

## Virginia Woolf as a creative social artist: Female transcendence and male ambivalence in *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*

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**Abstract:** Virginia Woolf, one of the most gifted female authors of 20<sup>th</sup> century England, is recognized as a major female modernist author of her time. Woolf's use of the (feminist) narrative voice has been the hallmark of her work and an influence to many of her contemporaries. Her description of female characters often overshadow their male counterparts in domestic and social spheres of life in the past century. This paper dissects the female protagonist in *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway* and their role in maneuvering through the patriarchal framework of their societal construct, simultaneously demonstrating their individual strengths to achieve a transcendence of consciousness that is illuminating while amalgamating moments of transient happiness with the turbulence of life through the use of the narrative voice dominant in her two novels.

**Keywords:** social identity, psychology, gender, feminism, narrative voice, transcendence

In two of Virginia Woolf's best known works, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the author portrays her two well-known characters, Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa Dalloway as ordinary housewives who transcend their conventional roles to become creative social artists in their own right. Both weave their mastery over their domestic spheres that ultimately go well beyond their social space, touching the lives of so many people, each in their own special way. This paper discusses Woolf's employment of her novelistic psychology in these two novels, charting her female character's psychological development that eventually brings harmony, sustenance and enlightenment to other characters as well.

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The novel *To the Lighthouse* contains such characters like Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, their son James, Lily Briscoe the painter, Augustus Carmichael the botanist, Charles Tansley the student, William Bankes, Minta and Paul. All of them are characters with their own quest, each trying to maintain an equilibrium and sense of control over the forces of disharmony presiding over various social, natural and cultural arenas. Similarly, in *Mrs. Dalloway* it is the attainment of meaning through heightened self-awareness that Clarissa Dalloway succeeds in achieving enlightenment. Both novels are seen from the female point of view, with the central characters of Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Dalloway being less educated as compared to their male counterparts, but obtaining our sympathy for their “ability to triumph over limitation, struggling against the absurdity of existence that demands their death” (Boorda 1976, 8-9).

Their characters remain resilient till the end, each demonstrating their will and determination not to be overpowered by confusion and the transience of life that threatens the survival of their family. For Mrs. Ramsay it is poverty, “unsanitary dairies” and her husband’s self-pity while Mrs. Dalloway shows courage and resiliency over the battery of self-criticism poured over her by the religious Doris Kilman that she grows stronger and experiences psychological awareness and character advancement.

The characters of Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay utilize their domestic spheres of life to transcend the ordinary, a feat only imaginable through Woolf’s portrayal of them. It was through their giving and sacrifices that their greatness be known and the domestic worlds of the characters exposed. Similarly, the male characters in her two novels are portrayed with ambivalence, none achieving the sort of transcendence Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay obtain in the end. Characters such as Richard Dalloway, Mr. Ramsay, Septimus Warren Smith and Peter Walsh were shown to be achieving very little in understanding them. They could not achieve the equilibrium of emotions and love demonstrated by the female central characters like Mrs. Ramsay who not only touched the lives of many individuals including her husband and children but she played a pivotal role in the enlightenment of her friend Lily Briscoe, who completed her painting in the end. It is the missing link to the Ramsays’ world, which finally shed light on the character of Mrs. Ramsay as the novel ended. “It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (Woolf 1996b, 306). But it was

only after a decade that this realization was achieved with the lighthouse trip undertaken by Mr. Ramsay, James and Cam.

The male characters of Woolf's two novels were also shown to have achieved a slow transcendence or none at all. Even if they do manage to rise above their current state of flux, it was towards the end of the novel that this is shown. Mr. Ramsay undertakes the trip to the lighthouse after the death of Mrs. Ramsay; and Septimus' death eventually gave the much needed answer her moment of illumination, a heightened self-awareness that enables her to transcend beyond her previous disarray in her life, and to arrive at a state of serenity, in control of her psychological reality and state of being. The moment of transcendence and illumination occurs when she perceives the mind of Septimus Warren Smith at his moment of death, and from her examination of the mind of Septimus; the novel ends in the reaffirmation of life. "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre, which, mystically, evaded them; looseness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was embrace in death" (Woolf 1996a, 202).

