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heart out another  
day...

## Abstract

This thesis is a comparative analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), with a specific focus on how these novels challenge and critique the social script of womanhood, exposing the depths and edges of traditional female roles and patriarchal mechanisms of subjugation.

My approach is mainly based on three analytical methodologies: in-depth examinations of the chosen novels, comparative analysis of pivotal scenes, and the integration of targeted theoretical frameworks and sources. The research is predominantly anchored in feminist criticism extending from the foundational thoughts of Mary Wollstonecraft to Elaine Showalter. Thorstein Veblen's perspectives, particularly concerning class, fashion, and the New Woman, offer further insights into the mechanisms that oppress, as well as the models that function to liberate, women.

The research uncovers Woolf's and Rhys's exposure and critique of ingrained mechanisms of subjugation, particularly highlighting social class and fashion as problematic constructs for women during the interbellum period. Examining the two literary texts, the study elucidates how the authors employ the novel as a medium to challenge women's situation during this era through innovative literary techniques. The precariousness of women's circumstances, connected to their age, work, class, and gender, was specifically highlighted by the authors, and indicated a tension between the ideal of womanhood and freedom. Through the New Woman ideal and magazines, fashion significantly contributed to the establishment of new beauty standards and the shaping of societal norms. As the study shows, the New Woman ideal is both celebrated and problematized by the authors, as it swiftly devolved into a consumerist paradigm where consumption itself became the new ideal. In both literary works, the urban landscape assumes a pivotal role, offering the characters a sphere fraught with both promise and destruction, emblematic of transgression, interconnection, and potential renewal. Through the lens of modernist critics, the study elucidates the symbolic value of the city as depicted by Woolf and Rhys and highlights its function as a site of carnivalesque and polyphonous modes that interrogate entrenched patriarchal structures in the quest for female freedom.

**List of Abbreviations**

*NAELV* - *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Tenth edition, vol. E - The Victorian Age, W. W. Norton & company, 2018.

*NAELT* - *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Tenth edition, vol. F - The Twenty and Twenty-First Centuries, W.W. Norton & company, 2018.

*NAELR* - *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Tenth edition, vol. C - The Restoration and Eighteenth Century, *W.W. Norton & company, 2018.*

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## 1. Introduction

At the start of my thesis journey, my inspiration came from the drifting figures in the narratives of Poe and Hamsun, with my interest deepening after engaging with a Harvard Magazine piece on the contemporary “Loneliness Pandemic”. I wanted to explore how our social interactions and responses to solitude, aloneness and loneliness have evolved, particularly fascinated by Poe's portrayal of the flâneur's sense of belonging and longing for a connection in the crowd. My curiosity was intensified by Baudelaire's fleeting female figures, leading me to investigate the concept of the flâneuse. Who was that woman walking on the street, what kind of life was she living? My research included a comprehensive examination of the various aspects of flânerie, delving into concepts as diverse as the vampiric and necrophilic flâneur, transformative flânerie, and the conventional artistic flâneur. Following an extensive review of various scholarly materials, including articles, books, letters, and podcasts, I became acutely aware of the fervent, polarized debate within the academic community regarding the legitimacy of the flâneuse concept. Yet, a pivotal epiphany reshaped my focus: the existence of the flâneuse, contested as it was, was no longer important to me. The intent was not to further fuel the divisive debate, but rather to delve deeper. The focus shifted to wanting to understand how and why it was problematic for women to walk in the city and understand the reasons behind women's seemingly precarious existence. This curiosity extended to examining how female writers depicted female characters from diverse social backgrounds in the metropolis. What were their freedoms and limitations, and how did economic factors influence their experiences and sense of belonging? Was it true that “The women in the streets, according to critics, was most likely a prostitute” (Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City* 8)? This journey was no longer about proving or disproving the flâneuse's existence but about uncovering the diverse realities of women's lives and their struggles for autonomy within the constraints of their times. I wanted to uncover how female authors challenged and critiqued the social script of womanhood, and the patriarchal mechanisms that made it hard for women to make it on their own.

During my exploration of various sources on the flâneuse, I repeatedly encountered references to *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Good Morning, Midnight*, which caught my academic curiosity and seemed highly valuable in an examination of women's urban experiences. These novels work well for a comparative analysis because of their shared interbellum setting, offering a focused historical framework for the analysis. The appeal was further enhanced by the portrayal of contrasting class narratives found in their protagonists—one from the upper class and the other subsisting from moment to moment. The idea of looking into two novels with common themes authored by individuals from highly contrasting backgrounds also

added to the project's appeal. Rhys, with her origins in the Caribbean and a subsequent move to Paris, offers insights influenced by her experiences of migration and the fall in her class position. In contrast, Woolf, coming from an affluent Kensington setting, provides a narrative infused with the experiences of upper-class life.

The story of Jean Rhys (1890-1979) born Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams, unfolds as a narrative beyond her literary persona. Rhys, emerging from a well-off colonial Caribbean upbringing, moved to England with ambitions for her future. In London, she encountered a series of struggles, including an unsuccessful stint as a chorus girl (Elaine Savory, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys* xi). Her personal narrative was one of abandonment, grief from the loss of a child, and erratic relationships. Rhys endured a life filled with struggles, from grappling with necessities to her fight with alcoholism. After *Good Morning, Midnight* experienced poor sales its limited success led to her retreat from the public spotlight. In a letter to her friend Selma Dias written on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1949, she stated that her novel had "many brickbats hurled at it" (Jean Rhys, *The Letters of Jean Rhys* 6) so she had grown a thick skin, she thought. After a lengthy period away from the public eye, during which she was presumed dead by some, her return to the literary scene was met with much absurdity. Rhys wrote about the later interest of her work in a letter from November 1949, in which she tells her friend Maryvonne about the BBC's appreciation for her work and the peculiar rumours of her passing. She humorously remarked:

I am very astonished that the BBC like my work (especially Good Morning), but it seems they thought I was dead – which of course would make a great difference. In fact, they were going to follow it up with a broadcast ‘Quest for Jean Rhys’ and I feel rather tactless being still alive! (61)

Nonetheless, Rhys's tumultuous life story should not eclipse her brilliance as a writer. Jean Rhys's intentional ambiguity regarding her age and the confessional tone of her writing may prompt some to connect her own persona with those of her protagonists. This has led to the concept of the "Rhys woman" as proposed by some scholars—a conflation that oversimplifies her characters. The "Rhys woman", is a term that approaches the women in Rhys's novels as an isolated portrayal of Rhys herself. Savory cautions against such a narrow approach to her literary figures, emphasizing that Rhys's work, while drawing from personal experience, extends beyond to critique broader social structures and the female condition in society, noting that:



She [Rhys] expressed a subversive response to a world not only hierarchical and indifferent to the individual who refuses to fit into its expectations, but potentially (and often arbitrarily) violent. (14)

A world that her characters evidently wrestle with, and her style rebels against.

In the preface on Woolf from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Woolf's life is portrayed as one steeped in privilege, growing up in a London family entrenched in the world of publishing. Surrounded by intellectual richness from an early age, she was immersed in a cultural society that undoubtedly influenced her artistic sensibilities. However, this idyllic upbringing also included a series of profound losses, beginning with the passing of her mother, which marked her first conscious encounter with mental illness (NAELT 270). In *Moments of Being* (1972) Woolf's writing on her mother's later years is suffused with both admiration and melancholy. She notes the ceaseless nature of her mother's domestic labours, intensified by the absence of a governess and her mother's ageing:

Her strength lessened her respites were fewer; she sank, like an exhausted swimmer, deeper and deeper in the water, and could only at moments descry some restful shore on the horizon. (39)

Subsequently, Woolf endured the sorrow of losing her half-sister and one of her brothers. Following her father's death, she sought solace in the bohemian neighbourhood of Bloomsbury in London. The series of devastating losses within a mere span of 11 years left an indelible mark on Woolf, profoundly shaping both her personal development and her literary output. Amidst this backdrop of grief and transformation, her connections within the Bloomsbury group and eminent modernist writers like T.S. Eliot provided intellectual stimulation and exploration. Her collaboration with her husband Leonard Woolf in establishing the Hogarth Press proved instrumental in shaping the literary landscape of the time. The press not only published Woolf's own novels but also served as a platform for important modernist works by authors such as T. S. Eliot, Katharine Mansfield, and E. M. Forster. In the beginning of her writing career Woolf set herself apart by rejecting the "prevailing 'materialism' of her contemporaries such as Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy," and focused on that the truth of human experience lay in the depths of consciousness rather than "gritty realism" (270).

As Woolf's literary journey evolved, her focus on the plight of women and the societal shackles limiting their freedom grew more pronounced. During a time when women were systemically denied educational opportunities, wealth, and property rights, they struggled to cultivate distinct literary identities (271). Within this context, Woolf emerged as a vocal advocate, using her pen to articulate the silenced perspectives and creative yearnings of women. Despite their contrasting social classes, the works of both Rhys and Woolf find common ground in their subversive reaction to societal injustices and the unrealistic standards that entrap women. Their female characters similarly manifest the profound precariousness inherent in the life of a woman during the early twentieth century. This theme is exemplified in their struggles with the standards of beauty and their experiences of oppression, whether external or internal. While their economic circumstances vary greatly, a connection arises, their shared deterministic destiny as women.

My thesis is structured into five parts. The chapter following this introductory chapter, the second chapter, is entitled "Tracking Women's Quest for Freedom". Here, I provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the critique and challenges against traditional roles of women as depicted in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*. The chapter looks into the debate and view of women's said capabilities and fixed positions in society from the Enlightenment era. The chapter continues with a historical account of women's roles and positions, tracing the trajectory from the late Victorian period into the early twentieth century. It reflects on the intellectual heritage of Mary Wollstonecraft's activism for equality, which vehemently argued for women's right to education and emancipation. The chapter delves into the limited opportunities for employment that women had during the Victorian Era, along with the educational, social, and financial restrictions they faced. In the examination of the Victorian ideal, the discussion will delve into its depiction as the pinnacle of purity and domestic perfection, famously labelled as the Angel in the House. Conversely, Virginia Woolf embarked on a literary crusade to deconstruct this romanticized archetype, challenging its constraints on women's autonomy and identity. Thorstein Veblen further contributed to this critique by highlighting the societal repercussions faced by women who defied the prescribed roles assigned to them. Those who deviated from the expected norms of domesticity were often stigmatized as deviant or unwomanly, underscoring the rigid expectations surrounding womanhood during this era.

Despite the emergence of the New Woman model of freedom in the late nineteenth century, symbolizing a burgeoning desire for female independence and agency, entrenched systems of oppression persisted. The concept of the New Woman, while heralding progress,

grappled with societal resistance that inhibited women's full emancipation. In analyzing the genesis of the New Woman archetype, particular emphasis is placed on the role of fashion as a potent symbol of societal expectations and conformity. The imperative to "keep up appearances" underscores the pervasive pressure exerted on women to adhere to narrow standards of femininity.

Fashion in many ways was related to freedom, but for many also a distant dream. In the subchapter on "The Bitch Goddess", the role of women's magazines is debated as perpetuating new standards of femininity, exploring dress as an instrument of both liberation and domestic oppression outside the home. The magazines transformed the New Woman into a consumer, or worshipper of the goddess of consumption, where freedom came to be equated with consumption, rather than promoting education or activities that created a true sense of freedom. As will be discussed, modernist writers engaged in a deliberate endeavour to challenge entrenched structures of oppression through their experimental literary techniques. Central to this pushback, was a heightened focus on the psychological depths of characters, resulting in a narrative landscape characterized by polyphony, meaning the presence of multiple voices and perspectives within a text, however also within the subject. Moreover, the urban environment, with its carnivalesque modes, emerged as a symbolic setting for themes of transcendence and interconnectedness. Within the cityscape, the boundaries between individuals and societal norms blurred, allowing for moments of liberation and collective celebration.

In the chapter entitled "*Mrs. Dalloway* and the Quest for Freedom", I begin by emphasizing Virginia Woolf's viewpoint on the novel as a genre, her own thoughts on her narrative voice used in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and her sense of duty as a female writer in the twentieth century. The character of Clarissa Dalloway is examined through a concept that I have termed "The Leisure Class Victorian Matron", discussing her as a figure who both embodies and challenges the expectations that comes with such title. Clarissa's function as the fragmented or polyphonous subject naturally extends into a discussion of her artistry and her walks across London, all in which are counterpoints to the passive ideal of the Victorian woman. In the analysis of Miss Kilman, (3.3) I present the concept of class as a mechanism of subjugation. In the analysis of Miss Kilman's character, the discussion will also explore the limited job opportunities for women during the interwar period, as highlighted in the literary review. However, this investigation will also look into how Woolf positioned Miss Kilman as a means to demystify the "monstrous" single women in society, the spinsters.

In the discussion of the carnivalesque mode in the novel, selected passages from the novel are investigated, with an emphasis on the connection between the carnivalesque, the urban landscape and the subversion of oppressive structures. Moreover, the chapter follows Clarissa, and her walks in the city, wherein she momentarily transcends the confines of her class and domestic imprisonment. The vitality of the metropolis, particularly evident in its carnivalesque manifestations, emerges as a living canvas of liberation. As we will see, Clarissa finds herself swept up in the city's rhythmic flow, a space where the collective joy and unrestrained celebration reflect her own desire for an ephemeral, yet intoxicating, release from the mundane.

In the fourth chapter, I delve into the depiction of womanhood in Jean Rhys's narrative. Through an exploration of Rhys's use of literary devices, I explore the constraints and societal norms that both restrict and define the protagonist's identity. The comparative method I apply in the close readings reveals striking parallels and poignant contrasts between the protagonists of the two texts. Key to this analysis is the figure of Sasha Jansen, whose personal battles against the currents of societal expectations and economic instability are emblematic of the broader struggles faced by women of her class and age. Furthermore, this chapter elucidates Rhys's critique of the oppressive forces embodied in motifs such as the magazines, which perpetuate and reinforce traditional roles and expectations. Rhys's stylistic choices are also looked into as they articulate a resistance to the mechanization of women, a theme that resonates throughout the novel.

## **2. Tracking Women's Quest for Freedom**

This thesis undertakes an examination of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, with a primary focus on their ways of critiquing and challenging patriarchal mechanism of subjugation. However, prior to delving into the analysis, it is essential to establish a context for their narratives and to outline the main concepts that will be applied when looking into their literary contributions, all of which are detailed in this literary review chapter.

The chapter opens with a chronological presentation of some important advocates and voices from the time of Mary Wollstonecraft to that of Woolf and Rhys. It explores the societal conditions and representations of women during the late Victorian Era and early twentieth centuries, providing a contextual backdrop for the analysis. This first section of the review provides an in-depth exploration of the foundational ideas and intellectual

contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft, contextualized within the broader Enlightenment discourse on women's struggles and rights. Drawing from Wollstonecraft's seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the chapter examines her advocacy for women's education and empowerment as essential components of societal progress. Wollstonecraft's critique of societal norms and expectations regarding women's roles underscores the systemic barriers to women's freedom and intellectual development. Tracing the lineage of women's writings to Woolf and Rhys female writers were on a quest for freedom, increasingly intrigued by portraying women as imprisoned and under-stimulated. Following the definition of patriarchy, I explore the emergence of a new ideal, the New Woman. As will be detailed, the patriarchy impeded the emergence of a new paradigm for women by reducing their roles and identities to commodities, thereby hindering advancements toward a liberated female subject. Modernist writers and artists pushed back on this by incorporating the polyphonous subject and challenging the status quo through new literary expressions.

## 2.1 From Wollstonecraft to Woolf and Rhys

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), along with other Enlightenment intellectuals, championed the emancipation and liberation of women, and played a pivotal role in advancing what was later to be referred to as feminist thought. Her work built upon the foundational ideas of earlier female writers, strongly advocating for women's education and freedom (NAELR 12). Wollstonecraft's writings, particularly *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), proclaim that women are far more than ornamental or subservient figures; they are resilient, intelligent, and deserving of both respect and a rightful place out in society. In her discussions on the vital role of women in society and the imperative of their education and empowerment, she argues that:

[c]ontending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that is she not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice.

(Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 10)

In other words, she argues that the full participation of women in intellectual and societal pursuits is not just a matter of equality between the sexes, but also a means to advance

knowledge, virtue, and the overall betterment of society. Wollstonecraft also examines how women are socialized from a young age, emphasizing the troubling lesson conveyed to young girls: from a young age, they are taught to prize traits like "cunning" and "gentleness" over intellectual and moral strengths. The notion that "outward obedience" and mere "scrupulous attention" to superficialities will earn them favour is, in her perspective, a grave injustice to the potential of women. Furthermore, she expresses concern over the notion that a woman's physical attractiveness might serve as a sufficient substitute for intellectual or emotional depth, so resulting in "everything else... needless" for many years of their life (Wollstonecraft 31). Wollstonecraft's insights are profound, not just for pointing out the flaws in the prevailing education and expectations for women, but also for setting the stage for the broader arguments she would present on women's rights. She argues not just for a change in perception, but for a comprehensive shift in how society views, educates, and treats its female populace, problematizing the idea that women were often not primarily seen as human beings but rather primarily as women. This perspective was a cornerstone of her feminist philosophy.

Her criticism laid foundational arguments for the feminist movement, emphasizing that women, like men, are deserving of a rigorous education and the opportunity to fully develop their intellectual and moral capacities. We must remember that Wollstonecraft's advocacy for women's rights occurred during the Enlightenment era when "women were barred from universities and faced innumerable other disadvantages and varieties of repression" (NAELR 17). Moreover, the narrative of female authors from that period is consistently marked by "self-educating, courage and extraordinary initiative," (ibid.) highlighting the sheer determination required to overcome the barriers that deprived women of their autonomy.

The fact that women were isolated from larger parts of society underscore the systemic oppression that women like Wollstonecraft dealt with and the remarkable tenacity women had to demonstrated in their quest of intellectual freedom and independence. Wollstonecraft's own life is illustrative of this tendency since she broke out of social norms to become a powerful thinker who invested in her own growth and helped other women she encountered, encouraging them to do the same. One of the main issues she dedicated her work to, was the dire consequences for women to live in solitude or fail in marriage. Wollstonecraft explains that women stayed in abusive marriages to avoid social and financial sanctions. However, fear of losing children was the main incentive to stay, and remarriage or prostitution was often the only option to survive. As Wollstonecraft writes, "Losing thus every spur, and having no other means of support, prostitution becomes her only refuge" (97). What women lack at this point in history is the right to provide for one's own needs, which she claims is the foundation

of independence. Women had to sacrifice or forfeit a significant portion of their lives, including their integrity, ambitions, and love, in order to attain a measure of autonomy. To avoid the "bitter bread of dependence" (90), she concluded that economic independence and education was crucial to attain freedom.

In the opening chapter of *The Female Malady* (1987), Elaine Showalter remarks on the final year of Mary Wollstonecraft's life and her unfinished novel, intended as a narrative complement to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, left incomplete at her passing, depicts the imprisonment and subjugation of women, born from the curtailment of their rights and societal expectations. As Showalter argues, the protagonist, Maria, becomes entrapped in an asylum due to the machinations of her oppressive husband, who seeks to take control of her money. Showalter emphasizes that the "mansion of despair," Maria's term for the asylum, becomes a metaphor for the wider societal constructs, from matrimonial bonds to legal systems, that restrict women's freedom and which in turn lead to their psychological unravelling. In Maria's quest to find meaning in her fight for stability and autonomy, she reflects on a profound question: "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born as slaves?" (1)

In a quest for freedom, the depiction of imprisoned female characters had escalated toward the end of the eighteenth century especially with the invention of the Gothic novel (NAELR 29-30). This Gothicism, which defied the rational and unveiled the darkest psyche of society also resulted in works like *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, which Showalter discusses, and later "the tradition of domestic fiction[...]culminating in the masterworks of Jane Austen (NAELR 30). Tracing the lineage of women's writings to Woolf and Rhys, many writers depict women as shackled to the house, their roles, and the consequences of not fitting into those roles. As this literary tradition developed, it progressively exposed the "prisons"—figurative but tangible constraints—that confined women to roles strictly dictated by their sex.

Following Wollstonecraft's late eighteenth-century outcry, the nineteenth century saw an expansion of female authorship, with writers building upon her legacy to further confront and question the societal constraints on women. Jane Austen, with her discerning social commentaries, critiqued the limited roles available to women. Her novels, particularly *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), highlighted the economic and societal pressures that dictated the choices women could make. Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854) and *Ruth* (1853) further delve into the complexities of womanhood.

Later, the tradition of probing into women's inner worlds set the stage for Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1892. Her story, while commenting on medical

malpractices, also draws from a literary tradition that had, for over a century, been writing in a quest for women's freedom. At the time when "The Yellow Wallpaper" was published, Virginia Woolf was ten years old and Jean Rhys a toddler of two, positioning them at the birth of a legacy where numerous female authors were actively challenging contemporary perceptions of women and the patriarchal system which subordinated women.

As the nineteenth century waned, during the *fin de siècle*, the spirit of decadence crept across the fields like a mist, into the cultural landscape bringing with it a shroud of disillusionment towards the rigid mores of the time and a curiosity for the uncharted, forbidden, and unorthodox. It was within this atmosphere of societal introspection and aesthetic exploration that women authors found new ways to articulate their discontent with the rigid strictures of their roles. Writers such as Oscar Wilde and Charles Baudelaire, often associated with the Decadent movement, inspired a generation of women writers to employ their pen in similarly bold fashion (Abrams & Harpham 79). In her 1993 anthology *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of Fin-de-Siècle*, Showalter presents the notion that "women writers in particular" gravitated towards the short story medium for its capacity to provide flexibility and freedom (viii) as opposed to the rigid and predictable trajectory of the Victorian novel that traditionally concluded with either the heroine's marriage or death (ix). The female authors writing against the traditional plot ending, dubbed the New Women, were often the subject of derision by "outraged male reviewers" who labelled them as "threatening daughters of decadence", criticizing their reluctance to conform to the conventional roles that society offered them.

Moreover, women who penned New Woman themes were dismissed as insane for their audacious rejection of being confined to "natural" roles and their resistance to being treated merely as "objects" (x). Recognizing the vitriol faced by women who dared to write about the New Woman, we begin to see the larger framework within which their voices were contested. The societal dismissal of these progressive female voices was not merely a cultural quirk but a symptom of a deeply rooted patriarchal order. This system sought to maintain control by assigning absolute authority to male figures, whether within the domestic sphere or the community at large. It is within this stringent structure that the New Woman's audacity to seek autonomy was seen as a threat, a defiance of the carefully constructed hierarchy that even literary voices struggled to dismantle.



### 2.1.1 Patriarchy

In "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf captures the essence of England's societal structure with the observation that it operates under a patriarchal system (39), as defined by *Encyclopedia Britannica*: "a social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute authority over the family group; by extension, one or more men (as in a council) exert absolute authority over the community as a whole" ("Patriarchy"). The Victorian Age saw the flourishing of such a system, gaining support from the period's interpretation of Darwinian theories, resulting in the widely held ideal of the Angel in the House, which supported the passive domesticity expected of women.

In the Victorian era, scholars influenced by the emergent theories of biological evolution posited by Charles Darwin proposed a model of cultural evolution that suggested societies universally progress along a singular path. This model, termed unilineal cultural evolution, mapped human history as advancing from communal mating practices to a structure led by women (matriarchy), and culminating in a patriarchal system where men held authority. Important figures in the development of this theory included American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan and German philosopher Friedrich Engels, whose works significantly shaped the idea that male supremacy was a natural outcome of societal development. Such arguments, now widely refuted, employed science to rationalize patriarchy as an ultimate and sophisticated form of civilization, relegating women to subordinate positions by asserting male dominance as the most evolved social structure ("Matriarchy").

