

**‘Every Groove, Stain, Fork, Knife’: Subject, Object,
and the Nature of Domestic Labour in the Works of
Virginia Woolf (1882- 1941)**

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Abstract

This thesis explores women's interactions with non-human objects in the domestic interior in the work of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). By studying the historical, economic and personal contexts that influenced Woolf's work, it attempts to explore how domestic labour emerges as a conceptual lens to study power relations in Woolf's Britain.

Over the last three decades, ~~research~~scholarship in the fields of literary modernism and Woolf studies, ~~has~~ attempted to historicize literary developments in the context of High Capitalism, and/or to study these developments through the lens of object oriented ontology. However, attempts to interpret women's roles in the world of commodity capitalism have been dominated by the need to show women as passers-by or consumers of what the market offered them. At the same time, the emerging field of object oriented ontology has usually approached objects in the domestic interior, without taking into account the processes through which the object arrived at, and assumed, the position from which it engages which the subject in the domestic interior. The thesis attempts to fill up the lacunae in both these approaches by bringing into focus women's roles as agents of reproductive labour in the body politic of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, and in the context of literary modernism. As such, it attempts to map the interactions which Woolf and other writers depict as occurring between women and non-human objects in 'private', domestic spaces.

The thesis begins by exploring the socio-economic contexts that shaped the domestic interior in Woolf's Britain. It then closely studies how the gendered subject negotiated the assemblages of objects that constituted domestic spaces, and consequently establishes that the quest for an autonomous domestic space lies at the heart of Woolf's feminist thinking. The subsequent

chapters locate various domestic spaces, and explore the specific dynamics between gendered subjects and non-human objects, in varying settings.

The thesis attempts to contextualize Woolf in order to understand the way in which she critiqued a society in which human beings related to each other *through* commodities, and demonstrates the ways in which human and non-human objects co-exist *with* each other in creative ways. At the same time, the thesis also acknowledges blind-spots located along the lines of class and ethnicity that remain present in Woolf's explorations of the power dynamics of the domestic interior.

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Epigraph

‘She had known every cupboard, flagstone, chair and table in that large rambling house, not from five or six feet of distance as they had known it; but from her knees, as she scrubbed and polished; she had known every groove, stain, fork, knife, napkin and cupboard.’²

- Virginia Woolf, *The Years*¹

‘...Virginia Woolf wanted the military budget for women.

She made the case for middle-class women. She said it should come to women as wages for the housework we did; that was a better way to spend the money. I can’t see an argument against it. In *Three Guineas*, the only extensive non-fiction book that she wrote, she made this central. But the case she makes for housework, spelled out brilliantly in this extraordinary book, seems not to interest- may even be censored out, by her admirers.’²

- Selma James, ‘The Challenge of Diversity: Reflections on a Conference’²

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937) 216, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/yearswoolrich/mode/1up>.

² Selma James, ‘The Challenge of Diversity: Reflections on a Conference (1990),’ in *Race, Sex, and Class: A Perspective of Winning* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012) 209, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/sexraceclasspers0000jame/mode/1up>.

Introduction

Suppose we begin by taking up an oft-cited polemic written by Woolf in 1924, the long essay *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*. Here, women and domestic spaces figure prominently in Woolf's project of debunking the prominent novelists of the pre-War era, most importantly, H.G. Wells (1866- 1946),² Arnold Bennett (1867-1931),² and John Galsworthy (1867- 1933). In the process of debunking these Edwardian novelists, Woolf heaps ridicule upon Arnold Bennett's *Hilda Lessways* (1911). Hilda Lessways, Bennett's eponymous heroine, is interested in building model houses, and dwells in a house herself, states Woolf's first person narrator, but, in spite of Arnold Bennett's piling up of economic 'facts' about the house in which Hilda lives, (describing the building, the location, and nature of its title deeds,) the narrative is not enough to convince Woolf that 'Hilda Lessways' would be found dwelling in such a house. '[H]e' says Woolf's narrator 'is trying to hypnotise us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there.'³

But, when Woolf tries to take over from Arnold Bennett, and embarks upon the task of describing 'Mrs Brown,' an old woman travelling in a train, who is 'English literature herself,' she too takes upon herself the task of describing the house in which she imagines her to live:

“I thought of her in a seaside house, among queer ornaments: sea urchins, models of ships in glass cases. Her husband's medals were on the mantelpiece. She popped in and out of the room, perching on the edges of chairs, picking meals out of saucers, indulging in long, silent stares. The caterpillars and oak trees [of her previous conversation with a stranger] seemed to imply all that. And then, into this fantastic and secluded life, in broke

³Virginia Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, first read as a paper to The Heretics, Cambridge, on 18th May, 1924, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1924) 16, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/VirginiaWoolfMr.BennettAndMrs.Brown>. The text used throughout this thesis is the [Hogarth Press 1924 edition, pamphlet version](#).

