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa Dalloway represent idealized versions of female domesticity at two different points in British social history. Because they make their parties into communal spaces for individual connection, they also both represent women who hew out a space for artistic creativity within the domestic sphere.

What does the female artist do then, with the mother? Let us go back to the presence of motherhood and childbirth in Woolf's foundational feminist tract, *A Room of One's Own*. Laura Marcus writes,

Throughout *A Room of One's Own* Woolf plays with the question of origin and generation. Whereas the feminist commentators of her time directly addressed the question of birth control and its impact on women's lives, Woolf encodes it, weaving this issue into *A Room of One's Own* and exploring, indeed, what it means for women to think, and to be able to think, the absence of issue. The fact of childbirth and child-rearing acts as one of the barriers intercepting the narrator's imaginings of a different lot for women.¹⁸

Here again we find motherhood positioned against artistic creativity in a binary opposition: Marcus identifies motherhood as a barrier to female freedom in *A Room of One's Own*. And indeed, we find early on in *A Room of One's Own* an accusation leveled against the mothers of what Woolf calls in *Three Guineas* "the daughters of educated men": after learning of the relative poverty of women's universities compared to those that serve men, Woolf asks, "What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us?" (RO 21). Shortly afterwards, Woolf identifies childbirth and child-rearing as the cause of our mothers' lack of

¹⁸Laura Marcus, "Woolf's Feminism," 219.

legacy:

For to endow a college would necessitate the suppression of families altogether. Making a fortune and bearing thirteen children – no human being could stand it. Consider the facts, we said. First there are nine months before the baby is born. Then the baby is born. Then there are three or four months spent in feeding the baby. After the baby is fed there are certainly five years spent in playing with the baby. You cannot, it seems, let children run about the streets. People who have seen them running wild in Russia say that the sight is not a pleasant one. (RO 22)

Within the humor that in some measure hides her anger throughout *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf comes to a seemingly irrevocable conclusion: because of the inordinate amount of time and effort which the bearing and raising of children demands, motherhood precludes the possibility of financial – and therefore artistic – independence for women.

Woolf does, however, provide an example of the coexistence of motherhood and artistic expression in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf attempts to identify the reason for women's necessity to men, the root of their "need of and dependence upon certain persons of the opposite sex" (RO 87). She discovers something not unlike the concept of the muse, of woman as a source of artistic inspiration. Woolf says that what all these great men got from women "was something that their own sex was unable to supply," something she calls "some renewal of creative power which is in the gift only of the opposite sex to bestow." Woolf imagines a scene in which one of these great men who loved women "would open the door of drawing-room or nursery and find her among her children perhaps." She then goes on to say that "the sight of her creating in a different medium from his own world would so quicken his creative power that insensibly his sterile mind would begin to plot again, and he would find the phrase or the scene which was lacking when he put on his hat to visit her." Woolf's image of maternal creativity is of something to be appropriated by men for the purpose of completing their own artistic works. She does, however, introduce the idea of a "creative power" inherent in all mothers, which she

elaborates upon shortly thereafter:

For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. (*RO* 87)

Woolf presents a compelling image of a powerful creative force within mothers that has been frustrated for so long that it soaks the very walls which trap them within the private sphere.

Woolf's declaration that female "creative force" has "overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar" is subtle, but the suggestion is unmistakable – Woolf calls for a demolition, a breaking out, an escape. The inherent "creative force" of mothers drives Mrs. Ramsay to imagine herself "pushing aside the thick leather curtain of a church in Rome" and to make her dinner parties events of "merging and flowing and creating"; Clarissa Dalloway's same "creative power" transforms her parties into offerings of creation.

If parties served as expressions of creativity for her characters, however, for Virginia Woolf they presented obstacles to her literary career. Woolf grew up during the end of the Victorian age, and she received an education in Victorian manners, just as her mother did. Like her daughter, Julia Stephen received no formal education. Woolf wrote that her mother's youth at "Little Holland House...was her education" (*MB* 88).

She was taught there to take such part as girls did then in the lives of distinguished men; to pour out tea; to hand them their strawberries and cream; to listen devoutly, reverently to their wisdom; to accept the fact that Watts was the great painter; Tennyson the great poet; and to dance with the Prince of Wales.