While Clarissa Dalloway herself was nearing death because of her heart condition, she embraces it and seems to be drawn to life more than Septimus who, as a war veteran, was disillusioned with life as he sees civilization to be meaningless, and his existence, a mere shadow:

Spiritually and emotionally eviscerated by the horror of war, Septimus returns to civilian life; being no longer able to feel. The cost of physical survival, for Septimus, has been severe; obsessed with self-loathing for having escaped while others died, he emerges from the war mad, a product of lunacy around him. His madness insulates him from all human relationships, even that with his wife, Lucrezia, whom he married without emotional commitment, following his release from the army" (Rosenthal 1979, 91).

While the transcendence of Clarissa was life giving and fulfilling, the mental workings of his mind were self-annihilating. Both characters draw parallels with one another in terms of their physical appearances, attitudes and psychological responses. Although Septimus was shown to be a person torn apart by his fragmented mind, he dies with his belief in the beauty-of-life. Though he is a fighter, he dies reluctantly; according to Michael Rosenthal (1979, 93), "Death is at once a refuge from the terror of loneliness as well as a protest against people like Holmes and Bradshaw ...For Septimus realizes, even at the end, that

life is good; it is only people who ruin it". He has refused to give in to people like Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, a physician. Both are unfeeling and cold men who were well responsible for his destruction. Thus, the ambivalence sets in, as Bernard Blackstone notes:

Virginia Woolf gives us a brilliant and drastic picture of the professional man. The evil Sir William can do is rendered the more horrible by the considerations that he is technically a healer; that society looks up to him, rewards him, and fails to look below the surface. He is the product that is of spiritual apathy, of ignorance, of the brute weight of non-awareness that afflicts our twentieth century world. We live all the time in the realm of appearance. We worship and distrust pity and intuition, and send our Septimus Warren Smith to Sir William Bradshaw" (Blackstone 1949, 84).

Comparing Septimus and Clarissa, we realize that the connection between them is indeed strong. Both are linked consciously in the end. Septimus is seen to be the composite "death-obsessed version of Clarissa" (Rosenthal 1977, 94) whose yearning for death supersedes his commitment to life. It is interesting to note that Woolf indicates, in the Preface to the 1929 American edition, "Mrs. Dalloway was originally to end with Clarissa's suicide; Septimus, who was not part of her early thinking about the novel, grew out of the initial conception of Clarissa, taking from her many traits, including her obsession to kill herself" (quoted in Rosenthal 1970).

Peter Walsh, Clarissa's former love, made his first appearance during lunch. Upon seeing him, Clarissa reflects upon the past of her once strong feelings for Peter. She was more strongly attracted to him than she had ever been to Richard; but as for Peter, his presence and aura of masculinity had a stifling effect on her mind. She was afraid of Peter's self-possessiveness would engulf her totally and for that she left him. Peter's self-possessiveness and resentment of her independence of him were too much for Clarissa. As for Richard, it was the emotional freedom that he gave, that finally made her marry him. Richard could provide the security she longed for, he was stable financially and in some ways emotionally, as compared to Peter who was still very much undecided in his life. Having seeing him afar, Clarissa ponders upon her past choice of not marrying him. She then reflects, "If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day" (Woolf 1996a, 52), but then as she ponders earlier on. "For in

marriage a little license, a little independence that must be between people living together day in and day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him...But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into” (Ibid, 10).