Mr Smith. I saw him blowing in, so to speak, on a windy day. He banged, he slammed. His dripping umbrella made a pool in the hall.⁴

Here, ~~a~~At one level Woolf's ~~interpretation~~ is far more detached from the political than the male authors, who connect Mrs Brown's present existence to systems of production and consumption.⁵

Mr Bennett, according to Woolf, would mention advertisements for tourist destinations in the railway carriage, Whitworth's bazaar from which Mrs Brown's brooch came, the specific railway line on which she travelled and the commercial networks which rendered this line profitable, and finally, cite the location of her house and the terms on which she lived there.

Woolf's description of Mrs Brown seems to cite very 'general' objects lying scattered across Mrs Brown's room - we do not know what specific medals her husband won, for example. But what this thesis tries to pick up on, is the way in which the things that Woolf's Mrs Brown dwells with mesh themselves into her existence, blurring the distance between the feminine subject and the non-human object. Mrs Brown's self, and the things in her room are bound to each other, in Woolf's description, so that when Mr Smith is 'blown in,' the words '[h]is dripping umbrella made a pool in the hall,' might on one hand, be ~~an~~s articulation made by the narrator about the room. Equally, they may be a fact registered by Mrs Brown, in the middle of her crisis with Mr Smith, a domestic crisis that requires the attention of one whose life is enmeshed with the state of the other things in the room which might be affected by the umbrella dripping water.

⁴ ~~Woolf~~, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, 9.

⁵ It is of course, important as this juncture to note that while this example from Woolf's oeuvre has been taken up as a paradigmatic example of Woolf's textual strategies, it would be myopic to take this limited example as an exhaustive view of Arnold Bennett's feminist politics. Bennett does engage with questions of domestic labour and women's laundry-work in *Hilda Lessways* itself, and as Margaret Drabble points out, he also engages with issues pertinent to feminist thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including the social issues attendant on women's increasing participation in white collar work, an issue which, as this thesis shows, Woolf also found imperative to engage with. Indeed, Hilda Lessway's vision of an extensive and exploitative network of laundry work, upon seeing a well-dressed man's clean white cuffs, is a narrative method also used by Woolf, on several occasions, as this thesis will show (Arnold Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, London: Methuen, 1911, esp 43, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/dli.ernet.475706/mode/1up>; Margaret Drabble, *Arnold Bennett: A Biography*, Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/arnoldbennettbio00drab/mode/1up>.)

Moreover, Woolf's description of Mrs Brown's poverty retains Mrs Brown's agency. Woolf strategically skimps on facts here, telling us instead that:

“She was one of those clean, threadbare old ladies whose extreme tidiness - everything buttoned, fastened, tied together, mended and brushed up - suggests more extreme poverty than rags and dirt.”⁶

This description of Mrs Brown, by the narrator, a fellow female passenger, does not see her as the passive consumer of commodities available from the market, such as copyhold properties, or brooches from a bazaar, or the services of the railways. Mrs Brown claims her agency over the space inhabited by her body, through her own actions, as Woolf uses the verbs, ‘buttoned, fastened, tied together, mended and brushed up,’ as descriptive words.

I would argue that Woolf attempts to depart from the tradition she sees *Hilda Lessways* as an exemplar of - that of seeing women's methods of dwelling in the domestic sphere as a self-evident category of women's oppression. Instead, she tries to treat domestic labour as a conceptual lens *through* which one tries to think of the world of objects.

What does it mean then, that Woolf locates the crisis-points of the formal, aesthetic, and political changes taking place ‘in or around December 1910,’ ushering in the age of High Modernism, as changes in the interpretation of women characters from literature, history, and everyday experience? For Woolf, the ~~publication~~ ~~arrival~~ of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and T.S. Eliot's poetry, ~~were~~ ~~are~~ the products of a cultural milieu which ~~felt~~ ~~els~~ the impetus to re-interpret the role of Clytemnestra, the mistress who willfully destroys her husband's household, Jane Carlyle, the mistress who destroys her own will to self-expression in order to support her husband's household, and ~~the~~ modern-day cook, the female servant, who seeks access to self-fashioning, and the public sphere.

⁶Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, 5.