Julia Stephen's childhood ingrained in her a female intellectual subservience. As a young woman, Virginia herself had to perform a similar feminine domestic role. She and her sister Vanessa were required at tea because, Woolf says, "father could not give himself his tea in the society of those days" (*MB* 148). Woolf's description of those teas reveals the deeply ingrained

nature of her domestic Victorian education:

...Lizzie, also dressed in her afternoon black with a white apron, announced the visitor. For then instantaneously we became young ladies possessed of a certain manner. We both still possess that manner. We learnt it partly from remembering mother's manner; Stella's manner, and it was partly imposed upon us by the visitor who came in.

It was not natural for Vanessa or myself. We learned it. We learned it partly from memory: and mother had that manner... (MB149-50).

The conventional Victorian female role, that of dutifully interested listener and teatime conversationalist was unnatural to Virginia, inherited from the two mother figures of her childhood: Julia Stephen and Stella Duckworth, who assumed the position of matriarch of the Stephen household after Julia's death.

Virginia Woolf saw the remnants of that maternally-inherited Victorian education as detrimental to her literary career:

But the Victorian manner is perhaps – I am not sure – a disadvantage in writing. When I read my old *Literary Supplement* articles, I lay the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their sidelong approach, to my tea-table training. I see myself, not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream and sugar? (MB 150).

If that "sidelong approach" represents Virginia's inheritance from Julia Stephen, then, we should not find it surprising that the adult Woolf found it necessary to kill the ghost of her mother in order to purge herself of what Laura Marcus calls the "tea-table manner." Marcus identifies that refined air as an element of Woolf's writing which has led many recent feminist critics to declare that, "in contrast to *Three Guineas*, *A Room of One's Own* is overly bound by a need to charm."¹⁹ But Woolf went on to say that "On the other hand, the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud"

¹⁹Laura Marcus, "Woolf's Feminism," 217.

(*MB* 150). Indeed, the comparative successes of her two major feminist works appears to have proven her correct thus far: *A Room of One's Own*, for all its politeness and charm, is read with much more frequency than the far more polemic and aggressive *Three Guineas*.

Carolyn Heilbrun, quoting Myra Jehlen, writes about what she calls “the brutal truth...that ‘all women must destroy in order to create.’”²⁰ For Virginia Woolf, this certainly seemed to be true. Let us go back to Woolf’s description of killing the Angel in the House: “Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her” (*DM*). Woolf’s weapon of choice for killing the repressive Angel is an inkpot, the medium with which she writes. The very act of writing, then, of creating, represents an act of destruction. Coventry Patmore’s Angel in the House has come to represent a confining, oppressive obstacle to female artists. Mrs. Ramsay’s death in *To the Lighthouse* is rendered in parentheses, with no explanation. That Lily’s successful completion of her painting can come only after a death which is relegated to the margins of the text provides evidence of the necessity of killing the Angel – and the mother – in order for women to create. For Virginia Woolf, the idea of “work” was essential to the construction of the self, of one’s identity. When she encountered difficulty in remembering and writing about her mother, Woolf wrote:

For what reality can remain real of a person who died forty-four years ago at the age of forty-nine, without leaving a book, or a picture, or any piece of work – apart from the three children who now survive and the memory of her that remains in their minds? (*MB*, 85).

The only “work” Julia Stephen left behind was her children. Without something tangible like a book, or a painting, Woolf says, she can recover no concrete “reality,” no dependable memory of her mother. Mrs. Ramsay’s and Clarissa Dalloway’s parties are no more tangible than the

²⁰Myra Jehlen in Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, (New York: Ballantine, 1988), 17.

continuously a sense of [the] existence” of all human beings, and she thinks, “If only they could be brought together” (*MD* 122). I have argued here that Mrs. Ramsay does with her life what Lily Briscoe seeks to do with her art – the same parallel relationship between mother and artist exists concerning Woolf and her own work. In Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa Dalloway, Virginia Woolf created two characters who shared her belief in the inherent connectedness of humanity; through their social skills, they broke down the walls of bricks and mortar that separate one person from another – they connect. In short, they do what Woolf herself wants to do with her writing. The point of my saying all this is that I think we should move towards a different understanding of the relationship between the woman as artist and the woman as mother, Angel, and hostess.

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