Abrams and Harpham argue that although feminist criticism as a distinctive and systematic method of analyzing literature emerged prominently in the late 1960s, it stands on the foundation of two centuries' worth of efforts to acknowledge and celebrate women's cultural contributions and achievements (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 123-24). This recognition is significant in light of the pervasive patriarchal structures that have historically governed Western civilization, a fact echoed by various strands of feminist theory, including psychoanalytical, Marxist, and poststructuralist. These theories hold, as Abrams and Harpham articulate, that Western society is fundamentally patriarchal—male-centred and male-dominated (125). This patriarchal construct ensures that women are systematically positioned as subordinate across all societal dimensions: in the family, within religious institutions, in the

political sphere, across economic systems, throughout social interactions, under legal frameworks, and within the arts (ibid.). As Abrams and Harpham highlight, the pervasive issue is that women, through socialization, are taught to assimilate and perpetuate patriarchal standards, often minimizing their self-worth and unknowingly contributing to their own oppression.

As mentioned, Woolf and Rhys were born in the late Victorian era, defined as “the third phase of the Victorian Age” (NAELV 14). During this era, Darwinian theories regarding sex played a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of womanhood. If you were born as the female sex, it also meant that it was your destiny to become a woman. Feminist critics have drawn parallels between the conservative Darwinian perspective on sex, which asserts biological determinism, and a metaphorical prison for women. This imagery reflects the constrained existence of women during the Victorian Age, and as previously mentioned, a theme frequently revisited in novels of that time. Literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their seminal 1979 work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, examine Charlotte Brontë's 1849 novel *Shirley*, characterizing Victorian womanhood as a shackling construct that imposed significant limitations on women's freedom, based solely on their societal role as the “weaker” sex, entrapped within the constructs of what we recognize today as gender. Gilbert and Gubar describe women as confined to “the prison of gender” (393), alluding to the rigid societal roles and constraints imposed upon women.

Additionally, the female sex was typically seen as passive, and less creative, while men were seen as active, and highly artistic. As Darwin himself concludes in *The Descent of Man*:

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man's attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman— whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music (inclusive both of composition and performance), history, science, and philosophy, with half-a-dozen names under each subject, the two lists would not bear comparison. (Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* 327)

His view was further supported by other scientists that claimed, “sexual differentiation was based on cell metabolism” (Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* 122). Patrick Geddes and John Thomson's late Victorian work, *The Evolution of Sex* (1899), also extends upon Darwin's

ideas from *The Descent of Man*, positioning that metabolic differences within the cells of the sex predispose behavioural traits. According to Geddes and Thompson, the very cellular structures of men and women contribute to sex differences in behaviour, with men's cells undergoing processes that tend to expend energy, making them more prone to disintegration or “katabolic” states. Women's cells, conversely, engage more in energy conservation, tending towards building up or “anabolic” states (26-27). In this biological framework, the divergence between the sexes was linked to their distinct roles in reproduction, influencing not only their physical attributes but also their behaviour.

In societies governed by patriarchal principles, such stereotypes were codified into a singular feminine ideal, epitomized by the Victorian archetype of the Angel in the House. However, the dawning of the twentieth century brought with it a stark realization, and this became increasingly difficult. It became apparent that the inner lives and aspirations of women, as well as their diversity and complexity, remained unaddressed within the restrictive confines of these traditional values. As we transition to the next section, we anticipate the emergence of a new paradigm that not only challenges these outdated notions but also redefined the essence of womanhood, paving the way for a reimagined sense of freedom and self-expression.

## 2.2 The Emergence of a New Ideal: The New Woman

Within the context of societal transformation, the emergence of the New Woman as a symbol serves as a significant indicator of changing norms and values. The historical backdrop that informed Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* was primarily the late Victorian era, extending from 1837 to 1901, and the earlier years of the twentieth century. This backdrop is a part of the period of modernity. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, modernity is frequently associated with transformative characteristics such as the advancement of scientific thought, urban expansion, and the emergence of individualism, (“Modernity”) all amidst the looming presence of modern warfare and destruction. Marshall Berman captures the essence of this era's duality, asserting:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world. And at the same time, it threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.  
(Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* 15)

During this time of transformation, the reconsideration of women's roles emerged as a critical issue. Guided by Ezra Pound's call to "make it new," female authors of the era were at the forefront of challenging established norms. They critically engaged with the deconstruction of the pervasive Angel in the House ideal—a symbol of domesticity and submission—and advocated for the New Woman, defined as "a woman especially of the late 19th century actively resisting traditional controls and seeking to fill a complete role in the world" ("New Woman"). The New Woman concept ignited widespread discourse, notably following British novelist Sarah Grand's, the first to use the term in the *North American Review* in 1894. Grand depicted the New Woman as someone who overcame the shackles of the traditional female domesticity, signalling a shift in societal perceptions of women's roles. As stated by Gillian Sutherland in *In Search of the New Woman* (2015), "Grand hailed the New Woman as one who has at last 'solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy'" (1). Debates raged over the scope of women's autonomy, educational access, and limitations in their marriages.

During the mid-nineteenth century, Britain had taken significant steps to extend the rights of its citizens (NAELV 15), but women were still discriminated against. In December 1867, a Second Reform bill was enacted, broadening the voting rights to include a segment of the working classes. Concurrently, improved access to education among the less privileged in society played a pivotal role in "heightening political awareness and activity" (ibid.). Despite these advancements, there were still challenges and limitations to be addressed, since many of these liberties were conspicuously absent for women (17–18). It was stated that one of the most pressing social issues in England at the time revolved around the complex relationship between men and women. Women were deprived of the right to vote or hold political positions, despite the presentation of petitions to Parliament advocating for women's suffrage as early as the 1840s (18). It was not until 1918 that women gained the right to vote. When it came to married life, "Until the passage of the Married Women's Property Acts (1870-1908), married women could not own or handle their own property", and while men had the ability to divorce their wives on grounds of adultery, wives could only seek divorce if the adultery also included "cruelty, bigamy, incest, or bestiality" (ibid.).

Employment opportunities for women remained severely limited, and their educational opportunities were similarly limited. These glaring disparities ignited a fervent debate about women's societal roles, famously known as the Woman Question (ibid.). Many people held varying opinions, and the topic was particularly contentious when discussing the role of

women. There were numerous contrasting views. The institution of marriage, and indeed the family structure itself, faced scrutiny and people particularly questioned the conventional roles of women as wives, mothers, and daughters, suggesting a broader re-evaluation of these societal norms (653).

In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), John Stuart Mill echoes the sentiments of Mary Wollstonecraft from *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Mill likely refrained from explicitly mentioning Wollstonecraft, possibly due to the public circulation of her personal letter that marred her reputation. Nonetheless, the influence of her ideas and writings is unmistakable. Mill's analysis delved deeply into the systemic legal, marital, and societal subjugation of women, asserting that equality between the sexes was not just a matter of justice but crucial for societal advancement. He declares:

What, in unenlightened societies, color, race, religion, or in the case of a conquered country, nationality, are to some men, sex is to all women; a peremptory exclusion from almost all honourable occupations, but either such as cannot be fulfilled by others, or such as those others do not think worthy of their acceptance. (Mill 100)

When referring to occupations “as cannot be fulfilled by others” he is referring to childbirth, and when referring to “less worthy occupations”, he is referring to chores in the domestic sphere. Further, he predicts an intensifying tension as societal progress expands women's intellectual horizons, but societal conventions continue to restrict their roles, asserting,

The case will be even more frequent, as increased cultivation creates a greater and greater disproportion between the ideas and faculties of women, and the scope which society allows to their activity. (ibid.)

Florence Nightingale, renowned for her advancements in nursing, also critiqued the restrictive societal roles imposed on middle- and upper-class women, advocating for their greater involvement beyond domestic confines. Nightingale claimed women were “taught trivial accomplishments to fill up days in which there was nothing important to do (NAELV 19). The household started to be viewed as a distinct realm separate from the external world, and women were increasingly pigeonholed into the role of “the Angel in the House” (Joyce Burnette, *Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain* 231).

Women such as Sarah Stickney Ellis (1812-1872), who established a girls' school to prioritize cultivation of “the heart” over intellectual prowess, authored a widely successful book on women's education and domestic roles. The book's bestseller status mirrors societal norms of the time. Her book *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*, the 1839 ideal of a woman, is portrayed as the sole custodian of the home. She is described as “the humble mistress who sat alone, guarding the fireside of his distant home” (NAELV 657). An image that underscores the concept of a distant domestic sphere, where the wife stands both as sentinel and the angelic embodiment of virtue. This depiction metaphorically positions women in a subservient role to the rationalism of men (symbolized by the fireside) within the boundaries of his home on her pedestal.

As previously noted, the Victorian ideal of womanhood held significant reverence, as exemplified by Coventry Patmore in his ode to his wife, *The Angel in the House*, which was published between 1854 and 1862. In the poem women’s “selflessness and purity were highlighted” (NAELV 20), hinting at the high standards and idealized roles women had to live up to. The characterization of woman as “No liken’d excellence can reach/Her, the most excellent of all” (Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* lines 27-28) came under fire from feminist critics, notably Virginia Woolf, who lambasted the poem for its overly sentimentalized depiction of the ideal woman and for the stifling influence such an ideal imposed on the lives of women, claiming that “killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of the woman writer” (Virginia Woolf, *Killing the Angel in the House* 5). Following Woolf's critique, the phrase “the Angel in the House” has become emblematic of the patronizing and suffocating view held by Victorians towards women, with the poem frequently cited as a prime illustration of this perspective.

Thorstein Veblen, whose work will be discussed in detail in subchapter 2.4, also expressed his concerns regarding the conventional perception of women as subordinate and dependent. He approached the Woman Question debate with the stance that women were often perceived not as independent entities, but rather as assets that signified a man's financial and social standing. Veblen articulately pointed out that:

Woman’s life, in its civil, economic and social bearing...is to be imputed on some other individual who stands in some relationship or ownership or tutelage to the woman”. (Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* 229)

He further noted that society considered it unbecoming for a woman to deviate from her prescribed societal functions, asserting that “any departure from her assigned round of duties is unwomanly”, and “it is unfeminine in her to aspire to a self-directing, self-centred life” (230).

Despite the general acquiescence to traditional gender roles among the societal elite, Veblen recognized an awareness and suspicion, which he claims kindled the “New Woman movement” (231). This movement or new ideal, represented a challenge to the entrenched Angel in the House archetype and as mentioned above, by the 1890s, the New Woman, an embodiment of liberated femininity, became a subject of intense discourse. This was reflected in the latest fashion trends and celebrated in a deluge of fiction and magazine articles, (NAELV 20) as a figure symbolizing autonomy and self-determination, unbounded by patriarchal definitions, her husband’s, or father’s name, seeking identity through her own endeavours and merits.

The New Woman was not only a concept but a cause advanced by female writers and promoted vigorously through magazines and women’s networks. This beacon of modern womanhood symbolized the aspirations for societal change. However, the onset of war presented a substantial impediment, leading some to perceive the interwar period as a regression in women’s roles and rights. Consequently, some modern scholars have raised doubts about the impact of the New Woman, especially during the interbellum period, citing the influence of wartime on women’s aspirations.

### **2.2.1 Between Precarious Jobs and the Little Black Dress**

One pivotal aspect that hindered the progression of the realization of the New Woman post-WWI was the decline in work opportunities for women, a factor that is central to understanding the setbacks in women’s quest for autonomy. The war had allowed women to momentarily fill roles vacated by men, broadening their horizons and blurring gender lines in the workforce. Yet, Estelle Freedman in her article “The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s”, raises the question of what became of feminism after women achieved suffrage in 1918 (Freedman 372). Sociological and economic studies that target the interbellum period in England, often point to a complex picture regarding women’s freedom at the time, which often is connected to employment opportunities. While there were advances, with more women entering the workforce, their employment was typically in low-paid, unstable positions, deemed suitable only until marriage. This reflects a broader societal trend

where women's economic independence was still tightly interwoven with traditional gender roles, complicating the narrative of progress during the time. Hatton and Bailey detail the heightened domestic demands during the interwar period, noting "the standards of housekeeping demanded of women were very high and had escalated since the late 19th century" ("Household Labor Supply and Women's Work in Interwar Britain" 231). This period also saw women's regress back to roles largely domestic in nature, (Hatton and Bailey 237).

Furthermore, over 40% of employed women were relegated to domestic service or the textile industry, reflecting the limited and precarious nature of their work at that time (232). Colin Linsley's research, as presented by Hatton & Bailey, on women in interwar England and their opportunities to participate in the workforce, underscore a notable disparity in the extent to which women could engage.<sup>1</sup>

His findings reveal a significant correlation between the presence of daughters within households and the likelihood of women seeking employment beyond domestic confines. In households devoid of daughters, there emerges a discernible decrease in the propensity for women to pursue work outside the home. This pattern suggests a link between familial dynamics and women's labour force participation. The absence of daughters in such households may result in a more concentrated burden of domestic responsibilities falling upon the women present. With fewer individuals to share the workload traditionally associated with household chores and caregiving, women may find themselves constrained in their ability to seek employment outside the home. The traditional division of domestic duties, predominantly shouldered by women, often served as a barrier to their participation in the formal labour market. In households with daughters, the distribution of domestic tasks may be more spread, thereby affording women greater flexibility and opportunity to pursue external employment (Hatton and Bailey 237). This observation underscores the challenges women faced in adhering to societal ideals due to the constraints of their employment opportunities, a theme to be further examined in the forthcoming analysis chapter. The division of labour within households, predominantly along gender lines, presented formidable obstacles for women in their quest for financial stability and personal freedom. However, amidst the constraints imposed by limited work opportunities, women seized upon emergent avenues for self-definition and autonomy in the aftermath of World War I.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Appendix A: Women's Work Interwar England" for more details.



Fashion played a pivotal role in shaping the identity of the New Woman, symbolizing the changing tides of freedom. Coco Chanel, the Parisian couturier, was at the forefront of this fashion revolution. Her introduction of “the little black dress” marked a significant departure from previous norms (“Coco Chanel”). Chanel’s innovative designs, as delineated by Maroula Joannou, catered not merely to the sartorial needs of women, but to their aspirations for autonomy and bodily movement. This she did by combining sophistication, soft textiles, and a touch of masculine simplicity to redefine haute couture (Jean Rhys and Fashion 445-446). Women eagerly embraced these ensembles as symbols of newfound freedom.

Joannou, further in her analysis, parallels the language of fashion with Rhys’s literary world, where the female body metamorphoses into a “readable text” (470). Rhys’s language of fashion is rich, she adds, with pearls, bags, footwear, and cosmetics—a language enabling a woman to meticulously craft and communicate her desired persona (ibid.).

In Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha frequently thinks about “the little black dress”, “longing for it, madly, furiously,” thinking if she only had the dress “everything would be different” (23). The act of stealing the dress (20) that she cannot afford highlights the gap between the New Woman’s aspirational model and the post-war societal realities. Fashion was, as mentioned above, a symbol of freedom, a dream of independence that many single women aspired to. Yet, for most, this dream remained just beyond grasp, as they navigated the instability of precarious jobs with pay that limited their freedom.

### **2.2.2 The Bitch Goddess: Fashion a Liberator or Domesticator?**

The transition from the Victorian era’s tightly laced corsets to the more liberating attire of the twentieth century marked a notable shift in fashion.<sup>2</sup> Despite this move towards relaxed styles, the emergence of forceful marketing strategies meant that women’s fashion choices remained influenced, adhering to new, yet still strict, societal expectations.

Ilya Parkins offers an insightful perspective in her essay “Fashion” from *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture* (2015). Parkins asserts that “for many critics and theorists of modernity, in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century, fashion *was* the modern” (96). She emphasizes the importance of fashion in understanding modern life by highlighting how both Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin regarded it as “a material embodiment of the spirit of modernity” (ibid).

Before World War 1, dress was socially stratified in quite a marked way. However,

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<sup>2</sup> See “Appendix B : Women’s Dress” for more details.

during the interbellum period, a transformation occurred due to advancements in the textile industry, that led to what can be described as a "democratisation" of fashion. The middle-class could also afford fashionable attire. British sociologist John Goldthorpe notes that "For women, clothes manufactured from new materials of rayon, crèpe de chine or artificial silk, became available at stores" (*Class and Status in Interwar England* 9). Consequently, the latest sartorial trends, once exclusive to the upper-class, became accessible to a broader audience.

Another marker of modernity is found in the growth of the textile industry, which presented a complex landscape for women's opportunities. On one hand, it offered a measure of emancipation by providing employment outside the domestic sphere and access to affordable fashion, allowing women to craft and express their unique identities through their sartorial choices. On the other hand, it also pushed women into a limited spectrum of job opportunities, often restricting their professional growth. Primarily, the jobs available to women in textile factories were often low-skilled, repetitive, and offered little opportunity for advancement or professional development. These positions typically involved tasks like sewing, spinning, and other forms of manual labour that required minimal training. Consequently, women were frequently confined to the lower rungs of the workforce with limited prospects for upward mobility.

The increased accessibility of fashion also introduced the pressure for women to "keeping up appearances", a pursuit that was often detrimental. Keeping pace with the latest styles in dress and other aspects became a taxing expectation for many women. Goldthrope further notes that the societal fetishization with success and the new was associated with various physical and mental issues. He remarks:

Doctors identified a syndrome labelled as "suburban neurosis," chiefly afflicting women and characterized by a variety of symptoms such as headaches, palpitations, insomnia, dyspepsia, and depression. This was diagnosed as the result of money worries, "the fetish of the home," limited social ties, and concerns to live up to "a false set of values". (7)

The upper class also felt under attack and were seeking new ways to distinguish themselves with refined items of clothing that signalled leisure and status, "gloves were essential for a woman as a symbol of "gentility," the mark of a lady who had no need to work" and equally important was it "to avoid status-damaging faux pas," (9) which included dressing inappropriately for the occasion.

Thorstein Veblen predicted another societal ailment stemming from the relentless pursuit of keeping pace with ever-evolving fashion trends. He posits, "A new style comes to vogue and remains in favour for a season, and, at least so long as it is a novelty, people very generally find the new style attractive" (Veblen 125). This observation hints at a disturbing correlation between the rapid succession of fashion trends and the erosion of discerning taste. Veblen foresees the emergence of what he terms "æsthetic nausea," a condition characterized by the increasingly outlandish and intolerable styles that gain prominence in succession (ibid.). Veblen's insights shed light on the spectacle of modern fashion shows, where avant-garde designers occasionally veer into the realm of the absurd. The sight of models adorned with inflatable devices or other eccentric accessories on the runway may be interpreted as a manifestation of Veblen's concept of æsthetic nausea. Concurrent with fashion becoming more accessible, there was a rise in the prevalence of women's magazines.

Women's magazines not only aided the distribution of fashion trends, but also fuelled the contemporary era's progression of fashion consumption. Fashion magazines became powerful determinants of style, taste, and societal standards. Ilya Parkins draws attention to the intriguing "qualities" inherent within women's magazines, emphasizing their role in shaping femininity. These magazines, Parkins suggests, are not just spaces exclusively tailored for women; they function more broadly as "domesticating enchantments," an evocative phrase she also uses as the title for her essay. This proposition implies that while women's magazines may outwardly cater to a female audience, they, on a deeper level, upheld patriarchal mechanisms of subjugation. Parkins notes that these publications reflect "tropes of modern alienation as the underside of feminine enchantment" (Parkins 344). In other words, these enchantments, or magazines offered an aspirational image, but they might inadvertently foster feelings of detachment and disconnection among their readers, as for instance through the image of the New Woman.

Since magazines were growing in popularity in the post-war era, they not only catered to women's said interests, but also actively promoted a culture of consumerism, encouraging readers to shop and renew their wardrobes regularly. Many of the magazines "were running stories that glamorized showy clothes and illustrations of beautifully dressed women in public spaces. Common scenes included women boarding a train or talking in groups at a café" (Livia Gershon, "The Birth of Fashion Magazines"). In a letter, Philosopher William James, critiqued the fervent veneration of material wealth, which he likened to worshipping a "bitch-goddess". He contended in 1906 that the aggressive chase of wealth, emblematic of consumer capitalism, had evolved into a prevalent affliction by the nineteenth century, a trend that

intensified as the 20th century dawned (“bitch goddess”). The bitch-goddess is also explicitly mentioned in *Good Morning, Midnight*, where Sasha expresses the hopelessness of a society worshipping mass consumerism when ambiguously confessing to two unknown men, she met at a bar that “Somebody wrote once that they worship the bitch-goddess. It certainly wasn’t Venus” (Rhys 36). The intertextual incorporation of the “bitch-goddess” in *Good Morning, Midnight* points to Rhys's own hesitance towards capitalistic values. Her critique, which will be dealt with in the analysis later, is mirrored in the protagonist Sasha's struggles against the enslaving dictates of societal norms, as exemplified by her grappling with the expectations imposed by magazines.

It has been stated that during the time in which Woolf and Rhys were writing their novels, “shopping shifted from a discrete activity to a climate,” (Elizabeth Outka, *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture* 81) and consumers became increasingly subjected to innovative advertising techniques. During this era, there was a notable evolution in marketing tactics, with professionals in the field finding new and creative ways to engage the attention of daily commuters. Outka notes that “Virginia Woolf reminds us in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) that marketers could even take to the air, represented in the airplane that writes an (ambiguous) message across the London sky,” (85) which, in many ways, resembles the omnipresence of contemporary advertising that resides within our very pockets.

The archives of *Vogue* and other women's magazines from the twentieth century demonstrate their pivotal role in shaping norms around what it meant to be a woman, and what a woman should look like. The magazines propagated specific diets like consuming celery or using cigarettes to suppress appetite, and one notes the era's pulse in the observation, “Suddenly, raw vegetables were in *Vogue*” (Anne Ewbank). In the encyclopaedia Britannica, it is explained that in eighteenth century Britain, women's magazines were more vibrant and substantive, but the nineteenth century saw a shift towards more domestic content, mirroring societal expectations. Periodicals like “*The Female’s Friend*,” which championed women's rights, were anomalies and generally short-lived. After 1880, British women's magazines began to revisit a broader range of topics yet continued to focus on traditional female roles like childcare and homemaking (“Women’s magazines”).

Virginia Woolf's concept of “frock-consciousness,” revealed in her 1925 correspondence, delves into the complexities of self-perception and the scrutiny of society's gaze. This term embodied the nuanced awareness and social pressures of personal appearance during Woolf's era. She describes the discomfort of being observed by “fashionable” women, noting how her freshly washed hair adds to her conspicuousness as it might look frizzy (*The*

*Letters* 405). This personal struggle with external perception underscores the era's significant emphasis on representation, highlighting the profound social implications of looks and fashion. Woolf's musings are echoed in Parkins' observation that visual self-representation was a serious endeavour at the time, (101) and that in an age dominated by visual culture, where identity often was "mediated through the eye," the imperative of self-presentation elevated. This emphasis on appearance, as Parkins posits, brought with it a unique set of anxieties in navigating the world (Parkins 102).

### 2.3 The Emergence of the Leisure Class

This thesis is guided by an exploration of the mechanisms that simultaneously constrain and empower women. Transitioning from an investigation of one such dynamic, fashion, we now pivot towards examining another mechanism that shapes women's experiences: class.