Modernism, after all, is not a singular entity. Woolf was exposed to texts with a range of political and aesthetic features, in her role as a writer, publisher, and literary journalist. Why would Woolf, with nearly twenty years' experience as a woman of letters, in 1922, choose to embed women's gendered experience of the household at the heart of her polemic defending the stylistic innovations that characterize modernism? This thesis would argue that an attempt to understand the politics of what constitutes 'personal,' autonomous space for the gendered artist, lies at the heart of Woolf's own quest for a radically gendered narrative mode, through which she could confront and negotiate with the zeitgeist of her times.

1. Historical Context:

1a. 'Domestic Consumption' and Empire

Most of the primary texts considered in this thesis were written between the two world wars. However, the historical circumstances that shaped the domestic interior and domestic labour in the inter-war years had roots that stretched back through centuries.

Indeed, the steady increase of domestic novelties in the European interior had been an on-going process since the Renaissance, across a range of income groups, and the concurrent changes in patterns of living had directly fuelled economic growth. As Chandra Mukerji has pointed out, early imperial trade in Britain was motivated to a large extent, by an aristocratic demand for consumer goods.⁷ Exports from the colonies, however, quickly became important consumption items for the entire population. Wealthy families displayed cashmere shawls in their drawing rooms, while Indian calico provided a light, cheap, and easy material for clothes and furnishings in working class homes by the early nineteenth century, (providing impetus to the British textile

⁷ Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.)

industry to come up with viable imitations of Indian calico and secure state favour for its products). Tea and tobacco were ubiquitous in British households, across social strata.⁸

Woolf's hero/ heroine in *Orlando* (1928) can go traipsing across continents to fulfill public roles as a male diplomat, participating in the exotic spectacles of Empire. But even when she lives in her house in England as a woman, she is still in the presence of Empire. She lives in a milieu in which cups of tea, imported from China and South Asia, served in 'china' ware, have been popular staples of the British home over three centuries, from the age of Addison to the age of the motor car.⁹

Various strands of **H**igh **M**odernism have established profoundly ambivalent relationships with the domestic space, and the 'feminine' values that this space is supposed to exemplify. This is, on the one hand, a legacy of the Age of Empire, which witnessed the above-mentioned proliferation of objects in the domestic interior **of** the Occident, an elaboration of domestic etiquette, and a consequent association of domestic detail with effeminate degeneracy, on the one hand, and feminine 'prosiness' on the other.¹⁰ As Judith Flanders' scholarship on the Victorian house points out, the expanding tide of domestic minutiae, was propelled by Victorian popular literature which regularly came up with new ideas for home-decorating projects, for women to undertake and display in their homes, along with an ever-expanding market for objects that were meant for display, 'things to cover things, things to hold other things, things that were representations of yet other things.'¹¹ These standards of domestic life were enabled to a large

⁸Ibid, 166- 242.

⁹ For a discussion of the obscured imperialism behind acts of drinking tea in Woolf, albeit in the context of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), see Urmila Seshagiri, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (New York: Cornell University, 2010) 152-154.

¹⁰ Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) xlii.

¹¹ Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*, 2003 (William Collins, 2004) eEpub.

extent, by Britain's imperial prosperity in the second half of the nineteenth century, which was marked by a fall in the real costs of furniture, and furnishings, and also through technological advances in the state of household lighting, which allowed for this form of display.¹² As the nineteenth century home established itself as a space of rest, as distinct from places of work, it became imperative that the drawing room ought to ~~be~~~~look~~~~like~~ a place in which items representing 'free time' (as opposed to the clock-regulated time of the work place) found a prominent place.

As the European domestic interior turned into an imperial space, women whose families had attained a measure of affluence came to occupy the position of passive consumers, and members of a leisure class. It is interesting, therefore, to read about the presence of women in Benjamin's characterization of the imperial bourgeois household:

‘On this sofa the aunt cannot but be murdered.... Behind the heavy Khilim tapestries the master of the house has orgies with his share certificates, feels himself the Eastern merchant, the indolent pasha in the caravanseraï of otiose enchantment, until the dagger in its silver sling above the divan puts an end, one fine afternoon, to his siesta and himself. The character of the bourgeoisie [sic] apartment, tremulously awaiting the nameless murderer like a lascivious old lady her gallant, has been penetrated by a number of authors... as writers of ‘detective stories’...’¹³

Here, there is a difference between the ‘master’ of the house, who is an active agent in the fantasy life enabled by his share certificates, and even in his death by *ennui*, actively reaching out for the instrument of death. The aunt, on the other hand, is just a corpse, her material presence nothing more than a clue for a murder mystery, like the passive apartment/ old lady that/who awaits the penetrating figure of the writer.

¹² See Flanders.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, ‘Manorially Furnished Ten Room Apartment,’ in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, first published in German 1974-76, 1978 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979) 49.