She decided it was wise giving Peter up, as it would cost her, her freedom. Peter’s habit of playing with his pocketknife when he meets Clarissa soon drives her up the wall; it was his old self that she meets again. She thinks he is unwise to be doing the same characteristic routine over and over again. The pocketknife, a phallus symbol, represents Peter’s masculinity. He shows his aggressiveness when he meets once again his former love, Clarissa; but she soon congratulates herself of not marrying him. She feels herself drawn to him because of his need for support, and Elizabeth entrance frees Clarissa from this entrapment. Both characters are actually ignorant of one another’s feelings, as Clarissa thinks Peter is overwhelmingly possessive while he thinks she was being too assertive. In the end however, Peter has his vision too; “the terror”, “ecstasy” and “extraordinary excitement” that he feels, all come from her, “For there she was” (Woolf 1996a, 213); and the novel ends with Peter having his share of the moments of illumination. Even though he does receive some form of realization, it is a slow process that unites him with his emotional and unknown self. He could not visualize what she sees or thinks but he does recognize her presence to be something mysterious and awe-inspiring. One can only say that Clarissa Dalloway’s role has succeeded in bringing people together, uniting them with her mastery of human psychology and communication. Thus, we could see this entire incident happening at her dinner party. It is said, “[...] the party is a grand spiritual reunion, within the spirit of Clarissa, where the scales drop from all eyes and all illusions of separateness and individuality vanish” (Love 1970, 147). It is an assembly of multiple characters united by her love and charm. Peter at first doesn’t realize the magnitude of the party in terms in bridging the human relations gap; but, in the end, he realizes the vibrancy and intensity of life that surround him having its origin in Clarissa Dalloway.

Richard Dalloway, Clarissa’s husband, meanwhile, is a politician, a Conservative MP, who truly loves her. Between them lies a unique form of communication that is unspoken but understood; it is this kind of silent love that binds them together. Although the character of Richard Dalloway seems to be a rigid individual, cold and undeveloped, he is pictured to be a successful humanitarian MP,

championing the rights of others and believing in gradual reform. Woolf pictures Dalloway to be the embodiment of a middle-class gentleman, confident, and playing a masculine role without any worries. Clarissa Dalloway accepts her husband's nature and because she was comfortable with him more than anyone else. Thus, "In came Richard, holding out flowers...He was holding out flowers-roses, red and white roses. (But he could not bring himself to say that he loved her; not in so many words.) But how lovely, she said, taking his flowers. She understood; she understood without him speaking" (Woolf 1996a, 126-129).

She understood her husband well enough to know that there is between them a "gulf" that one must respect, for "one would not part with it, or take it against his will, from one's husband without losing one's independence, one's self-respect - something, after all, priceless" (Ibid, 132). Richard, being a person who does not show his feelings openly, understood his wife's role as a giver of parties. It is her way of being the perfect hostess, giving out parties that even the prime minister attends. Her social event draws the social elite and its success is not so much of an importance than its symbolic meaning. While Clarissa has her social event in which she specializes in, her husband does not interfere in her affairs. He is rich enough to finance all her parties but she is in charge of them. Her dinner party is her pride and from it she finds fulfillment and reaffirmation in life; it is a sort of "[...] ritual celebration of life, a gesture full of meaning for her, which Woolf wholeheartedly affirms" (Rosenthal 1979, 100). It gives her something to look forward to, in the fragility of life and the post-war society of her time, which had, among its victims, Septimus Warren Smith. Unlike Clarissa, Septimus does not have any life affirming ritual that he could fall back on; and as a result, the nightmare of the Great War succeeds in obliterating him.

Thus we see the ambivalence of the male characters in her novel. Neither one seems to be achieving the sort of transcendence that Clarissa obtains in the end. The characters were seen to be lacking substance, weak, torn by their past or stunted emotionally. Characters like Peter Walsh and Richard Dalloway embody this kind of emotional incapacitation. Their ambivalent portrayal by Virginia Woolf shows their deficiency in being the complete wholesome person like Clarissa Dalloway. Their ambivalent and inconsistent portrayal is in line with the development of the female central characters that constantly outshine and achieve a psychological transcendence in their emotional

and mental outlook. The male characters are portrayed to be weak in one instance and strong in another.