The use of the term *class* in this thesis is associated with social class, and the precise meaning of class in a social context has experienced significant modifications throughout history, especially during Britain's Industrial Revolution. The term *class* carries a rich etymology that dates back to the mid-sixteenth century. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) records its earliest use in 1533, attributed to John Bellenden, a poet and translator. Interestingly, several meanings of class that emerged in English, such as a "set or category of things differentiated by grade or quality" (first cited in 1680), or as a "set or category of things or people with a common property or attribute" (noted in 1690), did not appear in the French language until later. By 1694, "class" was adopted in a biological taxonomic context. Its more recognizable sociological meaning, indicating societal divisions based on economic or social standing, appeared in English writings around 1758. Despite these additional meanings, OED maintains that the sociological understanding of "class," dating back to 1758, remains the most common interpretation, referring to societal divisions among people. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "class" denotes a specific group of individuals within a society who share similar economic and social standing. It encompasses divisions such as the ruling or professional class, as well as distinctions between higher and lower social classes. The term is often used before nouns to indicate class-based distinctions or conflicts, such as class distinction or class struggle ("Class").

In 1899, Mark Twain satirically addressed class in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. The phrase, "When red-headed people are above a certain social grade, their hair is auburn," (225) ingeniously shows how social status influences how individuals are

perceived or treated in society. During the Industrial Revolution, the concept of class became strongly linked to economic status and job position, reflecting the era's growing emphasis on social stratification. As cities and industries grew, a new social class called *the middle class* emerged. This group was made up of people from various backgrounds who were not extremely wealthy landowners or impoverished factory workers. Instead, this class included successful industrialists, merchants, bankers, shopkeepers, teachers, doctors, and more (Conti et al, *Big Ideas Humanities & Social Sciences* 251). Two distinct approaches in social analysis arose in reaction to the intensified scrutiny of the evolving social milieu: the Marxist approach and the Weberian approach. As defined in Routledge Encyclopaedia of Political Economy:

The main body of class analysis is based on the Marxist and Weberian approaches. The Marxist conception of class defines it as a group of people with a common relationship to the structures of political and economic power within a particular society, The Weberian perspective views class as a group of individuals who are categorized according to common socioeconomic indicators that are termed as 'life chances'. (Jones, R. J. Barry, *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy* 161)

The Marxist understanding of class was introduced by Karl Marx (1818–1883), who focused on the growing stratification between the working class, or *the proletariat*, and higher class, or *the bourgeoisie*, who held power over the means of production. Marx's theory holds that humans' economic efforts create social classes, which drives evolution, as he declares “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* 30). His theory marked a significant departure from earlier notions that society was a man-made structure, a product of conscious design or “social contract”.<sup>3</sup>

As Marx further notes in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), modern bourgeois society, emerging from the ashes of feudalism, has not eliminated class conflicts. Instead, it has created new social classes, new forms of subjugation, and new kinds of conflict to replace the old ones. He claimed that modern society, dominated by the bourgeoisie, had a unique

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<sup>3</sup> Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed that society stems from a social contract, a mutual agreement for organized community life, contrasting with Marx's view that society is shaped by material conditions and class struggle. Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), outlines this theory, positing that government legitimacy comes from the people's consent, aimed at protecting life, liberty, and property. In contrast, Karl Marx argued that private property creates class divisions and is a barrier to achieving true individual freedom.

characteristic: it had reduced class struggle to a simpler form. Increasingly, society was divided into two large, opposing factions, two major classes that stood directly against each other: the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat (31).

Returning to *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman invites us to consider the enigma: How does modernity's relentless transformation shape and reshape the notion of class? In a time "where the desires and sensibilities of people in every class have become open-ended and insatiable, attuned to permanent upheavals in every sphere of life. What can possibly keep them fixed and frozen in their roles?" (96-97). Through a Marxian lens, Berman observes that the liberation from historical shackles is accompanied by an emergent alienation, a dialectical twist where freedom and isolation walk hand in hand as "the basic fact of modern life, as Marx experiences it, is that this life is radically contradictory at its base" (20).

What Berman presents here is what we can understand as the divergent, ambivalent aspect of modernity, which also reflects itself in social structures, where every stratum of society both fuels and quells the fires of societal change. This dynamic renders class structures as transient as the very modernity that defines them, ephemeral and in constant metamorphosis, echoing Marx's poignant assertion that in the crucible of capitalism, "all that is solid melts into air," thus, what was once solid, has liquefied, only to solidify into new temporary class structures.

However, Veblen suggests that the economic struggle for survival in the lower classes is particularly difficult, trapping individuals with scant resources and time: "The strain of self-assertion against odds takes up the whole energy of the individual; he bends his efforts to compass his own invidious ends alone, and becomes continually more narrowly self-seeking" (Veblen 163). Consequently, characteristics such as altruism or communal affection diminish. This is compounded by societal standards of pecuniary decency, which further limit resources for the lower classes. As a result, the gap between the lower and upper classes widens, as the lower classes struggle to meet societal expectations while lacking the resources to do so (Veblen 164).

When examining women's societal standing, particularly in contexts where property ownership was denied and employment options were limited, they were effectively relegated to the lower class, devoid of financial autonomy outside of their husbands' control. Veblen further illustrates this situation by introducing the concept of "the inferior class," a designation encompassing "slaves and other dependents, and ordinarily also all women" (Veblen 21). Additionally, Veblen introduces the notion of "the leisure class," which, as he

argues, maintains its dominance through conspicuous consumption and leisurely pursuits. His detailed analysis of both the leisure class and the positioning of women provides a solid framework for exploring the themes of womanhood and freedom in the novels.

Not everyone shared Veblen's belief that the affluent people in society dressed to assert their power. William Hogarth, for instance, saw women's attire differently, viewing it not as a tool for conspicuous consumption but rather as a means to create aesthetically pleasing shapes, a pursuit grounded in aesthetic gratification.

The quest to define beauty has long intrigued scholars and aesthetes alike, leading to the age-old question: is beauty truly in the eye of the beholder, or is it a construct shaped by societal norms? On March 24, 1752, a pivotal exploration into this subject was publicized by William Hogarth in the *Covent-Garden Journal*, where he announced the first ever scientific study of beauty. Hogarth's approach utilized a thought experiment conducted with participants, who were presented with a series of illustrations showing variations in a woman's corseted waistline.<sup>4</sup> The aim of his research was to ascertain a mathematical foundation for beauty, which subsequently informed understandings of why women donned corsets, the shape deemed most appealing. His conclusion, derived from the experiment, was the identification of the "serpentine line". A specific curve, neither too sharp nor too straight, representing a harmonious balance that, in Hogarth's view, encapsulated the quintessence of beauty (John Armstrong, *the Secret Power of Beauty* 4). His assertion that "we are entertained and stimulated by change" (6) outlines a psychological appeal in aesthetic diversity of a curve alongside a simultaneous yearning for recognizable consistency found in that same line.

In the discourse surrounding the depiction of feminine beauty, Thorstein Veblen stands out for his assertion that beauty and fashion were not solely adopted for visual pleasure or aesthetic appreciation. Instead, he posits that they were instrumental in maintaining and reinforcing existing class structures, and the control of women.

Veblen, for instance, contends that the corset was mainly utilized to create an appearance where "the waist is attenuated to a degree that implies extreme debility," (106) as her slender waist morphed her into a symbol of delicate vulnerability. Veblen likens the corset to the practice of foot binding in Chinese culture, considering it a form of mutilation that turns women into "items of pecuniary and cultural beauty which have come to do duty as elements of the ideal of womanliness" (108). Such bodily modifications, per Veblen's implication, cultivate a precariousness in women that necessitates male assistance and protection, a notion

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<sup>4</sup> See "Appendix C: Scientific Experiment" for visual reference.



that intertwines with the commercialization and aesthetic valuations found in the magazines and beyond. Veblen's insights prompt us to consider the broader implications of beauty standards, especially when they are juxtaposed with the economic and social fabric of the leisure class.

Thorstein Veblen's concept of the "leisure class" describes a privileged group known for what he terms conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption — in essence, their lavish expenditure of time and resources. This group often engaged in activities that were designed to showcase and reinforce their social status. These activities, Veblen asserts, which include higher education, hunting, religious observances, and luxury living, are inherently unproductive but are pursued for the sake of demonstrating one's place within this exclusive group. Importantly, in the patriarchal context of the late nineteenth century to which Veblen was analysing and writing under, the leisure class was largely reserved for men, who held economic power. Women, although associated with this class through family ties, were not considered full participants. Their social standing was contingent upon the men in their lives, and their actions, including the adoption of restrictive and extravagant fashion, were expressions of the leisure status of their fathers or husbands rather than their own. Thorstein Veblen further claims that dress serves as a distinct expression of culture, exemplifying the economic principle of conspicuous consumption through the intentional waste of goods for the sake of social standing. Our attire is constantly on display, instantly signalling our place in society more than other forms of consumption. It “affords an indication of our pecuniar standing to all observers at the first glance[...]elegant dress serves its purpose of elegance, not only in that it is expensive, but also because it is the insignia of leisure.” (119).

As signalled above, women's fashion, with elements like the restrictive French heel and elaborate bonnets, even more symbolic than men's, extending this demonstration of leisure by making work impractical, thereby signalling a deliberate detachment from necessity and utility. As he states the “high heel obviously makes any, even the simplest and most necessary manual work extremely difficult” (121). While men in the leisure class were often the active participants and decision-makers, women were positioned more as symbols or representations of the family's status and wealth. The New Woman, Veblen asserts is indulged and encouraged, if not mandated, to engage in conspicuous consumption, often on behalf of her husband or another appointed guardian. She is spared or excluded from menial labor to ensure her leisure, thereby enhancing the social standing and financial reputation of her natural benefactor (232).

The leisure class, in their pursuit of conspicuous consumption, was constantly in a race to differentiate themselves from the lower classes. This led to a relentless need to stay updated with the latest fashions and trends, lest they be seen as outdated or, worse, less affluent. As previously mentioned, there arose an intense societal pressure, especially among women, to continually align with the ever-evolving standards of luxury and elegance. In essence, the leisure class not only stratified society based on economic capabilities but also instilled anxieties rooted in appearances and the fear of societal judgment. Veblen argued that the leisure class upheld their dominant position and perpetuated social hierarchies by preserving traditional practices and constructing cultural institutions that reinforced their power. He reasoned that their strong dislike for change was rooted in a refusal to forsake well ingrained traditions that supported their financial and cultural superiority. This hypothesis also extended to literary traditions, which, like the persistence of the corset in fashion, were not immune to the forces of modernity. The upper class of society could be paralleled with the neo-classicists in their approach to attire, whilst the burgeoning modernist movement in literature mirrored a divergence from this orthodoxy, disrupting, pushing towards liberation.

## **2.4 The Emergence of the Modernist Novel**

The following discussion will delve into several methods through which the modernist novel countered the oppressive forces previously discussed. Special emphasis will be placed on the depiction of the city, a central motif in both novels and a significant site in modernist literature. The chapter will explore how the city serves as a hub of interconnectedness and subversion, and examine how the use of the polyphonous subject and the carnivalesque setting in the modernist novel challenges established patriarchal structures.

The rise of the modernist novel cannot be separated from its entwined relationship with the historical period of modernity. This era, as previously mentioned, is marked by profound societal changes, from technological advancements and the sweep of industrialisation to the rapid pace of urbanisation, all of which dramatically reshaped cultural perspectives. In this landscape, the writings of Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys stand out as quintessential embodiments of modernist principles, presenting a form of literary engagement that is both a reaction to and a reflection of the complexities of their time. The modernist literary movement, marked by its exploration of character psychologies, places an emphasis on capturing the essence of individual identity and the polyphonous subject. This is evident in exploration of a literary method often associated with modernist literature, a narrative

technique known as “stream of consciousness”. A term initially introduced by William James in 1892 to mirror the manner in which our consciousness unfolds and flows, “As a continual stream of associated thoughts without rational ordering and permeated by changing feelings” (Abbott 84).

During the early years of the twentieth century, literary figures including Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Jean Rhys, and William Faulkner initiated experimentation within the domain of literature. They were writing stream of consciousness novels, novels wherein the primary focus lay in delineating the uninterrupted flow of thoughts and emotions experienced by one or more characters (Abbott 84). One might say that the rise of this “new” literature paralleled the shifting psychological landscape of individuals navigating an unsettling and transformed environment, especially following the war and the upheaval of urbanisation that displaced many to cosmopolitan hubs. During an era marked by profound transformations, literature also provided a solace and a space for interconnectedness amidst the precarity of life.

#### **2.4.1 The Modernist Novel and the Carnavalesque City**

The focus on the urban setting in this study is informed by its established role as “a key motif in modernist literature” (Katherine Mullin, *Cities in Modernist Literature*). Additionally, the carnivalesque atmosphere of the city serves as a symbolic site where various characters' lives intersect and where structures of class and social norms are challenged.

The mode of the carnivalesque is a concept that I have borrowed from Bakhtin in order to discuss the setting of the city and its role in the modernist novel. Bakhtin saw the carnivalesque mode, a mode born inside of the medieval marketplace and folk culture, as integral to the authentic novel, as it is a mode that reflects the complex nature of existence (Abrams and Harpham 88). To apprehend Bakhtin's conceptualization of the carnivalesque, an examination of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1559 painting proves instructive. This visual representation offers a potent tableau, distinctly vernacular and unapologetically human.<sup>5</sup> In Bruegel's painting, nuns are depicted slaying fish, while commoners are immersed in card games. Vendors peddle food, individuals dance leisurely, and others fetch water. Some reside in modest wooden homes, while others inhabit ornate brick houses. There is a range in attire, from pristine outfits to masked faces and even a man in his underpants. A prominent pink

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<sup>5</sup> See “Appendix D: The Carnavalesque Marketplace” for visual representation.

wagon with blue wheels features a comical man wearing a straw bucket on his head, holding a spade with two dead sardines on it — a seemingly satirical and intertextual element.

This painting of a carnivalesque scene is epitomizing a world where societal norms are momentarily suspended and everyone, irrespective of their status, blends into a state of community and belonging. Such sites, where conventional structures blur, echo some of the principles of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque site was a site where authority figures were both dethroned and satirized. (As seen in Elder's painting the crown of the king is switched out with a straw bucket). The convergence of formal and informal settings, exemplified by the church and the tavern, mirrors the carnivalesque capacity to intertwine high and low culture, embracing all parts of culture into one collective whole. Abrams and Harpham explain:

This literary mode parallels the flaunting of authority and temporary inversions of the hierarchies that, in many cultures are permitted during a season of carnival. The literary work does so by introducing a mingling of voices from diverse social levels that are free to mock and subvert authority, to flout social norms by ribaldry, and to exhibit various ways of profaning what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct. (88)

In his study of Dostoevsky's narratives, Bakhtin emphasized the significance of carnivalesque mode in the city that enhance interpersonal connections, stripping societal veils to reveal underlying truths. As he states in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (110). This point highlights the significance of open dialogue in modernist novels, drawing a parallel to the Socratic method admired by Bakhtin. Just as Socrates used dialogue to uncover deeper truths, the characters in these novels engage in discourse that reveals profound insights about themselves and the society they inhabit. This dialogic approach, characterized by its resistance to a singular authoritative voice, serves to challenge and unveil deeper societal structures. It operates in a manner akin to the subversion of official culture and authority witnessed in carnival festivities, as described by Bakhtin. Furthermore, within the carnivalesque framework, satire emerges as a prominent mode of expression. The carnival represents a gathering for "the feast," a celebration of time as a dynamic force of becoming, change, and renewal (*Bakhtin Reader* 198-99). Laughter, the hallmark of the carnival, serves as the foundation upon which

satire thrives. Through satirical elements, the carnival exposes and critiques societal norms and power structures, offering a space for social commentary.

In his article, Christopher Ames conducts a thorough analysis of the carnivalesque inherent in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941). Ames posits that an informed reading of the text, particularly with an understanding of Woolf's own annotations indicating her intention of "playing with words," unveils a narrative rich in comedic elements (Christopher Ames, "Carnavalesque Comedy in *Between the Acts*" 394). He identifies Woolf's adept mingling of polyphonic voices, termed by Woolf herself as "party consciousness," as a direct reflection of her innovative explorations in narrative voice and as a part of the carnivalesque tradition. Furthermore, Ames articulates that the source of comedy within *Between the Acts* springs from its parody, incongruity, and linguistic playfulness—attributes that are emblematic of the carnivalesque marketplace as presented by Mikhail Bakhtin, as the marketplace much like the novel itself became a site of interconnectedness and social commentary.

In *The Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire* (2005), John Marx extends this analysis of modernist literature to elucidate its role in unifying a diverse world during the early twentieth century. He details how this period marked, especially in England, a shift in perspective within the British Empire, suggesting a transformative moment that contributed to the genesis of a richer interconnectedness among people. English language, Marx highlights, was employed by authors like Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf who celebrated the power of English to create connections and community on a global scale. They celebrated a shared linguistic heritage, actively participating in the formation of an interconnected society through their works. "In the hands of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Joseph Conrad, English became exotic. Their writings accustomed readers to finding the very essence of high art in nonstandard, idiosyncratic prose" (2). Essentially, their writings expanded the horizons of what prose could be, encouraging audiences to embrace and value the profound artistic merit in narratives that were unique and intimately reflective of the authors' perspectives.

At the same time, modernist writers, particularly those who concentrated on the metropolis in their works, introduced readers to a myriad of previously unexplored settings, "many of which lay within England itself. In such places readers discovered English mixed into a various yet global, particular yet universal, popular yet elite medium" (ibid.). One specific example Marx employs to illustrate his point is that of Virginia Woolf's portrayal of the city in *Mrs. Dalloway*, noting that "[i]n *Mrs Dalloway*, readers find a corner of London

thoroughly exoticized and populated exclusively with eccentric characters” (178). Some of these characters are:

Peter Walsh just ‘back from India’, Doris Kilman the German sympathizer, Septimus Smith the shell-shocked soldier with the Italian wife Rezia, the anonymous ‘Colonial’ who insults the House of Windsor, even Richard Dalloway the ‘pillar of the metropolitan establishment’ who craves nothing but escape. (ibid.)

All of these, according to Marx, points to Woolf’s inclusiveness and awareness of the metropolis as an interconnected setting.

Further Marx notes that in the chaos often associated with metropolitan life, Woolf’s characters find joy and belonging in with the city’s rhythm, mirroring the sentiments of Joyce’s Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* (1922). Both authors transform the disarray of urban life into the familiarity of neighbourhood, suggesting that modernist fiction can reframe perceptions of the cityscape from discord to harmony (179). Marx’s interpretation posits that the metropolitan setting serves as a stage where opportunities, communal connections, and a sense of belonging can flourish, through the modernist subject.<sup>6</sup>

#### **2.4.2 The Modernist Novel and the Polyphonous Subject**

In contrast to the Modernist novel, the Victorian novel had often focused on the evolving middle-class society, where material wealth and social class defined one’s opportunities and status (NAELV 22). While class distinctions were very much stressed in society, the Victorian novel often explored the possibility of class mobility. The narratives spotlight the conflict between collective norms and personal desires, showcasing novels as the ideal vehicle to represent women’s journey towards self-discovery (23). The significance of the novel as a medium in Victorian times lay in its ability to reflect societal challenges and the quest for personal fulfilment, a theme particularly resonant for women facing the era’s limitations. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), along with Isabel Archer, from Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, (1881) are prime examples of characters striving

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<sup>6</sup> This interpretation receives an exploration in the analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the rhapsodic discourse of London is depicted as providing Clarissa with a profound sense of belonging and transcendence. Yet, in examining *Good Morning, Midnight*, the analysis presents a contrasting viewpoint. It suggests that while the metropolis might often be romanticized as a place of community and connection, there is an imperative to confront the growing city’s more severe aspects such as harassment, human trafficking, and poverty.

for self-realization within the bounds of their societies. Jane Eyre, navigating the strict social structures of Victorian England, aspires to independence and moral equality, while Isabel Archer follows a personal journey emblematic of the struggle against the rigid expectations placed upon women.

Furthermore, novels of the period, like those by Charles Dickens, which offered social critiques, and George Eliot's psychological fiction, often presented the heroine as a central figure whose quest for fulfilment symbolized the broader human condition. In *Middlemarch* (1871), for example, the reader follows Dorothea's journey, and are prompted to introspect on their own paths and the psychological challenges encountered in the pursuit of personal growth within a framework of norms and social hierarchy. In "In America," (1999) Susan Sontag reflects on the resonance and significance of George Eliot's novel for female readers, sharing a personal moment of when she identified with the character Dorothea and the profound influence it had on her own life decisions. As noted by Alexander Nazaryan, writing for *The Newsweek*, Sontag wrote, "I had just turned eighteen, and a third of the way through the book burst into tears because I realized not only that I was Dorothea but that, a few months earlier, I had married Mr. Casaubon" (Nazaryan, par.1). However, unlike Dorothea, Sontag had the opportunity to end her marriage, which she ultimately did.

However, as mentioned above, the twentieth century novels celebrate "personal and textual inwardness" (NAELT 20), and in the wake of the First World War, literary figures grappled with an era characterized by a profound disillusionment in entrenched beliefs and values. These beliefs and values included:

The deity and the Christian faith, the person, knowledge, materialism, history, the old grand narratives, which had, more or less, sustained the Western novel through the nineteenth century. (NAELT 20)

Virginia Woolf on many occasions question the conventional novel that presented a misleading representation of certainty, wielded language as a straightforward tool, and criticized the idea that:

the world, things, and selves were knowable, that language was a reliably revelatory instrument, that the author's story gave history meaning and moral shape, that narratives should fall into ethically instructive beginnings, middles, and endings. (NAELT 21)

Her critique points out the flaws in an ideology that simplifies life too much, reflecting a core tenet of Modernist thinking: a shift from the clear-cut beliefs of the past to a more introspective and disjointed perception of reality. Modernists like Woolf saw the tangible aspects of life not as absolute but as experiences shaped by individual perception. This differed from the nineteenth-century narrative's singular, author-driven truth.

Even as late as 1927, there was still stigma surrounding the novel as a genre, and some scholars questioned the new stream of consciousness technique. British artist and writer Wyndham Lewis embodied some scepticism towards the new ways of writing literature. In his work *Time and Western Man* (1927), Lewis questioned the modernist trends. He specifically problematized the stream of consciousness techniques popularized by authors like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Lewis referred to this narrative technique as "telling from the inside", using Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920) as an example in his critique. Lewis contends that the reader's immersion into this narrative stream, which he describes as being "magnetically drawn by the attraction of so much matter," results in a subjective experience dominated by the author's presence, rather than a detached scientific observation. He criticizes *Ulysses* imparting a "softness, flabbiness and vagueness" to the novel's portrayal of characters, which he sees as less individualized personalities and more fragments of Joyce's own identity, contending that:

It is you who descend into the flux of *Ulysses*, and it is the author who absorbs you momentarily into himself for that experience. That is all that the "telling from the inside" amounts to. (Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* 101)

Referring back to Bakhtin as discussed previously, his opinion of the novel genre for its contrasts sharply with Lewis' view. In "Epic and the Novel," (1941) one of the four essays from *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin provides a comprehensive exploration of the novel's distinct and transformative qualities, setting it apart from other literary genres. The novel possesses a natural ability to critique and subvert as it is self-aware, self-mocking, and marginalized by the elite society. Instead of aligning with societal norms, it challenges authority, destabilizes it, and refrains from endorsing power. It is not entwined with the desires of the elite and remains ever-changing.