1b. Flanerie and Shopping for the Home

Despite this passive characterization of ‘the aunt,’ the space of leisure was, of course, shaped by various forms of reproductive labour. Women were expected to put thought and effort into the publicly accessible parts of the house, the spaces designated for spending leisure time, and for reflecting the family’s economic and social status. Women, when they filled up these rooms with what goods they saw fit, according to their family’s income, were performing the role of an aesthete in a limited form. As Jennifer Jones points out, Post-Enlightenment notions of feminine psychology and mental capacities postulated that:

‘Women's attraction to novelties was held to be a product of a peculiarly feminine imaginative faculty and sense of sight, a product of the particular interaction between women and agreeable objects such as fabrics, jewels, and fashions... Throughout *Émile*, Rousseau stressed that women excel at fine observations; he advised that if one wanted to judge material objects or anything pertaining to the senses, one should consult women, but when one wanted to judge a situation that required morality or reason, one should consult men.’¹⁴

Armed with this knowledge and a disposable income, the European woman in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, was allowed to produce a ‘feminine modern,’ in her drawing room as long as she remained ‘original within the limits of the permissible,’ creating a distinct aesthetic of domesticity and comfort, rather than foraying into the realm of the artistic. Instead of aspiring

¹⁴ Jennifer Jones, ‘Coquettes and Grissettes Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Regime Paris,’ in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, Berkeley, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996,) 35-36.

to create high art, she could rely on the trends dictated to her, via whatever medium of popular artistic discourse she had access to.¹⁵

A woman's pathway to turn of the century modernity was thus located in establishing themselves as consumers, for themselves and their families. As Rachel Bowlby points out, the departmental store established itself as a safe and exciting space for the urban *flâneuse* before the streets of the city did - a debt Woolf would acknowledge.¹⁶ In Woolf's 'Street Haunting' the woman narrator walks out of her house, tired of a routine assemblage of everyday objects whose every crack and stain is imprinted in her mind. What gives her leave to get out, and participate in the pleasure of *flanerie* is the excuse that she needs to buy something, which she claims she can only find by walking halfway across the city of London.¹⁷ The walk itself is filled with experiences that are informed by her own gender, like the narrator's interaction with female shopkeepers and her observation of a woman with dwarfism shopping for shoes. Moreover, not only are the narrator's interactions with the female shopkeepers she meets characterized by her relishing of news about their domestic lives, she also relishes her own role as a consumer for her household, as she revels in the phantasmagoria of the shop windows, looking in at a shop for household goods:

... as if the tide of trade which deposits its burden so punctually and prosaically upon the shores of Oxford Street had this night cast up nothing but treasure. With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances. Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet. That rug will do for the hall. That alabaster bowl shall

¹⁵ Lara Tiersten, 'The Chic Interior and the Feminine Modern: Home Decorating as High Art in Turn-of-the-Century Paris,' in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Christopher Reed (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989) 18-32.

¹⁶ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure,' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, first published in *The Yale Review* in 1927 (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1970), 1942, 22-36, first published in the *Yale Review* in 1927, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/deathofmothand00wool/mode/1up>.

stand on a carved table in the window. Our merrymaking shall be reflected in that thick round mirror. But, having built and furnished the house, one is happily under no obligation to possess it; one can dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, and build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses.¹⁸

This directly pits feminine mass culture against an important strand of modernism. Much of what we today understand as canonical Modernism expresses a profound distaste for the *ennui* of an industrialized world of mass production. Attempts to break away from mass production were grounded in the need to break away from the home, and the feminine aesthetic which supposedly patronized whatever ‘trash’ was available in the market. In 1914, announcing Vorticism as an emphatically masculine artistic and literary movement, Wyndham Lewis, placed it in a masculinized public sphere:

‘The best type of artist would rather give expression to the more energetic part of that City man’s life - do pictures to put in his office, where he is most alive - than manufacture sentimental and lazy images... for his wretched vegetable home existence.’¹⁹

This would be re-iterated in Le Corbusier’s theories of architecture in the inter-war years, seeking to build homes that would valorize the masculine work ethics of top-tier professional men, engineers or big businessmen, who were ‘healthy and virile, active and useful,’ and who, according to him, deserved better than the fussy, feminine, kitsch of contemporary homes:

‘rooms too small, a conglomeration of useless and disparate objects, and a sickening spirit reigning over so many shams... and absurd bric-a-brac. Our industrial friends seem sheepish and shriveled like tigers in a cage.’²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid, 27.

¹⁹ Christopher, Reed, ‘Introduction,’ *Not at Home*, 9,11, Reed quotes Wyndham Lewis ‘Rebel Art in Modern Life,’ *Daily News and Leader* [London] 7 April 1914.