This contrast with the central female characters is also seen in the character of Mr. Ramsay in the novel *To the Lighthouse*. Mr. Ramsay comes across as a person in need of assurance to boost his self-esteem. He is described to be a tyrant who dominates and bullies his wife while demanding her attention at the same time. He crushes his son's hopes of going to the lighthouse, by saying the weather will not be fine tomorrow; he did it so much so that his son, James, would have taken any weapon at that moment and killed him. Being a domineering and jealous husband who even fights for his wife's attention from his son, even Lily Briscoe notices how Mr. Ramsay wears Mrs. Ramsay out to death. "That man, she thought, her anger rising in her, never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died, and had left all this" (Woolf 1996b, 219).

On the other hand, Mrs. Ramsay comes across as a caring and compassionate wife and mother, especially to her son James. Knowing her son to be devastated by his father's cruel reply, Mrs. Ramsay reassures him by saying tomorrow may be a fine day for the scheduled trip. Such protectiveness and love make Mrs. Ramsay James' special refuge from his father's harsh ways.

Mr. Ramsay was described to be a person obsessed with his work and also in terms of his "aggressive intellectualism" and "unyielding demands for pity" (Rosenthal 1979, 114) that unsettles even Lily Briscoe. She finds him hard to get along with because he embodies chaos and negative energy, a disruptive element to the cause of her work. He must be avoided at all cost. "Let him be fifty feet way, let him not even speak to you, let him not even see you; he permeated, he prevailed, he imposed himself. He changed everything" (Woolf 1996b, 219).

Although the portrayal of Mr. Ramsay is one of negativity, he is shown to be a scholar pursuing academic excellence, which continues to draw so much upon him. Woolf shows him to be a character that dwells upon his fears of being failure; for example, his fears of not getting beyond "R" in his work. But he must be admired for his perseverance and courage to go beyond his limits, pushing himself to the heights of excellence. Similarly, his perseverance eventually leads him to make that journey to the lighthouse, years later with Cam and James. It was a journey "that enables him to resolve the antipathies

nurtured by his children and earn from them; a sympathetic appreciation of his point of view they had never exhibited before” (Rosenthal 1979, 126). It was a journey that brought forth the much-desired praise that James looks forward to, a journey that was made after the death of Mrs. Ramsay. It was also a journey that simultaneously leads to Lily Briscoe finally obtaining her vision of Mrs. Ramsay who, despite all odds, manages to overcome the forces of destruction. Woolf highlights the journey motif because it is symbolic in portraying the relationship between Mr. Ramsay and his son. Estranged from his father since he was six years old, James’ decade old grudge is exorcised with the completion of the much-anticipated journey. In it, we see the complex relationship that Woolf tries to expound while she [...] “establishes their complex relation to each other, indicates the relation to Mr. Ramsay to the other characters and their relation to him, and illuminates some general problems concerning the relation of parents to children, husband to wife, and people to each other, but also endeavors to suggest indirectly certain profound ideas about experience and its dependence on time and personality” (Daiches 1979, 82).

Virginia Woolf gives an outlook on the struggles of the Ramsay family and she establishes the journey motif as a first step reconciliation process between father and son. The journey to the lighthouse is a journey of discovery and exoneration in which where one must surrender one’s individuality and pride to an “impersonal reality” (Ibid, 86).

Even though he is an egoist, Mr. Ramsay understands his wife for her simplicity and virtue in taking care of their children. The tension between them exists but it recovers its depth, and the love between them grows again. According to Joan Bennett (1964, 83), “Mrs. Ramsay soothes his wounded vanity, fosters his faith in himself. Mr. Ramsay gives her a sense of security, of stability and of confidence in life”. Mr. Ramsay understands that only his wife cares about him; and we see Mr. Ramsay acknowledging her presence and worth as somebody dear in his life. The following lines show the loving side of Mr. Ramsay that we rarely get to see:

One ought not to complain, thought Mr. Ramsay, trying to stifle his desire to complain to his wife that young men did not admire him. But he was determined; he would not bother her again. Here he looked at her reading. He liked to think that everyone had taken off themselves, and he and she were alone” (Woolf 1996b, 181).