Bakhtin emphasizes the novel's force, which stems from its ability to challenge established structures and authority. This power is encapsulated in its "plastic possibilities,"



(3) allowing the novel to continually adapt and reshape itself. This, Bakhtin concluded, stands in stark contrast to the more rigid high genres, that convey a "dominant force and truth," upholding and venerating established societal norms, values, and truths encapsulated in images of the distant past. Bakhtin writes:

This idealization of the past in high genres has something of an official air. All external expressions of the dominant force and truth (the expression of everything conclusive) were formulated in the valorised-hierarchical category of the past, in a distanced and distant image (everything from gesture and clothing to literary style, for all are symbols of authority). The novel, however, is associated with the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought (holiday forms, familiar speech, profanation). (Bakhtin 20)

Bakhtin points out that the old, distant images used in certain types of artistic styles are essentially dead, unchanging, and unable to communicate with the evolving present characterized by its liquid nature. This aligns with the modernist thought of how a new climate and consciousness need a new language to express themselves. As for lyric poetry "even discourse about doubts must be cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted," (Bakhtin 286) and other high genres such as the tragedy or the epic is "antiquated" (3). Conversely, the novel remains in a state of flux, drawing its vibrancy from the "eternal living element of unofficial language and thought." This positions the novel as an active participant in dialogue with society and history.

Ultimately, his argument underscores that the novel, with its carnivalesque and polyphonic tendencies, uniquely captures the complexity of human experience. Polyphony is especially relevant in the close readings of the characters in the novels, and their many voices that stand as a counterforce towards the structures that obstruct women's freedom by reducing them to certain roles within the larger structure of the patriarchy.

The term *polyphony* has its roots in the Greek *polyph-onia*, meaning a "diversity of tones", and *polyphonos*, which translates as "having many voices". In the modern context, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it pertains to "a musical composition style that employs two or more simultaneous yet relatively independent melodic lines" ("Polyphony"). This can be transferred to the function of *polyphony* in the field of literary studies, where it refers to a literary style that presents multiple, coexistent voices or perspectives, allowing for a sense of democratic dialogue within a text. Within the dialogic form or polyphonic form

“the characters are liberated to speak” (Abrams and Harpham 88). Unlike works of art with a singular, dominating narrative, polyphonic works embrace diverse truths and interpretations, as presented by a character. By permitting characters to utilize their own voice within a narrative discourse, we facilitate an emancipation from traditional character subjugation, where the author stands as the authority in the text. This empowers characters to convey their introspections and perspectives unmediated, challenging established literary hierarchies. Consequently, the approach not only serves as a textual destabilizer but also introduces a subversive, political dimension within the literary framework. The debate over whether the author can be entirely absent from a literary text has engaged numerous scholars. For instance, in Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author," (1967) he metaphorically suggests the death of the author during the reading process, emphasizing that it is language itself that communicates, not the author. However, Wayne C. Booth writes on the novel genres ability to lift the oppressed voices and giving them justice through language in his introduction to Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929):

What we seek is a representation, at whatever time or place and in whatever genre, of human "languages" or "voices" that are not reduced into, or suppressed by, a single authoritative voice: a representation of the inescapably dialogical quality of human life at its best. Only "the novel," with its supreme realization of the potentialities inherent in prose, offers the possibility of doing justice to voices other than the author's own, and only the novel invites us to do so. (xxii)

From Clarissa's reflective journey through her mind and memories to Septimus's fragmented experience of reality due to his mental illness, and from the stoic presence of Richard to the enigmatic Kilman, Woolf's narrative captures a polyphonic orchestra of voices. Similarly, Rhys's portrayal of Sasha and characters from her past, along with the fragmented articulation of Sasha's "I" that commands and critiques, represent a variation of personal and collective fragments forming one whole, the polyphonous subject.

Irene Simon, write about the interconnectedness or “one whole” as found in the image of waves in *Mrs. Dalloway*. This is for instance found in how Clarissa is “echoed” within her double Septimus Smith, through intertextual references that inhabit the image of an ocean that “sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, being and collects, lets fall” (Irene Simon, *Critics on Virginia Woolf* 59). Referring to a scene early in the novel, Simon notes that “As incidents and persons float up in her memory, so she may now imagine surviving on the ebb

and flow of things...There comes the consoling though that we are part of everything and live in each other” (58). In essence, the literary concern with the carnivalesque city and the utilization of the polyphonous subject converge in their shared goal of destabilizing and critiquing patriarchal structures.

### **3. *Mrs. Dalloway* and the Quest for Freedom**

This chapter investigates how Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* confronts the interbellum ideals of womanhood that maintained women in subservient roles and imposed precarious constraints upon them. It explores how the polyphonous subject in literature attempts to break free from these confines and examines the ways in which the female subject is restricted by class, fashion, and precarious employment positions that hinder their freedom.

The analysis will examine Woolf's use of literary devices in a specific sequence. First, the focus will be on character depiction and their response to the shifting paradigms of early twentieth-century England. The analysis focuses on two of the female characters in the novel, the protagonist Clarissa Dalloway and her female counterpart Miss Kilman. These characters symbolize contrasting class reactions to the changing position of women in an increasingly modernized setting in London.

Another aspect of the novel that will be focussed on is the setting of the city—reflecting London as a centrifugal force that connects all the disjointedness of a modern society to a collectiveness. The analysis will investigate how the city might evoke Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque where social order appears to be provisionally set aside, suggesting a space where all individuals, irrespective of their social class or status, can coexist and, possibly, transcend their confined existence.

In terms of narrative technique, the rhapsodic discourse of the city is also mirrored in the polyphonic style of the novel and the employment of an omniscient narrator that flows between the consciousness of characters from all classes connecting and combining, much like Mrs. Dalloway's parties. The narrative techniques are multifunctional, first reflecting the era's social complexities, and second, functioning as a prism that refracts and critically examines those dynamics. By adopting a satirical stance towards the aristocracy and weaving an omniscient narrative thread through various social classes, Woolf actively undermines entrenched class structures. In her polyphonic narrative, each individual voice becomes a piece in the broader mosaic of the narrative, with the narrator positioned as an empathetic

witness, internalizing, and thus affirming the shared traumas of a society post WW1 which had “bread in them all, all men and women, a well of tears” (Woolf 10).

### 3.1 Halos and Tunnels: The Language for the New

As discussed in the literary review chapter, modernist writers aimed to develop a new language to articulate a new set of experience. Consequently, literature itself had to evolve to accommodate these changes. Virginia Woolf devoted three years to the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, which was recognized as Woolf's most experimental novel to date (Arnold Kettle, *Mrs. Dalloway* 8). Concurrently, she documented her creative journey in *A Writer's Diary* (1953). The diary reveals Woolf's attention to the structural composition of *Mrs. Dalloway*. In her essay “Modern Fiction”, initially published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1919 as “Modern Novels”, Woolf delves into the challenges faced by novelists of her era and explains her attention to structural composition, declaring that the first major challenge for a writer is to find the courage and freedom to tell the story they truly want to tell, and next discover a narrative technique that can adequately convey their unique perspective. Here, Woolf also praised the evolution of the novel and its elastic possibilities as a genre, similar to that of Bakhtin. “the form of the novels, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved” (324).

Kettle posits, and with this assessment there is complete agreement, that a critic of literature should not attempt to isolate fragments of meaning from the artistic whole. Instead, the eye must regard the totality of the work as the medium of communication, since “A novelist's ‘method’ isn't separable from his ‘message’: the one emerges through the other” (5). The philosophy of the form-content relationship is especially relevant to Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Woolf's use of visual structuring and emphasis on ephemeral, fragmented moments disclose the essence of the work. Smaller scenes provide a deep commentary on the characters and their interwoven experiences, much like paint dots on a canvas, together forming the whole image or message.

In “Modern Fiction”, Woolf deliberates on her role as a novelist and criticizes the traditional literary preoccupation with the material and external, arguing for a focus on the internal landscape of the psyche. She posits that life is a succession of events but also a stream of consciousness—a “luminous halo, a semi-permanent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (Woolf 160). This view highlights the dual nature of our existence, in which a continuous, ethereal flow of consciousness is entwined with a

tangible sequence of life experiences. It emphasises the idea that our personal experience, the ongoing stream of ideas and emotions within us, is just as genuine and significant as the objective events in our lives. This perspective focuses not only on what happens to us but also how we interpret and cope with these things on an internal level throughout our entire life. A statement and belief that explains Woolf's interest in the psychological realm, rather than on a linear plot or dramatic event. As we will see in this chapter, this is something that clearly pertains to Clarissa Dalloway, as evidenced by the profound influence of her memories and experiences on the narratives progress.

Woolf's interest in the undramatic and smaller events of the day is examined by critics like Lorraine Sim in *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (2010), stressing Woolf's pattern of focussing on the minor occurrences in life, a mode found in the works of James Joyce, which inspired Virginia Woolf (Sim 8). This is for instance seen in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as Woolf expands the moments of a single day to fill the expanse of an entire novel, utilizing the genre's inherent plasticity—a characteristic Woolf claimed had evolved over time, depicting the novel genre as "undramatic," yet simultaneously "rich, elastic, and alive," capable of extensive possibilities (Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* 9). Contrary to criticisms and sources claiming “*Mrs. Dalloway* is essentially plotless” (“Mrs Dalloway”) the novel is, in fact, driven by these seemingly minor events, such as gesticulations or a facial expression that cascades into a torrent of reflections. The true pivot points of action within the narrative, the “plot”.

Despite its focus on fleeting moments and a defiance of authoritative narrative constructs, as seen for instance in the use of an omniscient narrator, and the *in medias res* beginning of the novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* is a craftsmanship of thoughtful structuring with the combination of various narrative techniques, as Woolf notes in her diary (Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* 61). Woolf for example explores the use of what is formally known as analepsis in her diary, a technique that disrupts the chronological sequencing in the novel. This narrative technique, which is described as "a description of an event or scene from an earlier time that interrupts a chronological narrative," (“Analepsis”) is one Woolf discusses in her 1923 diary entry, revealing her methodical approach to including the past throughout the narrative as her most important discovery. She instead terms this her “tunnelling process”, a recounting of the past through instalments:

I wrote the 100th page today. Of course, I've only been feeling my way into it—up till last August anyhow. It took me a year's groping to discover what I call my tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it. (Woolf 61)

Woolf's employment of analepsis is another method of disrupting the conventional linear temporal structure, fostering a narrative that permits a non-linear dive through Clarissa's past. This narrative design intensifies the reader's engagement with the characters, while simultaneously adding complexity to them and illustrating the human as interconnected and polyphonous. Others, such as that by Nicole Ward Jouve in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (2000), suggests that Woolf's metaphorical subterranean tunnels—her dive into the subconscious realms of the mind—serve to illustrate a dynamic subject in the midst of development (259). John Brannigan, in *English Literature in Context* (2017), also articulates how Woolf's distinctive use of the free indirect style of narration—where the third-person narration leans into the first-person character narrator's perceptions and perspectives, while still retaining third-person references to “she” and “her” (As for instance seen in the first scene of the novel)—establishes an unusual balance, a “free-wheeling nature of moment-by-moment consciousness” (584). A narrative technique that proves especially effective in generating empathy and providing deeper insight into the characters' inner worlds.

### **3.2 The Leisure Class Victorian Matron**

Virginia Woolf's protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, is a quintessential representation of the women of upper-class England, entwined with Victorian values in the Interbellum period. In the novel, Clarissa holds a complex dual position: on the surface, she is a woman who embodies the expectations of her high social standing, yet beneath this façade, as will be illustrated, she harbors aspirations and traits that challenge these norms.

This character analysis will first look into how Woolf portrays Clarissa's outward conformity to her prescribed social role, in other words, how she outwardly embodies what one might call The Leisure Class Victorian Matron. This will include a discussion on two major points about her character that are connected to her position in society and to her function in the novel: her womanhood, with a specific focus on age and class.

Secondly, it will delve into Clarissa's underlying desire to move beyond those roles seeking the fluidity and vitality found in the cityscape, which symbolically allows her freedom to transcend her traditional roles connected to womanhood and class.

### 3.2.1 The Leisure Class Matron

Clarissa's portrayal, where her age and leisure class status are seamlessly intertwined, offers a deeper understanding of her womanhood and the societal challenges she faces as she ages. Clarissa Dalloway is the wife of politician Richard Dalloway. They live together with their daughter Elizabeth and their governess Miss Doris Kilman in the richer part of London, Westminster (4). As a member of the upper-class Clarissa does not work, which gives her time to drift the streets of London, buy flowers (3) and spend time orchestrating parties.

Through Veblen's framework, the Dalloways exemplify the leisure class, as delineated in section 2.3 of the literary review. This upper class of society is marked by its lavish consumption of time and resources—traits that are clearly manifest in the lifestyle and practices of the Dalloway household. What might be seen as lavish consumption in the Dalloways' lifestyle is for example detailed in their possession of “expensive things everywhere; pictures, carpets, lots of servants” (135). As can be seen here, Clarissa's casual fetching of flowers (3), Richard's attendance at a luncheon at Lady Bruton's (32), and the orchestration of a social gathering for the purpose of “offering for the sake of offering” (134) are not mere acts of leisure but also emblematic of their class's conspicuous consumption. These instances, while on the surface may appear as routine elements of their daily life, are in fact deeply entrenched in the practices of the leisure class, as they demonstrate an effortless expenditure of wealth and time that is definitive of their social standing, and through Veblen's framework on class, a type of consumption with the purpose to reinforce social position in the class hierarchy. This type of consumption also manifests in Clarissa's fashion-habits which will be dealt with shortly.

Transitioning from this portrayal of the Dalloways' conspicuous consumption and the positioning of Clarissa in the leisure class, we turn to Clarissa herself, who, at an age described as “over fifty” (4), and in her capacity as a woman of high social standing, also embodies the archetype of a matron—defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “a married woman usually marked by dignified maturity or social distinction” (“Matron,” def. 1a). In her exploration of the female experience, Woolf originally intended to thematise menopause, a part of a woman's cycle of life that was often shrouded in silence. In that way, the matron is pertinent to the discussion, as we grapple with an author whose stream of consciousness technique is not merely descriptive but is a vehicle for political debate, as she clearly critiques and problematizes the concept of age for women in the interbellum period.

Woolf's narrative seeks to unveil and challenge, advocating for a transformative view and treatment of women past the age of fifty.

The sparse but evocative description of Clarissa by her neighbour Scrope Purvis conveys a respect for her age, aligning with the dignified status traditionally accorded to a matron. Clarissa is likened to a bird, specifically a jay, with her blue-green vibrancy and lightness, despite being over fifty and having turned very white following her illness.

A touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright. (4)

However, Clarissa's relationship with her own aging process is rather complex. Elaine Showalter, in her introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*, suggests that Woolf initially intended to depict Mrs. Dalloway experiencing menopause, highlighting a period in a woman's life that was often shrouded in silence. Showalter points out that menopause was, at the time Woolf wrote her novel, referred to as "the little death", a term that may explain the "illness" turning Clarissa's hair white (xxxii). Clarissa's struggle in relation to her age, stems from the taboo subjects of the time, and of the secrecy surrounding women's health, particularly as they age. Showalter discusses this more extensively in *The Female Malady* where she points to how "theories of female insanity were specifically linked to the biological crises of the female life-cycle – puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause" (55) which made women "the victim of periodicity", perhaps even the victims of their own bodies. Showalter further notes that the aging process was feared as a dreaded disease, as contemporary women of Woolf's time articulated it as a descent into "hopeless process of decline" (xxxiii), marking a period when women, having lost their fertility, became invisible and disregarded.

In her 2016 article "'Blackberrying in the Sun'? Modernism and the Ageing Woman in Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent*," Kathleen Williams Renk likewise examines the representation of aging in Woolf's novel, highlighting Clarissa Dalloway as a character who challenges the taboo perspectives on aging. She argues that authors such as Jean Rhys and Virginia Woolf break from traditional literary portrayals of aging women, which often relegated them to forlorn or redundant roles, suggesting that



Instead of focusing on youth, they ‘make it [modernism] new’ by carefully detailing the various ways ageism and sexism make us ‘the other’, as they speak out against the interlocking oppressions of ageism and sexism. (Renk 317)

In other words, Renk suggests that Woolf was challenging the compounded marginalization resulting from both age and gender discrimination through Clarissa, who deals with a certain reconciliation with the process of aging. This she claims, is for instance found in Woolf’s portrayal of Clarissa Dalloway as someone who exhibits a dual sense of mourning and celebration connected to her matronhood, (Renk 320) a portrayal that effectively challenges the era’s perceptions of aging.

In that way, Renk suggests that Clarissa’s lavish parties can be seen as acts of defiance against the Gods [sic], a metaphor for her resistance against the societal constraints of aging, perhaps making herself relevant again, since there will be “no more marrying, no more having of children” (Woolf 11), and resist abandonment since “it was all over for her. The sheet was stretched and the bed narrow” (51). This perspective is especially poignant when considering the historical context of Clarissa’s age, since a 52-year-old woman in the interbellum period would be deemed elderly, especially when considering Renk’s observation that the average life expectancy in 1920 was just 51.5 years (319), a fact that positions Clarissa near the later stages of her life cycle.

The theme of cycles connected to womanhood, is also, as Showalter argues mirrored in the green hue of women’s fashion, evoking growth, and renewal “as if it were some kind of leafing or natural exfoliation of the body” (xxxix). However, one could also build upon Showalter’s argument, dig deeper, and argue that there is a sense of ambiguity in the recurring motif of green, “a conspicuous element such as a type of event, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature” (Abrams & Harpham 229).

We find it for example in that of Clarissa’s green dress, which also is connected to her own fading vitality. In her dress the green hue clearly carries a sense of intriguing duality embodying both growth and decay, renewal, and stagnation, in line with Woolf’s ambiguous employment of green as a colour that is both enchanting and potentially deceptive. This is captured in what we might call *the green dress epiphany* scene after Clarissa finds out she was not invited to a lunch party when her husband Richard was, which reminds her of her fading relevancy:

Her evening dresses hung in the cupboard. Clarissa, plunging her hand into the softness, gently detached the green dress and carried it to the window. She had torn it. Someone had trod on the skirt. She had felt it give at the Embassy party at the top among the folds. By artificial light the green shone, but lost its colour now in the sun. (41)

In this moment, Clarissa is situated in her upstairs dressing room, a setting emblematic of introspection. Interestingly her dress, under "artificial light," gleams enchantingly. However, when Clarissa carries it to the window and exposes it to natural sunlight, the dress becomes faded and ordinary, a testament to its lack of true value. In another passage, in one of the many fountain scenes, the colour green similarly assumes an ambiguous significance, as depicted in a memory of when Clarissa made the consequential decision not to marry Peter.

There she came, even before the time, and they stood with the fountain between them, the spout (it was broken) dribbling water incessantly. How sights fix themselves upon the mind! For example, the vivid green moss. (70)

In this recalling of a memory where Clarissa and Peter stand divided by a malfunctioning fountain, Woolf employs that same motif of green, symbolizing not just the moss that clings to the fountain but also the financial security that ultimately sways Clarissa's marital decision. In choosing Richard Dalloway over Peter, she opts for a life of financial stability, mirroring the way moss might cover the cracks of a deteriorating fountain. This choice reflects the broader societal reality of the time, where women's independence was often constrained by economic dependence on men, and although women had just gained the right to vote and new opportunities to work, it was still seen as Veblen pointed out "unwomanly" to seek an independent life, and the job market was hard, especially for ageing women that could not write, women like Clarissa herself who claims she "could not think, write, even play the piano" (134).

The green moss on the fountain, therefore, becomes a metaphor for the financial considerations (green paper money) that bind marriages and maintain the façade of functionality in the structure of marriage, much like the moss that both beautifies and hides the cracks of a decaying structure or as Woolf puts it, function as "sights" that "fix themselves upon the mind," (70) underpinning a paradoxically deceptive element in the motif of green. The symbolic connection between the hue of green and women's cycles of life (as presented

by Showalter), and the concept of marriage might appear distinct, yet we understand that marriage, too, was a phase belonging in the cyclical journey of a woman's life. It was intrinsically linked to her identity as a woman, naturally a part of her life.

The layers of paradox in the motif of green mirrors the protagonist Clarissa's existence, suggesting a life filled with artificialities that dazzle within a certain milieu but dim in the harsh light of reality. The dichotomy of the dress's vibrancy, which parallels Clarissa's social radiance, underscores a profound truth: her brilliance, much like the green hue, is contingent on her surroundings. In the comfort of her domestic sphere, her social standing and elaborate gatherings allow her to flourish, yet beyond these confines, under the "real sun", her significance will gradually fade; much like the hue of her dress, much like her bed that narrows (34), much like her person sheering like the sheets of her bed (33), all altered by the relentless march of time.

### **3.2.2 The Victorian Woman**

Having established Clarissa Dalloway's marginalization and isolation in the position as a member of the leisure class and her role as a matron, this analysis now shifts to examine the dualistic nature of her character: the simultaneous alignment with and aspiration to rise above Victorian womanhood, highlighting her compliance, her dissent, and perhaps even her inability to fulfil its rigorous expectations.

This section begins with an affirmation of Clarissa's alignment with of the archetypal Victorian woman, which, as previously discussed in section 2.1 in the literary review, delineates the expected domestic role of women—a womanhood that Clarissa, to a certain degree, internalizes and performs. Secondly, the section will investigate how the narrative of Clarissa's life reveals a more complex character trajectory. Having performed her duties as a leisure class wife, Clarissa now perhaps navigates a period of personal redefinition, a wish to transcend her constraints and be a part of the collectiveness found in the city of London.

Clarissa's embodiment of the archetypal Victorian woman, fulfilling her societal role within that framework, is illustrated in a passage where, while drifting along Bond Street, she is struck by a profound sense of her own invisibility, feeling unseen and unknown. Completed with, or no longer involved in, the defining activities of marriage or motherhood, she is now simply drifting along the street as "Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway" (11). This moment is a sharp reflection on how her personal identity has been overshadowed by her marital identity, revealing the Victorian expectation that she exists

primarily as an extension of her husband. A passage that underscores the societal norms of the era that dictated a woman's identity through the lens of her marital status, often at the cost or sacrifice of her individuality.

During Queen Victoria's reign, women were expected to "embrace their role as wives and mothers and exist quietly and neatly within their domicile, with few hobbies or interests outside of their domestic duties," as noted by Olivia Tower in *The Ideal Woman in the Victorian Era* (par.1). This societal expectation was inherently tied to womanhood, a point that Virginia Woolf alluded in her 1942 essay "Professions for Women". Here, Woolf characterizes the ideal Victorian woman, stating, "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" (NAELV 401), highlighting the virtues of the time.

As we now understand, the character of Clarissa Dalloway stands as both conformity to and deviation from the archetype of the ideal Victorian woman. Clarissa embodies qualities of sympathy and charm, yet also displays traits that are unsympathetic and uncharming. She oscillates between selflessness and selfishness, portraying the image of the perfect wife while potentially falling short in motherhood. Nevertheless, she diligently tries to conform to societal expectations and sacrifices her own desires to adhere to the Victorian ideal. In the scene when Clarissa is reflecting to previous parties, she is comparing these gatherings to sacrificial acts with the purpose "to combine, to create; but to whom? An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps," (134) which she deems the pinnacle of her life's achievements, confessing, "Nothing else had she of the slightest importance; could not think, write, even play the piano" (134), and as a result "she knew nothing; no language, no history" (9). Ironically, Clarissa's life and potential has been the real sacrifice.

Clarissa's perhaps interpellated wish to hold on to, or her artistic performance of her Victorian self is further evidenced by the meticulous detail Woolf gives to Clarissa's dressing routine, symbolizing not just personal style but a strict adherence to the fashion etiquette of the Victorian era. Woolf encapsulates this in a scene when Clarissa notes that, "Women must put off their rich apparel. At midday they must disrobe" (33). This adherence to dress codes highlights the rigid fashion etiquette of the Victorian woman, which, as previously mentioned often resulted in a case of "suburban neurosis", leading to symptoms such as "headaches" and "insomnia", from which Clarissa is suffering from (69).

Clarissa Dalloway's adherence to Victorian dress and social manners serves as a safeguard against committing a "faux pas," a concept John Goldthorpe emphasizes in his work. Her own critical evaluations of fashion errors in others underscore this preoccupation

with maintaining decorum. The “faux pas” of being over or under-dressed for instance underscores the importance she places on the delicate balance of social appearances. In recalling a soiree in Burton, Clarissa reminisces about a discussion concerning a man "who had married his housemaid," (64) where she notes the housemaid's overly ornate attire, subtly underscoring the social misalignment and Clarissa's own awareness of class distinctions in fashion. Clarissa typically jests about the fashion “faux pas” of those beneath her own class.

She was absurdly over-dressed, “like a cockatoo,” Clarissa had said, imitating her, and she never stopped talking. On and on she went, on and on. Clarissa imitated her. (64)

Clarissa's chanting, going “on and on[...]on and on” ridiculing others for their fashion missteps could also indicate her desire to distinguish herself from those of lesser wealth as a form of defence mechanism. This is because Clarissa uses fashion as a way of controlling her social standing, much like we will see in Rhys’ character in chapter four, who also is desperately asserting her position through her attire.

Certainly, Clarissa wields fashion not merely as a sartorial choice but as a strategic instrument to display her social class. Her approach to fashion, which Veblen might argue is another display of conspicuous consumption, serves to reinforce her position within society's upper class. This is starkly contrasted with Miss Kilman who arguably wears what she wears because it is the only thing she can afford:

Miss Kilman stood on the landing, and wore a mackintosh; but had her reasons. First, it was cheap; second, she was over forty; and did not, after all, dress to please. She was poor, moreover; degradingly poor. Otherwise she would not be taking jobs from people like the Dalloways; from rich people, who liked to be kind. (135)

Clarissa's apparent disdain for Miss Kilman, often marked by a hyperbolic tone during her internal monologues, as evidenced in her rants (12), likely arises from her deep-seated concern to uphold her own social standing in the leisure class. This also necessitates her rejection of Miss Kilman because she belongs to a lower socio-economic class, but also because Miss Kilman harbours feminist principles, as seen when she is suggesting that Elizabeth gets a proper education (143). Veblen presents the leisure class’s reluctance to accept the burgeoning women's liberation movement, as seen in their derisive dismissal of feminist principles:

All this fume and froth is to 'emancipate woman from the slavery of man' and so on, is of use the chaste and expressive language of Elizabeth Cady Stanton inversely, 'utter rot'. (Veblen 230)

The principles that came with emancipating women included proper education, economic independence, and self-fulfilment which, through the eyes of the leisure class, was seen as unwomanly (ibid.). The so called unwomanly activities, did not prime the individual for the traditional roles of matrimony but rather fostered a sense of autonomy leading to a self-directing, and self-centred life.

The reluctance towards the emancipation of women in this exact sense is reflected in the social milieu of *Clarissa Dalloway*, whose existence is shaped by her upper echelons of society. This is poignantly captured in the novel's last scene, where Richard gazes, unknowingly at first, upon his daughter Elizabeth adorned in her "pink frock" (212). Despite not immediately recognizing her, he feels an instinctual admiration, which compels him to remark upon her looks—a beauty that garners the male gaze. Subsequently, realizing the object of his attention is his daughter, Richard's pride swells, not for her individual achievements but because "she looked so lovely" (ibid.), manifests society's elevation of women's physical beauty over their intellectual achievements that could pave the way for a professional vocation.

It is unsurprising that Miss Kilman steers Elizabeth towards these endeavours, imparting to her that "Law, medicine, politics, all professions are open to women of your generation" (143), but it is unclear if Miss Kilman's wish to break the cycle of the repetitive history of oppressing the female is succeeded or not.

On the discussion of class, the fear that the Victorian part of *Clarissa*, or even her class as a whole, may harbour, could be attributed to the liquidation of the traditional class structure that Marxism predicted. As we remember, he stated that "all that is solid melts into air," which suggests that the established class definitions and the power dynamics they entail are not permanent. They are subject to the relentless transformations of modernity. For *Clarissa*, this could mean a fear of the dissolution of the societal order that affirms her identity and status. The possibility that the proletariat, represented by Miss Kilman, might transcend their economic position is a threat to the stability and legitimacy of *Clarissa's* bourgeois existence. This trepidation, akin to the way she perceives her advancing age as diminishing her relevance, may be the catalyst urging her to shatter the chains of her predetermined societal

roles. Yet, beneath the surface there lies a subdued yearning to be part of a greater collective identity, to transcend the confinements of domestic life and escape from the role as the Leisure Class Victorian Matron.

### 3.2.3 The Polyphonous Subject

In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Good Morning, Midnight*, the reader encounters a variety of characters, times and voices that underscore the polyphonic quality of the novels. Clarissa Dalloway emerges as the epitome of the polyphonous modernist subject, characterized by her polyphony—embodying multiple selves and times simultaneously.

Clarissa's aspiration to transcend the era's traditional boundaries and structures of oppression through her free thoughts and artistry is a notable departure from the Victorian ideal. This is partly what connects her figure to the New Woman. This is illustrated early in the novel when Clarissa retreats to the solitude of her room, signalling a withdrawal from her prescribed societal role. Her retreat is described as a nun's withdrawal to her cell (33) or a child's retreat to a tower, suggesting both a search for sanctuary and an escape from a world where she feels increasingly marginalized.

As she withdraws, Clarissa experiences a profound sense of disconnection, "as if she had left a party" (ibid.)—not just from the society that once celebrated her but by the relentless march of time that she feels is eroding her significance. Her withdrawal to her room is a reaction to her husband Richard's engagement with Lady Bruton—a figure of social vivacity from whom she has been excluded—and a reaction marked not by overt romantic jealousy but by an internal acknowledgment of her waning importance in the social sphere that once defined her (ibid.). Importantly, this is a withdrawal to what Clarissa describes as the "attic room" (ibid.), a space at the top and yet on the margins of the house. This physical positioning in the house mirrors Clarissa's own declining social positioning as an elderly woman. In this way, the scene illuminates the private sphere as both a refuge and a prison for Clarissa, who, in the aloneness of her domestic confines, finally let herself reflect on her life, take off her mask, "disrobe" and confront her emotions away from the public eye.

The retreat to what is described as a tower captures the essence of gothic imagery within the house, marking it as a significant site. As Fred Botting notes, the house itself is a "conjunction of family line, social status, and physical property," (Botting, *Gothic* 4) where the ground floor, as in the case of *Mrs. Dalloway*, symbolizes a rational space of clarity and tradition. In stark contrast, the attic is the realm of the irrational and unknown, a dark, candle-

lit space that harbors Clarissa's tears. This attic room, distanced from the daily rhythms of family life, is a place where the gothic tradition of confronting the inner self is played out, a place where Clarissa “grounds” herself in their Westminster mansion. Here, in her isolation, Clarissa engages with the deep currents of her identities, drawing them forth to meet her gaze in the reflection of her own face.

Sitting in a sentimental solitude surrounded by her dresses (40) Clarissa finds comfort in the memories she has attached to these objects, of when she was “someone”, of when the skirt of her green dress ripped at the important “Embassy party” (41), highlighting her elevated social standing with a sense of sentimentality. When sensually “plunging her hand into the softness” (ibid.) of the seductive dress it is understood that Clarissa finds comfort in her superficial things. Furthermore, as Clarissa gazes into the glass, she “collects the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass),” (40) an act that symbolizes the gathering of her varied selves: the public figure, the social hostess, and the private individual with all her “faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions”. The reflection serves as a candid audience to her internal confession, revealing a woman who has meticulously crafted her external persona to the world, represented by her “pointed; dartlike; definite” (ibid.) self. This carefully constructed image is the one she presents at her parties, a beacon of radiance, yet it conceals the “other sides” of her nature that she diligently represses.

The act of pursing her lips “when she looked in the glass” is both literal and symbolic, a physical manifestation of the effort it takes to maintain this façade of unity and coherence. It suggests a conscious shaping of her identity, akin to the way one might craft a piece of art. The “imperceptible contraction” that occurs each time she views her reflection betrays a subtle, ongoing tension between her internal complexities and the singular “diamond” (ibid) persona she presents to the outside world. An act that is partly dependent on the structuring of the home.

On the other hand, the home marginalizes Clarissa Dalloway into a mere emblem, assuming an ornamental role that Veblen identifies as the traditional role of leisure class women: “[A woman’s] sphere is within the household” (Veblen 110). Here, she is tasked with the aesthetic duty to “beautify” and embody the “chief ornament” (ibid.) of the domestic realm, thereby becoming a visible manifestation of her husband's prosperity. Mrs. Dalloway and her participation in the conspicuous consumption and leisure activities typical of her class is not merely a reflection of personal choice but an enhancement of her husband Richard's financial standing.



However, the significance of Clarissa's ornamental role is increasingly threatened by the inexorable advance of time, a reality echoed in the resounding chimes of Big Ben. Her desire to possibly transcend or break free from the routines of the household "stage" and her anchoring retreat in the attic is clearly captured in this passage:

As she paused by the open staircase window which let in blinds flapping, dogs barking, let in, she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain. (33)

In this scene, Clarissa finds herself both physically and symbolically on a threshold, poised halfway up the staircase. She absorbs the fleeting noises from the external environment beyond the walls of the home, the "blinds flapping, dogs barking," and the persistent cycles of "grinding, blowing, flowering." Imagining herself breaking free "out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain," she envisages a release from the physical constraints of the house and her body, merging into a collective entity.

After her pause at the window, there is a sense of slow and sad rhythm in the interlude of Mrs. Dalloway's bed routine. Upstairs she meets a familiar setting which Woolf rhythmically describes in grammatical parallelism "There was the green linoleum and a tap dripping. There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room" (ibid.). Should Clarissa, who is "above fifty" (4) cease her vigilance in maintaining her façade, she risks her very being becoming entombed within the semblance of life, a notion encapsulated by the imagery of her "Narrower and narrower" (33) bed, resembling a coffin, and "the candle half burnt down" (34), symbolizing the waning of life and the encroachment of old age and mortality.

Clarissa's cognition is laced with irony; the reader anticipates a journey toward profound personal enlightenment, only to discover that Clarissa's stream of consciousness rarely penetrates the superficial layer of her social façade and often culminate in ruminations on her marital choices (133), worries of looking old, and other superficial aspects of her life, halting at the cusp of greater existential revelations. Yet, there are moments when Clarissa seems to edge towards a growth in consciousness, especially noticeable during her party. This evidently happens towards the end of the novel when she reflects on her previous social achievements—accomplishments that were once sources of pride—only to view them now as lacking true meaning confessing that: "these triumphs... had a hollowness; at arm's length

they were, not in the heart" (191). This acknowledgment captures her sense of detachment and the growing realization that these triumphs no longer fulfil her. Her musings lead her to consider Miss Kilman, Elizabeth's tutor, who represents something much more visceral and immediate since: "Kilman her enemy. That was satisfying; that was real" (ibid). In that way, Miss Kilman can be viewed as the antithesis of the empty triumphs and social pleasantries that Clarissa encounters. In her animosity, Clarissa finds an engagement that contrasts starkly with the superficial interactions she is accustomed to within her social circle. But why is Kilman perceived as the "enemy"? Is it because she embodies a truth Clarissa is afraid to confront within herself—the dormant, unexpressed aspects of her identity that yearn for a life imbued with real passion and substance? Is it because by creating the enemy or the "other" she reinforces her own sense of self? Or is it that Kilman threatens the illusion of control and order that Clarissa upholds in her social realm?

Clarissa's paradox of emotion towards Miss Kilman is indicative of a deeper connection. This indicates that it is in "motion", reactions and interactions, that she finds the new authenticity she wants: "It was enemies one wanted, not friends" (ibid.). This fact also motivates her interaction with the immediateness of bustling city landscape, which will be dealt with later, which in contrast to her own fading self is in a constant renewal and motion. The scene further concludes with a shift back to the superficial social realm as she notes the arrival of Sir Harry, an "old friend," but without the emotional weight she associates with Miss Kilman. "They must find her if they wanted her. She was for the party" (ibid.). Interestingly, the pronouns "she" and "her" underscore the tension in Clarissa Dalloway's identity between active presence and passive existence. "She," as the subject, places Clarissa in the active role of social orchestrator, or as the artist: "She was for the party." In contrast, "her" indicates things done to Clarissa or aspects belonging to her, revealing a more passive facet of her existence: "They must find her if they wanted her." This duality of "she" actively shaping her public facade and "her" passively reflecting on deeper truths within, captures the complexity of Clarissa's character and her struggle between outward conformity and inward authenticity.

Conversely, Clarissa, with her upper-class status, enjoys the privilege of replicating the city's spectacle within her own home and has the luxury to retreat to her sanctuary when the urban fervour overwhelms her. Clarissa's reaction to the city as something sublime and dangerous is captured early in the novel when she is standing in Piccadilly Street, feeling "far out at sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (9). This selective engagement with city life, which could be seen as a

romanticization of an existence that was often harsh, affords her a sense of security for the future: There, she can immerse or recreate herself repeatedly in the pulsating throng of the urban sea of people.

Interestingly, Woolf's depiction of Clarissa, while not patronizing, paints her as a social maestro of her gatherings, attributing an artistic essence to her social endeavours, as she possesses an innate ability to understand people, to combine and create, but confessing that "her only gift was knowing people almost by instinct" (ibid.).

The portrayal of Clarissa as both a creator and entertainer has been supported by various critics, underscoring an intriguing contradiction. Her role as the hostess of the party blurs traditional lines—it simultaneously upholds her Victorian femininity while also casting her as an artist and performer of the event. This duality gains depth when contrasted with Darwin's earlier cited view, which relegated women to passivity, devoid of creative spirit, intellectual agency, and artistic ability. Clarissa's voice and thoughts, as presented by the novel, and Clarissa's way of walking across larger parts of London also counters this sense of passivity in women. One critic wrote that:

The most important thing about Mrs. Dalloway is not her income, not her social status or her ideas but the fact that she is a woman. It is from this that her creativity, her *rapport* with 'life' proceeds and also the limitations of both. (Arnold Kettle, *Mrs. Dalloway* 26)

Here, Kettle hints at the dual nature of her womanhood as a source of both her distinctive perspective and the boundaries within which she operates. Kettle further argues that the most important example of this dual nature is found in Clarissa's role as a "party-giver". She serves as the spark, gathering and generating. But this talent transcends, being more than just a social gift. "Clarissa has 'that extraordinary gift, that woman's gift, of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be,'" a female creativity and feminine mode of perception, which he argues is the basics to "Virginia Woolf's whole system of operation" (27).

Ann Ronchetti, in *The Artist, Society & Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's Novels* (2004), disputes the reliability of Mrs. Dalloway's view of her own abilities, as for instance in the scene where her lack of abilities is mentioned (134), questioning: "how accurate this self-effacing assessment is, and how much her failure to nurture other, dormant talents may be the result of her social conditioning as a daughter of the upper class or her wilful repression of them" (Ann Ronchetti, *The Artist, Society & Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's Novels* 53). Clarissa

herself certainly senses an artificial element in her role as a hostess claiming that “Every time she gave a party, she had this feeling of being something not herself,” (Woolf 187) which could point to that Clarissa's artistry is not limited solely to her orchestrating parties but also and more intriguingly as the creator of the identity, or guise, of Mrs. Dalloway. In the sub-chapter dedicated to Clarissa's interaction with the metropolis, I intend to expand upon her artistry and its wider significance. I will be building upon Kettle's notion that Clarissa has undergone a transformation or "recreation" (Kettle 27). My argument posits that the city itself acts as a catalyst, providing her with opportunities and creative stimuli that, in essence, fuel her artistic process. Nevertheless, Woolf suggests that women's needs surpass the confining expectations placed upon them, going beyond the mastering of "the difficult arts of family life." Echoed by Showalter who claims, "The suffocation of family life, boredom, and patriarchal protectivism gradually destroys women's capacity to dream, to work or to act" (64), advocating for freedom that enable women to nurture their ability to envision, create, and take action.

Consequently, Woolf portrays Clarissa as an artist not only of the social sphere but also of self-construction, crafting an identity that oscillates between the authenticity of her inner world and the crafted persona she displays to society, a shift in person that many women can relate to.

### **3.3 Class as Patriarchal Mechanism of Subjugation**

This character analysis will look into how Miss Doris Kilman stands as a pivotal character within the narrative, embodying both a critique of social class and a challenge to established ideals of womanhood. This analysis will discuss her as a counterpoint to Clarissa and the privileged upper class of English society. Additionally, it will examine her portrayal in the struggle against unrealistic standards of womanhood, a struggle that resonates with Clarissa and women at large who face the societal expectation to fit a perfect mold, a task that seems unattainable.

The analysis begins by exploring how Woolf characterizes Miss Kilman as a defender of society's outcasts, positioning her as the advocate and the governess among the lower working-class. Her existence on the fringes, subsisting on the very basics, underscores the novel's theme of class struggle. Secondly, the analysis will turn to how Woolf through the character of Miss Kilman challenges the traditional stereotypes associated with single, unmarried women, or as they often are called, the *spinsters* in society. A discussion which

engages with the perspective of one critic, who claims that Woolf not only encapsulates the archetype of the spinster in her works, but also liberates her, rendering the single women "as individuals first and foremost, infinitely complex, and independent of the confines of being a martyr or monster, as demanded by any politicised movement," (Alexander Claridge, *The significance of spinster figures in Woolf's work* 61) a perspective that seeks to elevate the portrayal of the spinster beyond cultural stereotypes.

### 3.3.1 The Advocate

Miss Kilman emerges as an advocate for marginalized groups, her vocation as a governess infused with a spirit of activism shaped by her own experiences of societal exclusion and her principled stance amidst the tensions of wartime London. Prior to working as a governess for the Dalloway's, Miss Kilman was dismissed from her position working as a teacher in Germany (12). Upon her arrival in London, the war — a time when suspicion and resentment towards Germans were rife — hindered her employment at Miss Dolby's school (135). Bearing the German surname derived from Kiehlman (*ibid.*) and not willing to "pretend that the Germans were all villains – when she had German friends" (*ibid.*), she encountered perceptions of being a German sympathizer, which was a significant social stigma during the wartime atmosphere of heightened nationalism and distrust.

However, "Mr. Dalloway had come across her working for the Friends. He had allowed her (and that was really generous of him) to teach his daughter history" (*ibid.*). Considering the historical framework of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the Friends group—also known as Quakers—is associated with social activism, including championing women's liberation. The Quakers, recognized for their work in suffrage movements and civil rights, are identified by their commitment to peace and equality, perhaps influencing Richard's perception of Miss Kilman ("Society of Friends"). This aligns with Richard Dalloway's positive perception of Miss Kilman as someone with "a really historical mind," (12) and his faith in her tutoring his daughter.

In the context of Miss Kilman's own alienation from society, her sympathetic disposition towards other marginalized groups becomes apparent. As observed by Clarissa. "Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians, but in private inflicted positive torture, so insensitive was she, dressed in a green mackintosh coat" (12). In this passage, Miss Kilman's support for those who are struggling is apparent,

demonstrated by her solidarity with other countries during their respective ordeals.<sup>7</sup> Merriam-Webster defines an *advocate* as "a person who actively supports or favours a cause" ("Advocate"), a description that fits Miss Kilman, for example illustrated by her careful saving for an outing with Elizabeth, describing her as one of the "causes she believed in" (137). Miss Kilman's investment in Elizabeth's education point to her advocacy for knowledge, evidencing her commitment to guiding Elizabeth on a path to higher learning and intellectual empowerment (143). Furthermore, Miss Kilman's role as an advocate, or a soldier fighting for a cause, is accentuated by her surname, Kiehlman, which bears a martial connotation originating from the Latin *Cilianus*, which means "warrior", underscoring a combative and strong-willed character ready to advocate for a cause ("Name Origin Kiehlman").

Miss Kilman's attire and actions further paints her as an advocate for a larger cause, akin to wartime messengers carrying crucial strategies in their mackintoshes—here, the "maps or document of strategy" ("Mackintosh Brand Story") might represent the unspoken fight for women's rights. Her presence at the "Army and Navy Stores" (142) and by the tomb of the "Unknown Warrior" (141) signifies a silent homage to battles fought beyond the physical realm. Likened to a figure "armoured for primeval warfare" (138), Woolf paints Kilman as a figure who endures societal scorn to uphold the dignity and independence of women.

Revisiting Renk's article, she states that Miss Kilman's tendency to defend or advocate for outsiders is seen in the way Miss Kilman takes Elizabeth under her wing, as she has an empty relationship with her biological mother Clarissa (326). Renk suggests Miss Kilman has taken on the role as, "a type of surrogate mother", further describing Miss Kilman as "a pitiful, bitter Marxist" (*ibid.*, n17). While Renk does not explicitly mention her reasons for describing Miss Kilman as a Marxist, it goes hand in hand with her alienation and her resentment against Mrs. Dalloway's way of fuelling the capitalistic society describing her as a "Fool! Simpleton!" with her freshness and fashion (137).

As is well known, "alienation" is a Marxist concept that is employed to describe a disconnect between workers and the products of their work in a capitalistic setting, as well as a sense of isolation from their own humanity and the broader community. However, when "workers repossessed the fruits of their labour, alienation would be overcome, and class

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<sup>7</sup> Russia and Austria faced significant upheavals in the early 20th century. Russia, under Tsar Nicholas II, dealt with political unrest, poor working conditions, and the impacts of WWI, leading to the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik rise to power ("Russian Revolution"). Austria-Hungary struggled with nationalism, modernization, and the fallout from WWI, resulting in its dissolution and the formation of the Republic of Austria ("The Collapse of Austria-Hungary").

divisions would cease" ("Marxism"). Integrating these ideas on class into our understanding of the characters, it appears that Miss Kilman might experience a sense of proprietary attachment to Elizabeth akin to the investment one puts into labour. Through a Marxist reading, Miss Kilman could be seen as proletariat yearning for the "fruits" of her nurturing efforts, which the capitalist framework and the upper-class bourgeoisie, represented by Clarissa, would withhold from a worker, in order to keep their own position in the hierarchy.

Miss Kilman, as an advocate for the marginalized and a character through which Woolf critiques societal norms, stands as a testament to the class struggles of her time. This portrayal brings her occupation as a governess to interest, highlighting its relevance in the broader discourse on class and womanhood that Woolf challenges in her narrative.

### 3.3.2 The Governess

Miss Kilman's low earnings as a governess<sup>8</sup> not only restrict her to a basic existence within the lower working class but also place her in a liminal space, disconnected from the family she serves and separated from the other domestic workers. Her solitary position is a testament to her financial and social struggles within the Dalloway household, a reality underscored by her limited wage, which is emblematic of the broader economic constraints faced by governesses during that era ("Governesses").

Governesses, both before and after WW1 were guided by the protocols set forth in Emily Peart's *A Book for Governesses* (1868), that cautioned "servants dislike governesses, and are very unwilling to believe that there can be much good about them[...]Have as little to do with them as possible (103). Other protocols instructed the governesses to maintain a professional distance from the entire household—a practice leading to inevitable isolation (Mary Thorp, *An English Governess in the Great War* 5). Furthermore, the governess was often described as "workers between two worlds," caught in the lonely space between the servant class and the families they served, encapsulating Miss Kilman's own sense of poverty and solitude living in a constant paradox to the Victorian sect of womanhood.

Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* harshly critiqued the very occupation of the governess. She observed that the limited job opportunities available to women were demeaning and that those women with enough education to become governesses

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<sup>8</sup> A governess's annual salary in the 1920s ranged from £35 to £80, with outliers like Charlotte Brontë earning as little as £20, indicative of the profession's low economic valuation ("Governesses").

were not afforded the same respect as male tutors (192). Wollstonecraft noted that even educated women, when placed in the role of a governess, faced a form of degradation.

Further she argued that the fall from a woman's expected social station to that of a governess was not only a personal humiliation but also a societal failing. She questioned the progress of a society that did not ensure respectable and independent positions for women, thereby not considering “the happiness of one half of its members” (193). The employment situation for women had scarcely progressed from Wollstonecraft's era to the interbellum period of *Mrs. Dalloway* since, as noted before, Colin Linsley's research reveals that over 40% of the female workforce remained confined to traditional roles such as domestic service or textile manufacturing, highlighting the lack of societal advancement and the regressional effects on women's work situation in the interbellum period.

Without any form of recognition, in the form of higher wages or as Wollstonecraft suggests, dignity, even the most respectable women are subject to oppression, leading to a deterioration of their status and, ultimately, of their character. This is exactly what we see in Kilman, since the irony of Miss Kilman's portrayal as a "monster" (139) lies in the suggestion that vulgarity and monstrosity are societal constructs imposed upon those who deviate from the norm. Ironically, it is not her character that is monstrous, but society's perception of her, which turns monstrous in its intolerance towards her unmarried and unconventional status.

The limited financial means of the governess, paralleled by Miss Kilman's circumstances, signify a degradation of her being. Confined to a small, isolated room, her existence reflects the constraints imposed by her financial status. Miss Kilman is at first depicted “mewed in a stuffy bedroom with a prayer book”, (12) as a character enveloped in the trappings of austerity. Her living conditions, suggest an ascetic lifestyle that contrasts sharply with the more decorative environment that Clarissa inhabits with “giant candle sticks” (41) and a rather pompous “crystal dolphin” (41). This image of Miss Kilman living with the bare minimum deepens when considering a passage that describes her simplistic lifestyle:

Sometimes lately it had seemed to her that, except for Elizabeth, her food was all that she lived for; her comforts; her dinner, her tea; her hot-water bottle at night. But one must fight; vanquish; have faith in God. (141)

This passage reveals that, outside of her connection with Elizabeth, Miss Kilman's life is reduced to subsistence—finding solace in the routine of “her dinner, her tea” and the modest comfort of a hot-water bottle. Because of her economic situation with her low earnings as a



governess being “degradingly poor” (135), she is forced to stay within servitude to the Dalloways who chooses to pay her badly.

In short, Miss Kilman's portrayal as the governess reflects a critique of societal attitudes towards women who fall out of traditional roles, aligning with Wollstonecraft's censure of the limited, demeaning opportunities for women. Woolf illustrates the material and spiritual degradation faced by such women through Kilman's impoverished circumstances and societal ostracism, depicting a life confined by the smallness of her stuffy room and the narrowness of her means. Miss Kilman's portrayal illustrates the broader challenges faced by women who fall outside societal norms, but also reframes the “fallen” woman as a figure of resilience, persistently getting back on her feet again. As will be investigated next, the depiction of Miss Kilman redefines the single women in society, the so-called *spinsters*, asserting her as a reflection of but also as a crusher of the myth of the spinster.

### 3.3.3 The Spinster

Historically, *spinster* referred to a woman whose occupation was spinning thread and yarn. Merriam-Webster currently defines the term as “an unmarried woman, especially one who is older and seems unlikely ever to marry” (“Spinster”). Within this framework, Miss Kilman is a quintessential representation of the spinster: at over forty years old (135), she is single and not following the traditional societal expectations of womanhood. Alexander Claridge, in his essay “The significance of spinster figures in Woolf’s work” (2008), contextualizes the era of Woolf's early novels, highlighting her frequent use of the spinster figure to explore and critique her contemporary social landscape:

Men pursued careers, whilst women pursued husbands and bore them many children with strong, English names such as Harry, or Edward, who would, in turn, preserve the ‘Great’ British tradition of patriarchy. The spinster then is a direct affront to this tradition, refusing her prescribed role of wife and mother. (Claridge 56)

Claridge's analysis further delves into the complex perceptions of spinsters within society, noting that they were often regarded as celibate by choice or circumstance, perceived as unappealing or undesirable, and subjected to labels that undermined their femininity, such as “masculine”, or faced presumptions of being lesbian as a derogatory inference from their unmarried status (*ibid.*). On the surface, these labels and myths fit the depictions of Kilman,

but taking in consideration that these depictions are filtered through Clarissa's consciousness, they are indicative of societal prejudices rather than reflective of Kilman's true essence. Further in his discussion, Claridge highlights Woolf's spinster figures as countering the myth of celibacy. He examines how Woolf presents these characters with a richness in their sexual identities, challenging traditional views of spinsters as desexualized beings. Miss Kilman, he claims, for instance crushes this myth as she is "perhaps the most sexually threatening of Woolf's spinsters" with her large 'gooseberry coloured eyes' gazing at Clarissa, taking in "her delicate body" (57).

In contrast, Miss Kilman is also "only" a single woman struggling to navigate the challenges of modern life. Her very humanness stirs a sense of pathos within the reader which also demystify the myth of the single and monstrous figure. Having nowhere else to go, particularly in the wake of Elizabeth's refusal to engage with her, Miss Kilman's situation is even more poignant (145). Hurt, she "doggedly" marches to find a place to cope after having "lost her way" (146), being rejected by Elizabeth:

The tower of Westminster Cathedral rose in front of her, the habitation of God. In the midst of the traffic, there was the habitation of God. Doggedly she set off with her parcel to that other sanctuary, the Abbey. (146)

Down at the Abbey she meets "variously assorted worshippers, now divested of social rank, almost of sex" (141), and Miss Kilman who was deserted was "now rejoined" (ibid.). Not by god but by people around her, people who "gazed round and shuffled past the tomb of the Unknown Warrior". This re-joining in the communal serves a dual purpose in the character of Miss Kilman; it is both an anchor in a rapidly changing world and a testament to her search for something enduring to believe in, especially after the disillusionment that may have followed the war. This also functions as a comment by Woolf on faith, but not a specific faith: rather the value of community and sense of belonging.

Marshall Berman explains that after the "death of God" and especially after the war, "Modern mankind found itself in the midst of a great absence and emptiness of values and yet, at the same time, a remarkable abundance of possibilities" (21). This observation highlights the paradox of modernity: while the new urban landscape offers manifold possibilities, it also brings a certain disorientation in the absence of traditional values. Therefore, Miss Kilman, in her religious devotion, navigates this dichotomy by clinging to a faith as a means of self-orientation amidst the tumult of the interbellum period and the

broader scope of modernity. It is conceivable to argue that Miss Kilman, akin to the other female characters in the novel, mirrors women in reality, taking strides toward a form of liberation yet ensnared by societal constraints. By leaving these women in an ambiguous state, caught between freedom and captivity, Woolf perhaps aims to provoke some kind of action towards the next phase of emancipation.

### 3.4 The Carnavalesque in *Mrs. Dalloway*

The public sphere of London in *Mrs. Dalloway* is a highly carnivalesque site of incongruity, motion, and inclusiveness. This is for instance seen in Peter Walsh's introspection as he drifts towards Westminster before Clarissa's party (179). His painting of the city scape portrays a diverse array of social classes and reflect the richness of London's collective texture. As he observes:

Doors were being opened by a footman to allow the exit of a high-stepping old dame, in buckled shoes, with three purple ostrich feathers in her hair. Doors were being opened for ladies wrapped like mummies in shawls adorned with bright flowers, and for ladies with bare heads. (180)

This description encapsulates the spectrum of society, from the affluent, to those adorned in luxurious fashion, and modern ladies without hats. Furthermore, Peter observes:

In respectable quarters with stucco pillars, through small front gardens, lightly adorned with combs in their hair (having run up to see the children), women emerged; men waited for them, their coats blowing open, and then the motor started. (ibid.)

This observation highlights the middle class engaging in their domestic and social duties, a contrast to the earlier depiction of the upper-class. The scene broadens to include, "Everybody was going out. With these doors being opened, and with the descent and start" (ibid.), which captures a moment of communal transition and activity. Importantly, the "Everybody" serves as a collective call to action, a unifying event that compels individuals to leave the confines of their private spheres. The "doors being opened" suggests not only the literal act of doors opening to allow exit but also a metaphorical unveiling of new possibilities and experiences that lie beyond the threshold of the structured home.

Furthermore, "with the descent and start" Woolf introduces layers of meaning. The "descent" can be interpreted as a literal movement from the interior to the exterior, from private to public, or as a figurative gesture by the affluent, who momentarily step down from their elevated social standing, joining the public sphere on equal footing with others. This movement simultaneously heralds the "start", the commencement of an event, a journey, or a significant moment of interaction and engagement, a renewal suggested by a "start".

Finally, the "it seemed as if the whole of London was embarking in little boats moored to the bank, tossing on the waters, as if the entire place were floating off in a *carnival* [emphasis added]" (180), signals a participation in a collective carnival-like atmosphere.

Moreover, Peter's encounter with authority and the marginalized is striking: "And here, in Westminster, was a retired judge, presumably, sitting four-square at his house door, dressed all in white. Presumably, an Anglo-Indian. And here, a commotion of brawling women, drunken" (ibid.). The juxtaposition of a dignified, possibly retired judge with the chaotic scene of brawling, drunken women further underscore the carnivalesque atmosphere, where the public bring together individuals from contrasting walks of life into a single frame. Through Peter's observations, the passage captures the essence of a moment where social hierarchies are blurred, and the city comes alive with a sense of unity and festivity. In scenes such as these, the novel engages in meta-commentary, reflecting on its own capacity for unity.

Woolf employs satire as a literary device to dissect the pretensions of the upper class. Satire is an important tool in carnivalesque subversion. Satire, criticizes human flaws, vices, or societal issues through ridicule, irony, parody, and other techniques, often aiming to encourage social change ("Satire"). This literary device is pervasive throughout the novel. For example, when Clarissa coldly expresses a sense of shock and indignation when people talk about the death that just happened at her party "what business had the Bradshaw's to discuss death at her party?" (201). Furthermore, Clarissa's proclamation of her non-judgmental nature, coupled with the narrative's layered irony—most notably the tragic irony of Clarissa perceiving her own failure in the light of diminishing womanhood, blind to the actual failure of society.

Arnold Kettle points to the satirical dimensions within Woolf's social critique, is for instance found in "Lady Bruton" and the "Prime Minister in his gold lace" as caricatured figures representing the pomp and circumstance of power (9); however, his perspective also reveals a society ensnared by its own narrow confines. For instance, the petty geographical markers of Bond Street, Bloomsbury, Ludgate Hill, and the commercialism of the Army Navy stores. Emotionally, society is fractured by a pervasive sense of isolation and loneliness, a

biting commentary on the disconnectedness of individuals within the glittering facade of societal opulence (Kettle 9). Confines and boundaries of such manner is transgressed by characters such as Elizabeth. Elizabeth, the daughter of Clarissa, transgresses the established social boundaries of her upper-class upbringing in Westminster by venturing into the working-class quarter of the Strand. She thinks, “crowds of people coming back from the city have more power than single clergymen in Kensington, than any of the books Miss Kilman had lent her” (150). The “crowds of people coming back from the city” represent a collective energy that has the power to awaken something dormant within the individual psyche. This force is described as having more influence than individual authority figures or didactic literature inasmuch as its clusters of life has “an impulse, a revelation, which has its effects for ever” (150). While this scene also functions as a meta-commentary to the novel itself (as its form is clusters of life and impulses which has its effect for ever,) it also suggests an inspiration coming from freedom in movement, from heat in the masses that liberate the one to become one with another.

### **3.4.1 London and the Polyphonous Subject**

Woolf employs an omniscient narrator to articulate the myriad perspectives and voices embedded within the text. Already from the first page of the novel, the narrative voice moves through the foliage of the trees and out to the “open air” (3) and plunges into the inner sanctum of characters’ thoughts with a fluid, inclusive ease. Direct discourse punctuates the text as both Peter and Clarissa interject their voices, lending a sense of immediacy and intimacy. For instance, Peter's teasing interruption, “‘Musing among the vegetables?’ —was that it? —‘I prefer men to cauliflowers’—was that it?’” (ibid.), not only recalls a memory but also immerses the reader in the moment. The passage toggles between the external and internal, giving us a peek into Clarissa’s musings, tinged with nostalgia, as trivial as they might appear, juxtaposed with Scrope Purvis’s external perspective of Clarissa, which offers a different angle to her character.

This narrative technique seamlessly shifts focus from Clarissa’s inward reflections to the external observations of her neighbour, Scrope Purvis. This illustrates how Woolf crafts a narrative that flows naturally between the subjective and objective, between the internal consciousness of her polyphonous characters and their external perceptions. The result is a richly layered and textured narrative that captures the essence of life’s simultaneity—the inner

world of individual experience and the outer world of social facades and community connections.

In the city Clarissa finds “waves of that divine vitality” (7), that let her shed what Woolf describes as “the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves” (Woolf *Street Haunting* 481), a house door that is opened amidst a bustling setting that opposes the static, Victorian convictions of immutable truths:

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

This moment in London, immersed in the paradoxes of a modern existence; resonates with the ambiance of a carnival. The mixture of high and low culture, organic and synthetic, the secrets of the “below” and the flaunting of the “triumphs” all under the unity and awe of the aeroplane overhead.

Mikhail Bakhtin articulated the essence of such dynamic public spheres as epitomizing the carnivalesque, noting that “The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is people as a whole, but organized in *their own way*” (Bakhtin *Carnival Ambivalence* 225). The fluctuating scene, a blend of tangible and symbolic juxtapositions, carries the rush of unorganized musicality, a Londinian rhapsody leaning forward with its idiosyncratic semicolons that creates a sense of momentum from one cluster of images to the next.

This particular carnivalesque meeting with the city, merged objects of the past with modern aesthetic and soul such as, the gleam of modern brass instruments, the simplicity of barrel organs, the contrast of muscle force related to carriages and technological advances, and the social spectrum from sandwich vendors to the garb of aristocratic women such as Clarissa herself.

Moreover, this living moment of June, the vitality of the scene is what she loved:

Somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best

, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (9-10)

The city, inhabiting the spirit of modernity, is in a constant state of renewal, where buildings may rumble to “bits and pieces” and be rebuilt, and people come and go, yet it persists through time. This concept of an eternally youthful and renewing city presents a stark contrast to Clarissa's own mortality and her awareness of her age. The city becomes a symbol of a collective spirit, a living entity where individual lives intersect and contribute to its vast narrative, where people “lived in each other”. Clarissa feels a part of this collective—despite her fears and the realization of her own mortality, she finds a sort of immortality thinking that “here, there she survived”. Peter and Clarissa survive in the continuity of the city's life; their spirits lingering in the warmth of the streetlights. It is a comforting thought that hints at a form of survival beyond physical existence, a collectiveness she tries to recreate in her home.

Clarissa's connection to the city is compared to natural elements, such as lifting mist within trees. She is both the observer and the participant, an integral part of the urban landscape. The mist, like her influence, spreads and connects her to the unknown, to the people she has never met, and to the familiar, those she holds dear. It suggests that her life, her essence, extends beyond her physical presence, diffusing throughout the city and touching lives in unseen ways. The cityscape is also portrayed as a place where the individual's identity can be both lost and found—lost in the anonymity of the crowd, but also found in the sense of being part of something greater and is what arguably guided Clarissa to recreate herself. This duality offers Clarissa comfort and a glimpse of the divine, an urbanity where the collective human spirit is worshipped through its ceaseless ebb and flow.

Lastly, the vitality of the moment, the vibrant immediacy of a June day in London, is what captivates Clarissa. It is a moment of beauty and connection, a point in time where the personal and the collective intersect. For Clarissa, it is not just about surviving in a literal sense, but about her essence surviving in the collective memory and life of the city, and by extension, in the body of the human experience.

#### **4. *Good Morning, Midnight: In the Waltz of Oppression***

This chapter explores Sasha Jansen's determined quest for freedom and the challenges that prevent some women from embodying the ideal of the New Woman. The chapter begins with a concise synopsis of the novel. Furthermore, the chapter delves into the roles imposed on women within society, shedding light on Sasha's sense of entrapment within a cyclical pattern of oppression.

The overarching theme of the novel is the precarious situation of women in the cosmopolitan cities of the early twentieth century, highlighting that this precariousness has both external and internal origins. The external origins are about the limitations women face in society: despite legal rights, the lack of sustainable employment prevents them from achieving autonomy, and the jobs that are available are often temporary, expected to fill time until marriage. The freedom to move through the city is also constrained by societal judgements, and their drifting in the public sphere often results in harassment.

The internal origins of the precariousness, has to do with how women grapple with societal ideals of womanhood. This includes youth, beauty, fashion, and motherhood. Society, meaning “people in general thought of as living together in organized communities with shared laws, traditions, and values” (“Society”), persistently devalue women when they fail to conform, even though they intellectually recognize these ideals as false. As will be demonstrated, Sasha, like Clarissa and Miss Kilman each grapple with the societal expectations of womanhood, which shape and confine their identities in distinct ways. Their engagement with fashion serves as a means to navigate these norms, attempting to claim agency in a world that prescribes their relevance based on appearance and age. As they age, the characters are faced with a society that often equates a woman's worth with youth and the adherence to fashion trends. This obsession with fashion thus becomes a double-edged sword. It is both a pursuit of empowerment within the constraints of societal ideals and a reminder of the pressure to embody these expectations. Certainly, class plays a significant role in this context as we have already looked into. Yet, for women, the effects of class-related oppression are magnified, subjecting them to dual constraints. They encounter barriers that not only hinder their full engagement in the workforce but also confine them to predetermined life paths.



As discussed in the preceding chapter, Clarissa's battle with these external and internal forms of marginalization is fought from within her stable home, a place that provides both sanctuary and entrapment, and from within her position in the leisure class. On the contrary, Sasha faces her struggles from a position of uncertainty, without a fixed home, moving from hotel to hotel, engaging in short-term relationships, as well as lacking the anchor of financial security. Where Clarissa uses the walls of her residence to fortify her place in society, and in the leisure class, Sasha's unsettled existence exposes a life unmoored, with the underground lavabo providing the only refuge and feminine solace amidst the turmoil of the modern world.

As signalled above, the following examination will concentrate on the character of Sasha Jansen. It will address her battle with social and class predicaments, especially those relating to expectations of her as a woman, and women's experience with economic instability due to inconsistent job opportunities, what other opportunities did they have?

The discussion will also focus on Rhys's use of motifs, such as the magazines representing unescapable oppression that enhances traditional roles and domesticates the woman even outside of the home. Similarly, the recurring motif of the mechanized woman accentuates the societal pressure on women to adhere to expected roles, eroding their individuality, and transforming them into functional components of a capitalist system. This motif is also found in the tone of the novel, steeped in coldness, painted with a corporate palette of blue, silver, snow, and stone, all cast in a leaden expression. The pushback on the cold structures of oppression is also challenged through the polyphonous subject, Sasha, and the intertextual elements in the novel.

#### **4.1 Synopsis**

Starting *in medias res* and told from a first-person perspective, *Good Morning, Midnight* follows Sasha Jansen who, financed by a friend, returns to Paris in an attempt to escape her desolate life in London. In Paris, she dwells on past traumas and navigates a series of disheartening interactions and reflections on her own aging and poverty. Despite trying to adhere to a routine and avoid painful memories, Sasha is constantly reminded of her past, particularly her experience of being abandoned by her partner Enno and the loss of their newborn son. Her interactions in the city range from unsettling encounters with her neighbour, a ghost-like man with pointy shoes, to failed connections with others, including a young man named René, whose intentions are initially unclear. However, Sasha's attempt to seek solace in familiar places and new acquaintances only leads her deeper into darkness, to the point

where she attempts to drink herself to death for the second time with her remaining money.

## 4.2 Sasha and Women's Work

Like many of Jean Rhys's heroines, Sasha Jansen illustrates the struggles of women who live outside the expected norms of their time. They are often entrapped in a cycle of waiting for some money to come through, just enough money to purchase a dress, which, in turn, enables them to present themselves appropriately in a café setting, which, in turn, facilitates the possibility of meeting a man, which, in turn, could lead to the provision of their financial needs—a sequential chain of events that ironically infuses their imprisonment<sup>9</sup>.

Womanhood in the 1930s was closely linked to the professions deemed appropriate for women, with certain roles reinforcing and reflecting societal expectations of femininity, which made it harder for women to escape such imprisonments. Without stable jobs, they faced economic uncertainty, which forced them into “women's work” or transactional relationships. Diana Souhami, in her 2018 article “The 1930s: Women had the vote, but the old agitation went on”, explains the situation of women in the 1930s UK, highlighting the gap between legal rights and societal attitudes. She notes that despite legislative changes like the equal voting rights granted by Stanley Baldwin's government, the underlying assumption of male superiority persisted. Souhami encapsulates the era's contradictions, stating, "To have legislation is not at all the same as to have the state of affairs that the legislation claims to achieve". This statement underscores the reality that legal equality did not translate into genuine societal change, as women continued to face low pay and were chained to discriminatory practices. This was highlighted earlier in the discussion of Colin Linsley's research into the regressive circumstances during the interwar years that forced women into traditional “women's work” again<sup>10</sup>.

Women's work, according to the OED, refers to tasks and employment traditionally and historically undertaken by women, often related to domestic responsibilities and certain

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Rhys's earlier novels also explore the plight of women existing on the fringes of society, often caught in a web of material dependency. In *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Rhys introduces us to Anna Morgan, an 18-year-old who associates with older men. Similarly, *Quartet* (1928) presents Marya Zelli, a woman who is taken in by a couple, and develops a transactional relationship with them. These narratives underscore Rhys's thematic preoccupation with women navigating precarious social positions influenced by older men and material exchanges. See Rhys, Jean. *Voyage in the Dark*.; and *Quartet*.

<sup>10</sup> The spike in births observed directly after World War I also underscores a temporary relapse into traditional roles, yet the most significant surge in birth rates—the real baby boom—did not manifest until after World War II, "Crude Birth Rate in the United Kingdom (UK) from 1800 to 2020." *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1037268/crude-birth-rate-uk-1800-2020/>. Accessed 1 April 2024.

professions deemed suitable for women, such as nursing, tutoring, or secretarial work. This concept reflects the gendered division of labour still prevalent in society, particularly before the latter half of the 20th century (“Women’s work”).

Sasha's employment history, detailed in the novel, is a clear example of this and a problematization of and critique against the occupational roles that were available to women during that time. Her transient and precarious job positions, often predicated upon her physical appearance, typify what was historically categorized as women's work. Cynthia Port's 2001 article "Money, for the night is coming': Jean Rhys and Gendered Economies of Ageing" first published in *Women: a cultural view*, addresses the challenge of “keeping up appearances” in Rhys's novels. Port notes that many of Rhys's heroines have been employed in roles that required them to display their physical form, adding that the plight of being an outward beauty would grow increasingly challenging to maintain with advancing age, further adding that “the characters have either lost their jobs or lost the energy to pursue them, and therefore market their bodies more directly with increasing anxiety” (207).