Mr. Ramsay comes across as a scholar facing the dilemma of loneliness; and, in this aspect, he puts his full concentration on his work. It is a job that he takes seriously and devotes his entire life bent on completing his quest. He is an emotionally stunted man and he is incapable of projecting such radiance that Mrs. Ramsay exudes.

We see that Virginia Woolf has created the male-female characters in place with Mr. Ramsay almost in control of the world of academia, while Mrs. Ramsay rules the domestic world with ease. Mr. Ramsay struggles with his work. He is filled with uncertainty over the prospects of continuance. However, he excels like Clarissa Dalloway in the management of human and domestic relations. Her triumph is in the “Bouef en Daube” dinner in which she unites the different worlds of consciousness by the power of her love. She emerges triumphant in her conquest, using her prowess in cooking the perfect meal, that Mr. Banks comments, “It is a triumph” (Woolf 1996b, 151), while Lily Briscoe admits the aura of Mrs. Ramsay was irresistible: [...] “how childlike, how absurd she was, sitting up there with all her beauty opened again in her, talking about skins of vegetables. There was something frightening about her. She was irresistible [...] It came over her the emotion, the vibration of love” (Ibid, 152-153). Endowed with simple intelligence, she admires her husband’s work and considers it a monumental task, an “admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence” (Ibid, 159). Whatever it is, Mrs. Ramsay supports her husband full heartedly, knowing that he needs her constant reassuring that all will turn out right. Sharon Kaehele and Howard German observe the character of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay to be actually fulfilling to one another: “Their traits are complimentary. Mrs. Ramsay’s creative and intuitive femininity balances her husband’s courageous and intellectual masculinity. ...the man-woman relationship is strengthened by the union of these characteristics” (Kaehele and German 1970, 190).

Thus, we see Woolf’s ambivalent portrayal of various male characters in her novels. Men and women, with the exception of Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa Dalloway, seem to be characters lacking depth, substance, personality and wholesomeness of being. The reason for this lack of development seeks to make a distinct comparison between the male characters and the female central characters. The male characters are portrayed to be holding too strongly to a masculine set of values in life that hinders them from having the vision of fulfillment and illumination, which would have enabled them to break free from

the conservative expectations of society. Joseph L. Blotner comments on the role of women such as Mrs. Dalloway: to “give love, stability, and fruitfulness to the family ...so the female should always function; woman serves to ameliorate the effects of male violence, hate, and destructiveness” (Blotner 1956, 187). These women are able to transcend their limited space and look well beyond their domestic sphere to create harmony and equilibrium with the forces of chaos in their lives. Clarissa Dalloway could bridge both feminine and masculine worlds, because of her openness of mind and heart; her knowledge of feelings and experience, seen in her past memories with Sally Seton, suggest hints of lesbianism: “The strange thing. On looking back, was the purity, the integrity of her feelings for Sally. It was not like one’s feeling for man. It was completely disinterested; and besides, it had a quality, which could only exist between women, between women just grown up (Woolf 1996a, 39). Here, Virginia Woolf shows that the experiences of the present are always influenced by the experiences of the past. She moves from one consciousness to another in the tightly knit novel *Mrs. Dalloway* to show how fluid the nature of our consciousness was. She has created a vast network of interlinked consciousness that not one distinct and separate consciousness can exist separately. Thus, Clarissa Dalloway visualizes the death of Septimus because of their shared consciousness is so strong; it transcends the normal boundaries of thoughts between two people. The feeling of Clarissa for Sally is an example of her feelings of love for another woman that transcend the normal boundaries of a relationship. It is something that does not happen between any of the male characters in both novels. The male characters seem to be engrossed in their own pursuits, being totally oblivious to the other characters’ feelings, and each of them hold strongly to their way of perceiving the other as compared to Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay who perceive the mind of both male and female characters to the point of understanding their consciousness and passion.