In the case of *Good Morning, Midnight*, this becomes clear through Sasha's past employment as a “mannequin” (13) at a “dress-house” (11) as a receptionist, as a seasonal guide (21), and as an English tutor (108). Sasha's position as a mannequin is doomed by the passage of time and the natural effects of aging. Sasha's position as a receptionist depends on her ability to project an image that aligns with the company's branding, only allowing interference from the outside. The work as a guide, being seasonal, highlights the ephemerality of her employment options. These jobs reflect the limited opportunities available to women, often relegating them to the margins of the workforce, and underscore the struggle against a societal structure that channels women towards occupations that are undervalued and precarious. Ultimately, forcing many into an undesired destiny not of their own choosing.

These occupations limit Sasha’s societal engagement: each role is passive and detached from any substantive influence, merely enabling the continuation of capitalist consumption. Sasha depicts her fate with a simile, comparing her life to a straw swirling aimlessly, illustrating the sense of being at the mercy of forces beyond her control as a woman in the modern world: “like one of those straws that floats around the edge of a whirlpool and is gradually sucked into the centre, the dead centre, where everything is stagnant” (33).

Her deterministic existence, entangled in the bleak choices between unstable employment and what Wollstonecraft referred to as "legal prostitution," is emblematic of the

dilemma faced by women of her time: either to persist in the struggle for autonomy or succumb to marriage and its associated loss of autonomy and professional aspirations. However, much like Miss Kilman, Sasha finds herself in a “spinster” position where marriage seems an improbable prospect due to her age, thereby rendering work as her primary avenue for survival. This circumstance binds her to a precarious existence, akin to the one demonstrated by Miss Kilman, whose future is as precarious as Sasha’s. These themes are already established on the first pages of the novel, as will be discussed, setting the stage for an exploration of the limited ways of life available to women, and the societal currents that pull them inexorably towards the “dead centre” and into transactional relationships.

### 4.3 The Price of Safety

At first glance, the novel seems to centralize Sasha’s trauma from losing her child and her interrupted suicide attempt (4). On a deeper level, the analysis reveals a critically underexplored theme: the entrapment of women within the confines of transactional relationships, a cycle that, as mentioned above, predestines their paths, and restricts their autonomy. Through this reading, it is not the melody of a song that triggers Sasha’s emotional outpouring, rather, it is the subtle but crucial interaction with the American man and the *quid pro quo* “brandy-and-soda” he provides her (3). A symbol that makes her “remember” her perpetual state of indebtedness and her life’s cyclical nature—forever reliant on borrowed moments and spaces.

The opening scene of the novel immediately sets the stage for exploring this type of gender dynamic by introducing the physical separation within a shared space, indicative of the distinct roles and places assigned to the madame and monsieur. “There are two beds, a big one for madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for monsieur” (ibid.), we are told. In this room the smell of cheap hotel is “almost imperceptible” (ibid.), hinting at a deep familiarity with and life frequented by stays at cheap hotels. The gaze through the window, with its view of a cold concrete “impasse going sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps” (ibid.), becomes a poignant emblem of Sasha’s own social positioning at the bottom, looking up at a society structured by steep gradients of wealth and class. The narrator then confesses that “I have arranged my little life,” since she has made plans for her day to eat out and the place where she wants to have her drink. This arrangement, she explains is important since

last night, for instance, a woman was “humming” and “tapping the accompaniment with her fingers” (ibid.), to a song called *Gloomy Sunday*<sup>11</sup>.

Later, the humming woman’s American friend buys Sasha a drink, and then she starts to cry. The other woman, humming as an outlet for her own silent suffering, promptly cues Sasha on the unspoken rules of decorum regarding public displays of grief, subtly urging her to cease her tears and pointing out that she, despite her own sorrows, behaves composedly.

In a withdrawal not unlike Clarissa's ascent to the seclusion of her tower room and its reflective mirror, Sasha’s next act of descending into the lavabo is a momentary step down, a rest from always needing to defend herself “from the wolves outside” (29). On her way down, she observes “fifteen women in a queue, each clutching her penny, not one bold spirit daring to dash out of her turn, past the stern-faced attendant” (4). Like the other women in the line-up, Sasha too needs to surrender the penny she clenches, a symbol of her self-sufficiency, in exchange for the enclosing walls of the lavabo. In this pivotal scene, there emerges a suggestion that safety for women lies in surrender, which has strong connections to the ending of the novel. Yet, this transaction demands the currency of a woman’s independence —a retreat not just in physical space but also in spirit.

Within the secluded feminine setting of the lavabo, Sasha, akin to Clarissa, seeks a sanctuary. Gazing “in the glass,” she confronts her visage, assuring herself, “a bit of an automaton, but sane, surely” (4). This self-reflective assertion acts as a crucial reminder for Sophia, or Sophie (her real name), to maintain the façade that renders her life endurable. We discover in the ensuing passage that Sasha is a persona, an alias she adopts (5), after receiving items of clothing from Enno, a “cossack cap and the imitation astrakhan coat” (6). The unisex name Sasha, with its Greek origin, commonly a diminutive of Alexander, echoes the distinguished bearing of “defender,” a legacy of Alexander the Great (“Sasha Name Origin”). This informs our understanding of her internal dialogue, where the “I” commands the “you” to “stand straight, keep your head up, smile” (16), an internal chorus urging her to maintain composure and resilience.

Sasha's composure is later challenged by Enno's insistence on her deference, epitomized by such trivial commands as peeling an orange (106), which casts her in the expected role of quiet submission. Sharp contrast to this docility is Enno's prior reproach for

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<sup>11</sup> “Gloomy Sunday,” originally penned by Hungarian pianist and composer Rezső Seress, was released in 1933 under the title “Vége a Világnak,” which translates to “The End of the World.” The song, performed by Billie Holiday, was once banned due to the belief that “the song induced people to commit suicide” (Stack et al. “Gloomy Sunday: Did the ‘Hungarian Suicide Song’ Really Create a Suicide Epidemic?” 350), prompted by its poignantly sorrowful lyrics.

her lack of engagement in bed, as he rebukes her, "You don't know how to make love... You're too passive. You're lazy. You bore me" (105). This stark contrast in expectations captures the paradoxical demands made of Sasha, as she is forced to oscillate between reserved virgin and fervent vixen, compliance, and passion. However, in this process, in the lavabo-mirror, she compels herself to emulate the detachment of an automaton, thus stripping away her humanity in favour of a cold, mechanical demeanour in order to both survive and please. A ritual closely resembling that of Clarissa's, marked by her stringent routines and the gathering of her thoughts and selves in the reflective surface of her dressing room mirror.

On a larger scale, this scene draws a parallel to the compromise women often make regarding their autonomy for the sake of security, a dynamic frequently observed within the institution of marriage. Mary Wollstonecraft articulates this compromise of security in exchange for bodily and spiritual autonomy as a form of legally sanctioned prostitution (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 192). However, she posits that if women were afforded the opportunity to engage in other vocational positions, it would prevent many from resorting to both common and institutionalized forms of prostitution, a progression that remained largely stagnant or unaltered from Wollstonecraft's to Rhys's era.

#### **4.4 The Fallen Woman and Survival**

Rhys explores the complex connection between institutionalized and common forms of prostitution through the experiences of both Sasha and Lise, an acquaintance from Sasha's past. During Sasha's pregnancy, as she continues to provide English lessons, she finds herself enveloped in an aura of reverence from those around her, being treated as a "femme sacrée," or "sacred woman" (108). This term reflects the period's cultural mindset, which considered pregnancy a woman's noblest calling, fulfilling a vital social duty. This respect is rooted in the notion that she is engaged in the creation of life, an act intertwined with societal ideals of femininity and womanhood. During this time, however, Sasha's passion for literature often leads her to a bookstore nearby, where a staff member suggests she read "lurid stories of the white-slave traffic," (109) alluding to the grim realities of prostitution and human trafficking. This juxtaposition between the innocence of new life and the shadow of organized crime underscores a cityscape rife with contradictions. Upon closer examination, this scene adds layers of ambiguity to the novel, especially when contrasted with Enno's mysterious financial gain in the "Lapin Agile" (107), a part of Paris's red-light district, hinting at unsavoury methods of survival that Sasha chooses to ignore. One night when Enno comes home with

money Sasha thinks: “Why ask? Money circulates; it circulates —and how! Why, you wouldn’t believe it sometimes” (106).

The complexity of economic survival, especially women's economic survival at the time, is further explored through Lise, a 22-year-old brodeuse who describes the poor working conditions for women working in factories. Lise tells Sasha that “the light in the workrooms isn't so good. Sometimes your eyes hurt so much that you can't hardly open them” (110). Now without a job, Lise often visits Sasha and Enno for meals, an act that underscores her precarious situation. However, despite the lack of known income, Lise is depicted in “pink garters with little silk roses on them,” (109) possessions that do not align with her limited finances, leading to speculation about her methods of survival. She is also described as having the *Airs of Manon* (ibid.), reminiscent of the opera's protagonist, a flirtatious and coquettish young woman who obtained her desires through allure.

This portrayal suggests Lise, also the victim of domestic violence, might be one of the women who has fallen into the centre of the whirlpool, possibly exchanging her charm or even intimacy for financial support or benefits, a means of survival that is threatened by the fact that she may need “spectacles” (110) after damaging her eyes working at the factory. This is further hinted at when she queries Sasha on the use of douches by English women, admitting she herself resorts to them twice daily using *Gyraldose*: an antiseptic historically employed for feminine hygiene, and occasionally used as contraceptives to destroy sperm post-intercourse (“Douching and Spermicides”). Lise's routine hints at precautionary measures, yet it also alludes to potential health risks associated with these practices, including sterility, especially given that Trioxymethylene, known for its use in hospital sterilization, is among the potent ingredients (“Trioxumethylene”). Her twice-daily use of this product suggests a lifestyle in which such precautions are a regular fixture, indicating the difficult choices she faces in a society that constrains women’s roles and autonomy, making themselves into dolls with silk garters at the cost of their health.

In that way, Sasha's contemplation of dolls while she is on duty at the dressing-house draws a haunting parallel to the lives of the women around her:

Watching those damned dolls, thinking what a success they would have made of their lives if they had been women. Satin skin, silk hair, velvet eyes, sawdust heart. All complete. (11)

This image of dolls carries the embodiment of a hollow yet seemingly ideal female haunts Sasha, especially after the loss of her and Enno's child, the subsequent abandonment by Enno, and his empty promises of support (116-117). In the aftermath of Enno's absence, Sasha finds herself in a desolate state, compounded by her lack of financial resources. Heartbroken and without options, she turns to a desperate solution: "now the lights red" and "the fat man and I are in the corner by ourselves" (115). In this chilling moment, the fat man's words resonate: "You mustn't be sad; you must laugh, you must dance..." (116), hinting at Sasha's potential involvement in prostitution. This scene not only underscores Sasha's dire circumstances but also resonates with the novel's broader theme of women assuming roles of joy and civility amidst personal despair and societal constraints.

In Rhys's exploration of women's position in the workforce, she also highlights women's seemingly predestined inability to rise above a basic, proletariat existence on their own. Sasha's living spaces suggests that the very rooms she inhabits mirror her financial stability and thereby her self-worth. The state of the rooms she chooses or is forced to accept becomes a tangible measure of her fluctuating fortunes. "Everything the most respectable, that's the place for me..." she asserts, aspiring to decency (27). Yet, in the wake of encounters with the oppressive men in her life, her tone shifts to that of self-contradiction, to acceptance of her degraded position and of devaluating herself: "the musty smell, the bugs, the loneliness, this room, which is part of the street—this is all I want from life" (107). The vertical movements through the building, from the top-floor "good rooms" (103) to the more "ordinary one the third floor" (140), to the dark ones with cockroaches in it (24), parallels her attempt of escaping her path of life, only to find herself returned to the same position, in the same hotel room that serves as both the opening and closing scene of the novel.

Sasha's sense of isolation is palpable, as she feels uniquely misfortunate, remarking that "Only I would have landed here, only I would stay here..." (25). This sentiment surfaces even as she moments before stares into the window of the woman across the street applying makeup, suggesting a connection between them that Sasha does not fully acknowledge. This echoes a scene from *Mrs. Dalloway* where Clarissa observes the "old lady" moving away from the window every time Big Ben chimes, "her white cap moving at the back of the bedroom" (Woolf 139), recognizing a mutual, but unspoken, understanding of their collective fate as women.

However, Sasha's position at Salvatini's also highlight her predetermined class status as an unmarried, poor, and ageing woman. In this way Sasha shares her fixed "spinster" status with Miss Kilman and is met with a mixture of suspicion and disdain. The dressing-house,



situated between the fashion capitals of Paris and a subsidiary in London (11), symbolizes the entrenched class barriers of the time. Sasha's position within the firm, acquired under the influence of her physical attractiveness (12) exemplifies the objectification that women often endure and the precariousness of their subordinate positions. This is evident in a pivotal scene, when a “top dog” from the company, Mr. Bleak, embodying bourgeois dominance with his “bowler hat and majestic trousers” (11), summons Sasha to the office upstairs. In the office, Mr. Bleak with a “furtive” smile, is writing a letter while Sasha is standing there in dead silence (16), and then presumes she is a “Mrs...” but has forgotten her name (17).

With the letter she is asked to deliver somewhere, Sasha is drifting through the maze-like building, attempting to discern the letter's proper destination, but ends up walking in a loop “back in the original passage” (18). The building's constricting architecture mirrors Sasha's claustrophobic imprisonment but also her growing panic as she grapples with uncertainty over how to handle the letter. Sasha describes the details of the dressing-house with the same meticulous attention that she gives to nearly every room she walks into: “This is a very old house—two old houses. The first floor, the shop proper, is modernized”, as well as the showrooms and fitting-rooms. “But on the ground floor are the workrooms and offices and dozens of small rooms, passages that don't lead anywhere, steps going up and steps going down” (17). This foundational, separate but also invisible space is where “the girls” of the dressing-house work (18)— this space represents the marginalization of women in the professional sphere; their essential yet obscured contributions, their working spaces literally and metaphorically beneath those of their male counterparts occupy the “upper floors” with more prestige and security. Like Miss Kilman, who was distanced from her colleagues within the household of the Dalloways, Sasha too finds herself separate from the working girls, lacking a sense of belonging.

The maze-like structure with its numerous rooms and dead-end passages also represents the limiting norms of the gendered labour division. Women navigated a professional world not designed for their success; it was a labyrinth of restricted choices and dead ends. The anxiety she anticipates from other females in the workrooms, highlights the friction between the necessity for solidarity among women and the reality of internalized sexism, where women, having absorbed the norms in society, might judge each other harshly instead of acting as allies. The simplicity of asking for help is broken, as Sasha thinks the other girls will perceive her as “a fool”. Meanwhile, Sasha judges Lise harshly for having “thick ankles” (109). After failing to deliver the letter to Grousset, he disdainfully refers to her as “a hopeless, helpless little fool,” (19). Sasha's situation underscores the insecure nature

of her employment, similar to Miss Kilman's. Both could easily be dismissed, due to no job security or workplace rights, reflecting the tenuous situation for women workers at that time. Mr. Bleak condescendingly labels her "a hopeless, helpless little fool," (ibid.) to which her response is a series of defeated affirmations: "Yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh, yes". Her verbal submission to Mr. Bleak's patronizing address reflects a broader surrender to the oppressive forces and may open the door to moral decline. This is, for example, seen in the way Sasha steals a dress to make sure she has enough money to survive (20), an act that momentarily frees her from her complete proletariat existence and the state of dependency and marginalization, but at the cost of moral decline.

#### 4.5 External and Internal Conformity

Looks and fashion emerge as the primary tool through which Sasha asserts influence over her own life, particularly as she is in a race against time (that is, her age). Renk suggests that while Woolf's characters "shift their concerns to the ways in which their characters come to terms with aging" (317) as we saw in *Clarissa*; Rhys' characters symbolize the impoverished aging woman. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the precise age of Sasha is never mentioned, yet through her recalling of the past, "Lise is twenty-two years old, three years younger than I am" (109), and clues suggesting the year is around 1937 (74). Through this, it is implied that she is approaching her mid-thirties, an age that, at the time, was considered middle age. Renk argues that Sasha's struggles are compounded by her socio-economic position. Already marginalized by poverty, as she ages, her status within the lower class becomes more entrenched and deterministic with her age, compounded by society's diminishing regard as her youth (that is, her beauty) fades (320).

For Sasha, the significance of her appearance assumes a heightened importance in contrast to *Clarissa's* circumstances. Sasha's meticulous attention to her looks stems from her precarious financial situation, where fashion becomes not merely a matter of personal expression but a means to survive. Unlike *Clarissa*, who lives a relatively established and financially secure life due to her marriage with Richard Dalloway, Sasha's social and economic survival is perilously linked to her physical appearance.

This dynamic reflects a broader truth: for economically insecure women, personal aesthetics are not merely for self-expression but crucial tools in seeking financial foothold. In this context, Sasha's extreme fixation with fashion invokes in her what Woolf conceptualized as "frock consciousness". This is evident in a scene in a hotel lobby where Sasha's self-

alienation is so intense that she feels as if her identity is diminishing, and her "dress extinguished me" (8). This sentiment captures the estrangement not only from the social sphere but also from her own self, illustrating how fashion can be seen as both a means of empowerment and a source of self-alienation.

Sasha frequently checks herself in the mirror of her handbag, worrying about the hollowness under her eyes and her body being thin and ghostlike (43). In this part of the novel, Sasha takes us into her past memories of other women worrying about her appearance, "Back, back, back" (44), to the hospital after giving birth to her son, and all she can think about is "Money, money for my son..." (46) before the clock-working matron at the hospital comes in to "fix" her body after the birth, comforting Sasha that, "Now I am going to arrange that you will be just like what you were before. There will be no trace, no mark, nothing" (47) and then binds her body with tight wrappings to make it look flawless. Sasha instead leaves with a deep mark in her soul after losing her son. After re-visiting this painful memory while sitting in a bar, Sasha plans the next stage of her transformation act. She decides to change her hair at a salon to a sophisticated ash blonde shade, a choice affirmed by the hairdresser as fitting for someone "in her place," in other words, for someone in her class and age-related circumstances (48).

In the salon, Sasha is presented with an array of magazines such as *Féminas*, *Illustrations*, and *Eves*, alongside publications like *The Art of Hairdressing*. While engrossed in an article about breast lifting, Sasha's encounter is emblematic of the wider cultural forces at play when it comes to aesthetic and fashion. As previously discussed, Ilya Parkins identifies these magazines as more than leisure reading; they are instrumental in the construction of femininity and "tropes of modern alienation" (Parkins 344). These publications extend the domestic sphere's influence into the public realm, thereby enhancing the traditional roles of women under the guise of empowerment and sophisticated hair dyes.

This notion is further elaborated upon by Marylaura Papalas, who, in her study "Fashionable Flânerie", a study of the interwar French *Vogue*, interrogates the magazine's aesthetic choices in distorting reality. Papalas notes a trope of "urban walking" emerging in the 1930s magazines, wherein "a growing number of motionless women described by Baudelaire began to break the mold that held them in place" (Papalas 90). However, these representations were largely confined to the city's peripheries, crafting an image of women who appear to traverse freely yet remain bound by the city's margins (Papalas 91). Papalas critiques the visual narratives within these magazines, highlighting their departure from urban reality, which often poses a threat to women. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the public space is

often depicted as a realm of intimidation and threat, particularly for women, a theme that becomes pronounced in the episode where Sasha is harassed by two men (34).

In contrast to *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the fountain scenes offer pivotal moments for Clarissa to ponder life's choices and grapple with her emotions, the fountain on Boulevard St. Michel in *Good Morning, Midnight* becomes the backdrop for a disconcerting episode for Sasha. While seeking refreshment at the fountain, her solitude is abruptly pierced by the sudden approach of two men: "Just then two men come up from behind and walk on either side of me. One of them says: 'Pourquoi êtes-vous si triste?'" (34). Their intrusive proximity and subsequent attempt to engage with Sasha highlight the exposure and vulnerability that women can experience in metropolitan public settings. Furthermore, the fountain is not merely a fixture but carries its own symbolism within the scene and the narrative at large. The fountain at St. Michel portrays the Archangel Michael wrestling with the devil, reflecting Sasha's own struggle against the oppressors in her life, figures she describes and hold synonymous with the devil, including Enno (54), René (154), her neighbour (157) and ultimately herself.

However, this depiction of Sasha in a harassed state in the public sphere contrasts with the photographs within the magazines that project a sanitised version of city life, marked by what Papalas describes as "surreal quietness and stillness" and devoid of typical urban chaos (Papalas 93). This selective framing distorts the reality of the urban experience and contributes to a misleading perception of women's autonomy and mobility in public spaces. The trend of using walking models in the city that were not really walking models in the city reflects the editorial trend of fabrication in media representations of women. A trend that persisted into the 1940s (Papalas 95). Sasha's past employment as a mannequin is illustrative of her direct involvement in this constructed reality, which promoted an unattainable ideal of womanhood (the New Woman) and obscured the challenges faced by women in the public sphere.

Sasha is deeply affected by the beauty standards of her time, showing a desperate desire to conform, as evidenced by her efforts:

Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed, but look how hard I try. Three hours to choose a hat; every morning an hour and a half trying to make myself look like everybody else. Every word I say has chains round its ankles; every thought I think is weighted with

heavy weights. Since I was born, hasn't every word I've said, every thought I've thought, everything I've done, been tied up, weighted, chained? (86-87)

Her exhaustive efforts to mirror societal expectations of appearance is not just about the aesthetics; they reflect a deeper internalization of conformity. Her protracted trials to choose the perfect hat and the diligent morning routines to standardize her look epitomize a struggle to embody the automated formality that she perceives as the norm. Rhys provides a poignant critique of the futile attempts by financially disadvantaged women (also meaning ageing women) to mimic the celebrated and fabricated womanhood during that era. This ideal remains elusive for women like Sasha, who, unlike the privileged "woman with a room of her own," instead faces the reality of receiving "two pound ten every Tuesday and a room of the Gray's Inn Road" (33), representing the confined and predetermined sphere for women of her status.

#### **4.6 Anti-mechanical**

In a manner akin to Woolf, Rhys's novel employs stream of consciousness and distortion of chronological and temporal representation to reflect the effect of a disjointed and fragmented existence on human perception in a modern setting. Blurring together the present, past, and surreal dream states to unsettle the reader's sense of temporal stability disrupts the sequential clockwork flow of the plot. The suspense, crafted through a subtle but very frequent use of ellipses and the more pronounced black holes of unresolved plot elements, gives Sasha the power of her own story, but also imbues the text with extreme ambiguity. This stylistic choice not only introduces a non-linear element, creating disorientation and complexity, but it also, as noted by Savory, interrupts any monotonous and mechanical progression of the narrative.

The critique of the mechanical and monotonous, is also found in the portrayal of what Savory refers to as women's mechanization, as exemplified in Rhys' short story "Outside the Machine" (14). Though not explicitly defined by Savory, the concept of a mechanized woman could refer to a uniformity imposed upon women, a homogenization in appearance and behaviour, and a compulsion to conform to societal expectations. This process of assimilation effectively reduces individuality, rendering women indistinguishable from one another (almost like the dolls at the dress-house), bound to routine and operating almost automaton-like.

In Rhys's short story *Outside the Machine*, the theme of women's mechanization is explored through the perspective of Inez Best, the bedridden narrator, who remarks on the disturbingly mechanical behaviour of "masked" matrons in her vicinity, likening them to "parts of a machine" (Rhys *The Collected Short Stories*, 183–4). It becomes clear that the other hospitalized women, too, are cogs in the machine, having spent their lives following orders precisely, "just as they were told," (184) like unison chorus girls.