Lily Briscoe, the painter who finally obtains her vision of enlightenment, is another character that embodies the development and evolution of Woolf’s vision. She possesses androgynous qualities that enable her to understand and to explore both feminine and masculine minds, and to complete her painting in the end. She could visualize how Mr. Ramsay has finally reached the island and James received the so much needed affirmation from his father. It was her search for truth that she “gets the whole picture” in the end. Lily Briscoe and Mrs.

Ramsay share a distinct likeness for each other because of Mrs. Ramsay's ability to be the guiding force, exuding much zest for life that attracts Lily. The connection between them becomes stronger because both have a mutual want for life and a passion for creating order out of chaos. According to Hermione Lee,

Completed forms, whether made from a social and family group, an abstract painting or the journey to the lighthouse, create the only lasting victory over death and chaos. Such forms can only be brought into being by means of the arduous search for truth, which are a necessary personal responsibility (Lee 1977, 137).

Lily Briscoe makes a tribute to Mrs. Ramsay with her painting; she finally receives the vision to see Mr. Ramsay in a totally new light. She has made the connection with Mrs. Ramsay by withdrawing herself from her. Lily Briscoe has succeeded in seeing her in a new reality through an entirely new perception. "Mrs. Ramsay - it was part of her perfect goodness to Lily, sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needle to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stockings, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat" (Woolf 1996b, 296).

The character of Mrs. Ramsay in the novel comes across as an enchantress or goddess who weaves her charm around her guests. She wins over them with her superb dinner and she creates an emotional impact on Lily; and even after a decade, her presence is felt strongly by her. Mrs. Ramsay's role is more than a nurturer or homemaker; she is the gravitational force that pulls everything together, and hence all life revolves around her. Her presence is at the center of events that she orchestrates. Being a prime mover of events, her subtlety stays in the background, while she tries to chart in the best mode the course of events for the fulfillment of all who stays with her. She is a stark contrast to the other male characters of whom neither one outshines her in terms of the love she gives, nor has anyone created any lasting impact similar to Mrs. Ramsay's.

Virginia Woolf thus sets the ambivalence of the male characters against the central female characters that manifest the feminine and masculine outlook. This was something the male characters in her novels fail to embody; a dual vision that would have granted an understanding of the inner psyche of both sexes; and so, the equilibrium in the male-female relationship would have been achieved for a more harmonious unity. They do not exude love like Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay who reaches out to bridging various

characters with their multiplicity of personality and behavioral patterns. It is their (Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay) reaching out that has helped other characters to understand themselves as well as the complexities of life that is far reaching in its consequences to those who are unprepared to face it. Lily Briscoe, for example, realized that Mrs. Ramsay has created harmony and permanence over chaos. The obtained vision shows her becoming like Mrs. Ramsay, reaching out and understanding the plight of characters like Mr. Carmichael and a change in her attitude towards men. She felt great sympathy for Mr. Ramsay as she admired his determination to continue with the trip to the lighthouse, as compared previously when she had only feelings of dislike for him. Her vision in the end, the glimpses of reality gave the answer she longs for the missing piece to the puzzle, which is finally found and the picture completed. Virginia Woolf suggests that transcendence could then be got with such androgynous qualities that are essential for the obtaining of heightened self-awareness and for eventually overcoming the forces of confusion and destruction. This should be the attainment of the ideal space that both male and female character should achieve, so as to co-exist peacefully within the spheres of differences in our world today. Much hope and optimism come from this ambivalence of characters such as Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay could create moments of love, while uniting worlds of consciousness at a time of great difficulty and anxiety.

Virginia Woolf captures the essence of time and she creates a *mélange* of past, present and future events of the novel; she achieves a unity of disparate forces, eventually culminating in the fusion between individual and society. The English author writes by amalgamating experience and suffering, and she views the world of reality through a free mind from any pre-conceived judgment. This finally leads to an ideal space, fully liberated and deemed to be perfect for every individual to co-exist peacefully with mutual respect and love for one another.

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