Marshall Berman explores the overarching goal of modernity, where automation is the main goal. Berman does not directly tackle the specific experiences of women or mention women's mechanization, but in his discussion of the development of the highway in "The Twentieth Century: The Halo and the Highway" he explains how people are becoming subservient to the city, a reversal from the notion of the city serving its people. Berman draws upon Le Corbusier's projections, illustrating that urban planning for the future often prioritizes building upon roads in favour of traffic over walkable city areas, casting pedestrians and traditional social places such as cafés, pubs, and restaurants as obstacles to progress (165). This pursuit of optimization, favouring efficiency over communal urban spaces, reflects a particular valuation of space within the capitalist framework. Berman references Le Corbusier, noting his vision of the modern man necessitating a new type of street, one that functions as "a machine for traffic," which in its most efficient form is highly automated and has "no unmechanized pedestrians to slow the flow" (167).

Sasha, telling herself that she is an automaton and that she has been made "very cold and very sane...very passive," (5) hints at her own process of assimilation and further refers to her body as argent-like with "silver breast" (107). Sasha is also an emblem of the unoptimized individual in a world that prizes productivity; instead, she is the embodiment of the "unmechanized pedestrian" Berman speaks of, someone who, rather than contributing to the progress forward, exists outside the machine, outside the norms, in a fluid state emphasized by her alcohol consumption. Despite her anxiety to lose her "autonomy", there is a part of her that yearns for the very assimilation she resists, as seen when she purchases her hat and nobody identifies her in the restaurant, which she thinks is a positive outcome (56). This defiance, as elucidated through her dreams, becomes a cornerstone of her existence, shielding her from complete assimilation into a consumer-driven ethos. In a pivotal scene Sasha's declaration, "Venus is dead; Apollo is dead; even Jesus is dead," (155) resonates with the sentiment famously expressed by Nietzsche in his assertion of "God is Dead." This literary allusion serves as a poignant commentary on the erosion of traditional boundaries and values, signalling the implications for moral frameworks. Since, Apollo, as Nietzsche explains stands

as the god of “boundaries and limits; he teaches an ethic of moderation and selfcontrol (“The Birth of the Tragedy” xi). The imbalance between what Nietzsche referred to as the "Apollonian and the Dionysian" in society becomes apparent, reflecting a discord between order and chaos, restraint, and indulgence, whereas the consumer is driven to consume faster and more frequently.

This dissolution is epitomized in Sasha's own unrestrained self-indulgence, emblematic of a society spiralling beyond the confines of moderation. And now “all that is left in this world is an enormous machine”, further painting a picture in her mind of an octopus machine with long arms of steel and the eyes “stiff with mascara” (155). The surreal image of the machine's eyes "stiff with mascara" lends an unsettling air of artificiality to the scenario by implying that a cold, mechanical reality lies under the surface. The juxtaposition of industrial machinery and femininity further points to her subconscious fear of assimilation.

Sasha's existence is a struggle between defiance and the desire to belong, reflecting the tension between individuality and the capitalist drive for mechanization. The fear of being reduced to an automaton and being completely assimilated into this mechanistic existence is clearly illustrated in a “luminal daze” in which she dreams of being at the tube station in London. Standing in a queue, again, “Many people are in front of me; many people are behind me. Everywhere there are placards printed in red letters: This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition” (6), the crowd advances in a single direction, heeding the signs without thought. The phrase “This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition” echoes repeatedly, its ghostly emptiness akin to a looped recording. Trapped underground in the vein of London Sasha does not find the way out. She touches the shoulder of a man, and “he points to the placards and his hand is made of steel” and more “steel fingers point along a long stone passage” (ibid.). The dream, with all its cool, steel-blue imagery and repetitive language, follows her out as she wakes up to the very cyclical rhythm of waltz from the street outside (“Waltz”). The sense of coldness pervades the language of the novel as well, often manifesting in a corporate tone and demeanour, as vividly depicted in Sasha's contemplation of her baby's death:

But my heart, heavy as lead, heavy as a stone. He has a ticket tied round his wrist because he died. Lying so cold and still with a ticket round his wrist because he died. Not to think. Only to watch the branches of that tree and the pattern they make standing out against a cold sky. Above all, not to think... (114)

In this loop of remembering and deliberate forgetfulness, we witness Sasha's resignation to the cold, unyielding cycles of her existence, where each revolution of her life seems to bring her back to the same point of despair, allegorically echoing all "other" women that did not, for whatever reason, live up to the ideal at the time.

#### 4.7 The End is Where We Start From

In exploring Sasha Jansen's seemingly unattainable quest for freedom, we delve into a profound sense of alienation born from her relentless struggle to both survive and conform within societal confines. This internal strife, as elucidated by Alison Kennedy in the novel's afterword, is intertwined with themes of grief, self-indulgence, and acute observation (159). As seen in the scene above, Sasha's reaction to trauma is to focus on the external world, "watch the tree branches" acutely observing and not thinking. In other words, Sasha's focus on the external (including her obsession for fashion) also frees her from the internal struggles she is dealing with. Although she never experienced Clarissa's room full of clothes, she still found comfort in it, and some sense of "freedom". The distraction takes her out of the rhapsodic mind, which is depicted in fragmented style of the narrative, marked by abrupt shifts in time, between dreamscapes, luminal dazes, and self-awareness. Kennedy points out that Rhys seamlessly integrates temporal leaps, endowing the text with a sense of "organic cohesion" (163).

The novel's polyphonic nature, exemplified by the seamless integration of French, and some German, different cultures and intertextual references to music, art and to mythology, amplifies this sense of cohesion. However, the most significant intertextual reference lies in the title itself, "Good Morning, Midnight," an oxymoron drawn from Emily Dickinson's poem, which the reader is exposed to thematically from start to the end:

Good Morning, Midnight!

I'm coming home,

Day got tired of me —

How could I of him?

Sunshine was a sweet place,

I liked to stay —

But Morn didn't want me — now—



So goodnight, Day!

Dickinson's poem, with its themes of fading beauty and the existential weight of aging, with Rhys' own re-slanting of the — now—, sets the tone for Rhys's exploration of female expressions across different epochs. Simultaneously, the title encapsulates the paradoxical nature of Sasha's existence, caught between the dawn of possibility and despair. Through intertextuality, Rhys establishes a dialogue with cultural tradition, enriching her narrative with layers of meaning that resonates beyond the confines of the text itself, this echoes Savory's argument as presented in the introduction, stating that Rhys expressed a subversive response to a hierarchical world, far beyond the "Rhys woman". Drawing upon this intertextual element, Rhys is in dialogue with a collective memory of female subjugation, and the text itself becomes the embodiment of otherness. As "intertextuality is meant to designate a kind of language which, because of its embodiment of otherness, is against, beyond and resistant to (mono)logic," (*Intertextuality*, Allen Graham 45) as it unifies and is in constant dialogue with other texts. But what about the end?

Bennett and Royle write in their chapter "The End", that T.S Eliot argued that to make an end is to make a beginning "the end is where we start from" (*An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* 357). As suggested by Bennett and Royle, the text at its culmination, provokes readers to reflect, to engage with the end and its meaning. How does the story resolve: abrupt, surprising, inevitable, or perhaps apocalyptic? These questions assume that endings are conclusive and final, but Bennett and Royle offer the question, "What if we were to consider another viewpoint, one that views endings as having a certain amount of openness?" (*ibid.*).

In open endings, we encounter a diverse array of potential outcomes. Within this spectrum, the conclusion of a text may take on haunting, ambiguous, suspenseful, or even unfinished quality. Such endings leave readers in a state of perpetual questioning and interpretation, inviting them to engage deeply with the narrative's unresolved elements. Bennett and Royle, in their own reading of the ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, assert that this text concludes with an openness that is inherently "future-oriented" (357). Yet, crucially, it leaves readers on a threshold, suspended in a state of liminality. The final words of the text evoke a sense of disorientation, leading to a "dark passage" (361).

This ambiguity is mirrored in the ending of *Good Morning, Midnight* as well, where the readers find themselves similarly disoriented and confronted with unresolved questions in the darkness of midnight, or perhaps death. Moments leading up to the end, Sasha describes

herself as "very drunk" (154) with her inner turmoil intensifying and the intrusive voice that clamours for her attention, she declares: "Damned voice in my head I'll stop you from talking!" (155). Amidst this escalating chaos, and drunkenness, Sasha wanders in and out of rooms while the paragraphs become progressively condensed. Ultimately, her voice dwindles to a mere twelve lines, marginalized, and defeated holding her arm over her eyes (157). Despite the dramatic reality of what is happening, Rhys makes a point out of silencing her heroine.

In this unsettling moment, Sasha's fixation on the colour of the man's gown offers insight into her psyche. This fixation resonates with Sasha's previous endeavour to conceal her anguish through self-reinvention following the loss of her baby (or any other tragic moment in her life). It underscores her use on the external objects as a coping mechanism, as escapism. However, the unresolved uncertainty regarding Sasha's fate—whether she met a violent end, sexual assault or yielded to assimilation—lingers in the reader's consciousness. By weaving Sasha's fate in dialogue with the intertextual elements and finish off with unresolved narrative, her voice resonates even more enduringly. Her "yes-yes-yes....," (*ibid.*) which echoes that of what she uttered while emotionally harassed by Mr. Bleak, places Sasha in a constant waltz of cyclical oppression. This is emphasized in the circle composition of the novel, starting, and ending in the same location and in the loop of her uttering "I think: 'is it the blue dressing-gown, or the white one? That's very important. I must find out—it's very important'" (157). The "I think:" signals a distancing from the actual event, a descend to a different narrative layer, however, it also grammatically and thematically, transports the reader to the very beginning scene of the novel, when Sasha narrates that "I have arranged my little life...these things are very important" (3). Yet, with the ambiguous ending suggesting uncertainty, Rhys prompted readers to take initiative, underscoring the openness of the future.

## 5. Conclusion

In concluding this comparative analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, we revisit the crux of these novels: the tension that resides within the ideals of womanhood and the quest for freedom.

The objective of the research was to shed light on how Woolf and Rhys challenged the oppressions and freedoms that women experienced during a highly precarious time in history and to investigate how the female characters within these narratives wrestle with patriarchal mechanisms of subjugation. It focused on the societal repercussions that the historical context presented and how these repercussions were portrayed, problematized, and challenged in literature. Prominent voices in this study included Mary Wollstonecraft and Elaine Showalter, as well as other influential feminist critics. Furthermore, Thorstein Veblen's concepts have guided the analysis of fashion, the emergence of the New Woman, and the emergence of the Leisure Class. Moreover, the study delved into the modernist subject and the modernist novel attended by Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque and polyphony, and enriched by other modernist critics and their insights on the historical backdrop of modernity.

The study has brought to light how these literary works explore the oppression of women within patriarchal systems and challenge the traditional roles of women in the early twentieth century. In the literary review I examined the stifling ideal of the Angel in the House, the constrictive styles that limited women's bodily autonomy, the deficiencies in women's education focused solely on domestic duties, and the deterministic roles of women dictated by their sex. Here, I also discussed the modernist reaction to modernity, specifically how authors from this artistic movement challenged rigid Victorian ideals of oppression. This was seen in the way the New Woman replaced the Angel in the House as a model of freedom, where fashion became a tool of liberation, as the little black dress came to replace the restrictive corsets that once limited women's freedom of movement. In this section of my thesis, I also explored the modernist novel as a literary instrument for opposing the patriarchal forces in operation. As evident in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Good Morning, Midnight* these structures were challenged through a variation of literary techniques such as distortion of the lineal plot, the exploration of the polyphonous subject, and the urban setting. Perhaps the most influential pushback, is the way in which Woolf and Rhys craft their characters to exist beyond societal norms. While this shows what could possibly happen if one fails or refuses to conform, this also suggest that individuals embody and should be recognized for more than the labels or roles assigned to them. This is demonstrated through both works within the

constellation of the unresolved characters who resist conforming into one mould or state, whether that is spinster, advocate, wife, mother, poor, rich, or simply woman. Instead, each character is an amalgamation of their own voices, relationships, memories, times, spaces, dreams, and desires.

The study also problematizes the ideal of the New Woman as many women could not afford the materialistic objects or treatments synonym with freedom. As highlighted in the thesis, magazines became a new means of domesticating the woman outside of the home, frequently placing a strong emphasis on materialism and beauty ideals, underscoring the contradictions in the pursuit of emancipation. As a result, womanhood was closely connected to and undermined by patriarchal forces. In a society that became increasingly oriented towards consumption, the New Woman reflects an insidious shift in cultural worship—from the goddess of love and fertility, Venus to the “bitch-goddess” of consumerism. This phrase, as uttered by Sasha Jansen in *Good Morning, Midnight*, evokes a powerful critique of the way consumerism already then had begun to dominate the value system that defines women's aspirations and self-worth. The analysis in the study suggests that this societal shift has complex implications for the New Woman, who, while seeking liberation from domestic confines, may find herself ensnared in a new form of internal oppression, one that makes her equate her own worth with her ability to consume and conform to beauty standards. Ironically, no woman can ever attain these ideals, as they keep women busy and in a constant chase of renewal.

This transition reflects a profound irony in the quest for emancipation: the tools of liberation may inadvertently become instruments of control, where fashion and new ideals become capitalist control disguised as freedom. The New Woman navigates a delicate balance, striving to assert independence while being drawn into the orbit of material desire and the allure of aesthetic perfection. It raises questions about the nature of freedom in the context of contemporary womanhood and whether true autonomy can exist in a world that venerates consumption and appearance above all else.

Reflecting upon my journey, my initial curiosity was sparked by a longing to unravel the enigma of the walking woman portrayed in Baudelaire's works, pondering her existence amidst the cityscape and the constraints and freedoms that shaped her life. I thought: “Who was that woman walking on the street, what kind of life was she living?”. Acknowledging the monumental nature of my endeavour, I now realize that I could have simplified my approach by consulting fewer sources. However, the diverse perspectives I encountered have enriched my understanding of the walking woman...

Through tireless study I have come to realize that defining her essence is no simple task; she embodies a multitude of roles and possibilities. In envisioning her presence in London during the interwar period, I imagine her likely bound by the bonds of matrimony, her attire dictated by societal norms. If employed, her labour would likely mirror the toils of domestic chores, providing sustenance but little opportunity for savings. Her vulnerability to losing her job and yearning for acceptance would be all too familiar. Yet amidst these constraints, her spirit remains resilient, her essence defined by the freedom of her thoughts and the path she treads, whether in heels or barefoot, and she knows there is hope since “all that is solid melts into air”, indicating that while these structures surround us, we still have the power to influence the new structures that will eventually form, and melt again. Veblen wrote with optimism that:

Social structure changes, develops, adapts itself to an altered situation, only through a change in the habits of thought of the several classes of the community; or in the last analysis, through a change in the habits of thought of the individuals which make up the community. (133)

As social structures evolve, there is a hope for the future, and hope also grows when looking back to what has been done in terms of women’s quest for freedom.

The first wave of feminism focused on suffrage and legal rights, moving through the second wave which, influenced by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), challenged domestic and workplace inequalities. The third wave expanded these discussions, embracing diversity and questioning rigid gender identities. This included the quest of dismantling the concept of biological determinism: the belief that one's biology is destiny, which sparked new interest in Simone de Beauvoir’s earlier proclamation, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (*The Second Sex* 273). Referencing back to Friedan’s work, Naomi Wolf in her book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (1990), Wolf argues that,

As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it waned to carry on its work of social control. (10)

Her message is that even after being freed from domesticity and given the opportunity to pursue better careers, women were still subject to control. Wolf exposes the continuing struggle against the patriarchy where the beauty myth became a powerful tool of oppression. A myth of beauty that, as Wolf states, links a woman's value directly to her appearance, significantly impacting her psychological state. This she argues is the proof of that "We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth" (ibid.). A response to the advancement that continues to manipulate beauty standards in order to maintain social control, impeding women's progress and upholding patriarchal norms.

Today, in the fourth wave of feminism, we focus on themes including rape culture, body shaming, and sexual harassment. The use of social media to draw attention to and resolve these issues has been crucial ("Fourth Wave Feminism"). However, these same platforms persist in subjugating women and perpetuating their oppression. This ongoing issue is fuelled by social media platforms, driven by algorithms (a fundamental part of AI systems) that shape and distort feminist goals and ideals by dictating contemporary womanhood. These platforms, perpetuating new ideals like the reborn "That Girl," and bombard us with advertisements that are hostile, urging lasting youthfulness and perfection. The fashion industry, too, promoting a fashion culture that poses a threat to our planet.

Cambridge Herstory, an online platform, notes that this wave of feminism aligns with rapid technological advancements. It utilizes the internet and social media to combat sexism in innovative ways. Inspired by the #MeToo movement initiated by civil rights activist Tarana Burke, we are now amidst the "call-out" culture, urging prominent women to publicly denounce harassment, providing encouragement to speak out, and solidarity for those who have experienced likewise. Mary Beard, an official member of Cambridge Herstory, writes on the #MeToo movement in the afterword of her book *Women and Power* (2017) stating that:

As I have tried to show, right back to Philomela (who wove the denunciation of her rapist into her tapestry), women have often been allowed a limited voice, at last in raising questions of their own treatment and abuse as women. #MeToo has made a gratifyingly loud noise that, for once, has been transmitted over most of the planet, but it falls into that general category. Even more to the point, the root cause of the harassment that women have suffered (and the root cause of the earlier silence of so many) surely lies in the structures of power". (*Women & Power* 111)

While Virginia Woolf or Jean Rhys did not share the exact fate with Philomela, who got her tongue cut off, both of their novels stand as bold hashtags in literature, and their pen speaks for the silenced. In the vein of Mary Beard's scholarly pursuits in discussing and documenting the history of women and power, Woolf and Rhys offer readers a closer, more intimate perspective. Through the art of storytelling, Woolf and Rhys defy patriarchal norms and challenge societal structures that perpetuate injustice against women. Their narratives serve as powerful resistance, shedding light on the harsh realities of a world that often oppresses and marginalizes women. For many years their works have inspired readers to confront and question the status quo, igniting a desire for social change that champions female freedom.

Although I dare not presume to possess the wisdom or courage to precisely define freedom, I hold firm to the conviction that literature holds within its pages the power to free us from various shackles and predicaments. It has, as shown in this thesis, the capacity to confront political issues, comment, enlighten, inspire while concurrently offering hope and solace to the soul. Particularly in the aftermath of war, literature, a part of our collective consciousness continuously emerges as a vital realm for reflection and comprehension.

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## Appendix

## Appendix A: Women's Work Interwar England

This table focuses on the participation rates of females in the household, especially in the context of Interbellum England. However, by inference, the low participation rate among those designated as "wives of household heads" suggests that the traditional gender roles were dominant during this period, with men typically assuming the role of the primary breadwinner and head of the household. This implies that men had a more consistent and expected role outside the household in employment, resulting in their wives having lower external participation rates. The distinct difference in participation rates between wives and other women in the household further underscores the societal expectation that a wife's primary responsibility was domestic and oriented towards the care of the family and home. In households with only 1 female, the participation rate is 14.2%, very low compared to households with 2 or more daughters.

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TABLE 1				
Numbers and Participation Rates of Females in London and York Households				
	London		York	
	Number	Participation rate	Number	Participation rate
<b>For individual females</b>				
All	1788	30.6	2330	29.5
Wives	1012	6.0	627	4.3
Nonwives	776	62.8	1703	38.8
<b>For households with</b>				
1 Female	918	14.2	549	8.6
2 Females	246	43.3	612	27.9
3 Females	71	54.0	172	48.3
4 Females	32	58.6	20	60.0
5 Females	5	36.0	8	62.5
6 Females	2	50.0	1	67.7

Hatton, T.J., and Bailey, R.E. "Table of work." *Explorations in Economic History*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1993, pp. 229-256. *Science Direct*, <https://doi.org/10.1006/exeh.1993.1010>.

## Appendix B: Women's Dress

Between 1830s to the 1890s, the attire of non-working married women served as a tangible marker of their socio-economic standing. An analytical perusal of period-specific fashion illustrations highlights the constrictive nature of their garments. Key elements of this era's aesthetic included intricate crinolines, form-fitting corsets, expansive bustles, and embellished hats, which collectively impaired fluid movement. These ornate hats, aside from being decorative, also restricted visual fields, often allowing vision in a singular direction. Footwear from the 1850s was characterized by slim, heel-less satin designs; however, as the century progressed, there was a noticeable shift towards broader, leather-based shoes with modest heels, further impeding mobility. The cumulative effect of these heavy fabrics and ornamental accoutrements significantly burdened the wearer's physicality.



Edmundson, Carolyn. "Illustration." *Artstor*,  
library.artstor.org/asset/SS7731863\_7731863\_12503386.



W.S. & E.H. Thomson. "Crinoline." *Artstor*,  
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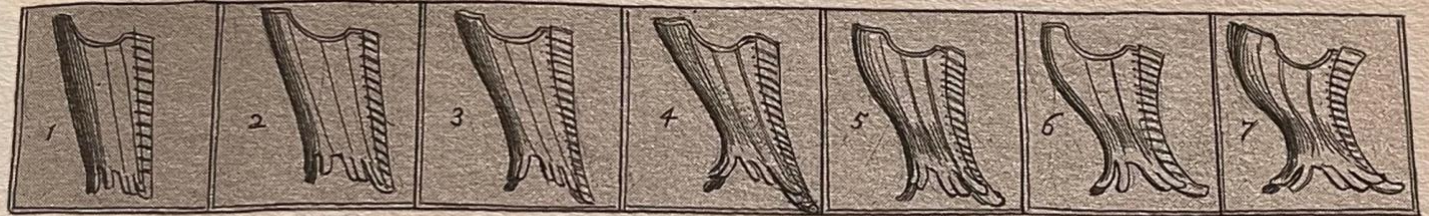
Although dresses in the twentieth century continued to signify class, they evolved to become more comfortable, featuring lower waists and shorter skirts that facilitated movement. An exploration of archived issues from *Vogue* reveals telling insights into the prevailing fashion trends of the twentieth century. Depictions present the archetype of the New Woman, likely draped in a luxurious silk ensemble, adorned with the iconic fur piece and opulent pearls. Her poised demeanour is accentuated by the display of her slender legs and the graceful exposure of her neck. Her coiffed hair, likely slicked back with a styling product, adds to her sophisticated aura, while her lips, touched up with lipstick, complete her polished appearance.



Chapman, Frederick T. "Untitled Advertisement in *Vogue* Magazine." *Vogue*. 1 Aug. 1925: p. 45. Artstor, [library.artstor.org/asset/SS7731863\\_7731863\\_12350060](https://www.artstor.org/asset/SS7731863_7731863_12350060).

Appendix C: Scientific Experiment

It was with these corsets that Hogarth undertook the first scientific experiment on beauty.



*The earliest aesthetic experiment: select the most beautiful corset*

“The earliest aesthetic experiment.” Armstrong, John. *The Secret Power of Beauty*. Penguin Books, 2005, p. 6.



Appendix D: The Carnavalesque Marketplace



*The Fight between Carnival and Lent* (1559), by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525–1569)



## Appendix E: Gyraldose



"Gyraldose." *Yay Cork*. "Hidden treasure: This 86-year-old bar of soap was found in an old French bedside locker." Accessed April 12, 2024. <https://www.yaycork.ie/hidden-treasure-this-86-year-old-bar-of-soap-was-found-in-an-old-french-bedside-locker/>.

Reflecting on the potent substances that were once standard in products for women prompts a sobering consideration of the stringent practices, they historically underwent to align with societal beauty norms and contraceptive methods. Presented is an image from yesteryear, showing the list of ingredients found on the back of a Gyraldose soap bar. In my analysis of *Good Morning, Midnight*, I delve into the implications of these ingredients, having researched their properties and potential effects through a medical dictionary.