²⁰ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells, first published in English in *London by John Roddeker*, 1931 (Dover Publications: New York, 1986) 18-19.

Femininity and ~~the terms on which the home had~~ capitulation ~~of the homeed~~ to the values of the mass produced industrial world, were thus framed as the source of regressive values. Writing in the late 1940s, Adorno would place on record his disillusionment with the women's movement, in the light of women being admitted into major sectors of the industrial workforce, claiming that women had given up the 'hysteric's' impulse to pose fundamental questions about patriarchy, as had been the case in Ibsen's day. Instead, Adorno claimed late modernist women were willing to ~~accept masculine standards_ and~~ accept 'their miserable working-day, and... their home-life senselessly clinging to self-contained conditions of domestic labour' in the midst of an industrialized world:

‘Provided only a certain abundance of commodities are granted them, they enthusiastically assent to their fate, leave thinking to the men, defame all reflection as an offence against the feminine ideal propagated by the culture industry, and are altogether at ease in the unfreedom they take as the fulfillment of their sex. The defects with which they pay for it, neurotic stupidity heading the list, help to perpetuate this state of affairs.’²¹ (my emphasis)

1c. Domestic Labour in the age of High Capitalism: Paid and Unpaid

However, even if the labour that produced goods and services happened elsewhere, the home was not simply the locus of consumption, nor could homemakers be simplistically categorized as the subjects whose role was making the most important decisions about household consumption. Even a casual reading of Woolf's more canonical works reveals how much labour goes into producing systems of home-making and hospitality. Domestic labour repeatedly appears as a motif in Woolf's oeuvre, whether in ~~the-a~~ household that prepares for a party attended by the Prime Minister in London in the 1920s, in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), the Paston household in the

²¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, first published in German in 1951 (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

fifteenth century, in *The Common Reader* (1925), or the derelict household in the Hebrides between the wars, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Indeed, a great deal of work went into the fashioning of the home as the space of leisure. Paid domestic service remained the primary sector in which women sought employment until 1945. Almost every woman in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had either been a servant or been a mistress superintending a woman servant.²² Indeed, the ability to employ at least one female servant was sometimes seen as the minimum criterion for belonging to the Victorian middle class. Serviced by underpaid female labour, the physical surfaces of the bourgeois home were first brought up to a pitch of cleanliness, attended by new discourses about hygiene, and new lighting technologies which made dirt visible. They were additionally attended by a range of jobswork like polishing, blacking, and whitening items, all of which aimed to remove the marks of human use from domestic objects. As Anne McClintock writes, '[d]irt was a Victorian scandal because it was the surplus evidence of manual work, the visible residue that stubbornly remained after the process of industrial rationality had done its work.'²³ It was a contradiction to 'the liberal dictum that social wealth is created by the abstract, rational principles of the market and not by labor.'²⁴ The hands producing domestic labour were expected to be as discreet as possible, so that it would be easy to render them invisible in the landscape of the clean, civilized, and modern household. In this context, McClintock writes, the energies of mistress and maid were consumed in the work of reproducing a household in which objects shone with polish and elbow grease, so that ~~all~~-marks of both the industrial labour which had

²² Alison Light, 'Preface' in *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (Penguin, 2007) epub.

²³ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Imperial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 153.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 154.

gone into the production of the object, and the reproductive labour that had ensured its present state, were invisibilized:

‘...replacing the disorderly evidence of working women with the exhibition of domesticity as veneer, the commodity spectacle as surface, the house arranged as a theater of clean surfaces for commodity display. The mirror [i.e. the object polished till it shines] /commodity renders the value of the object as an exhibit, a spectacle to be consumed, admired and displayed for its capacity to embody a twofold value: the man's market worth and the wife's exhibition status. The house existed to display femininity as bearing exhibition value only, beyond the marketplace and therefore, by natural decree, beyond political power.’²⁵

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century saw a boom in the availability of ‘consumer durables,’ beginning with the carpet sweeper, which were aimed at saving, or rather, using labour more efficiently in the domestic sphere. This market for consumer goods only expanded further in the inter-war years. Yet, as both Laura Humphries and Alison Light have explored, these new goods were intended for use in households which enjoyed a minimum standard of affluence. Advertisements for carpet sweepers and other devices for instance, had illustrations juxtaposing the product with smiling maidservants in clean uniforms, in a tradition of using ~~subaltern~~ working class or non-white subjects to advertise cleaning products (the logic being that these products were the tools of civilization, effective enough to clean the dirt intrinsically associated with ~~subaltern subjects~~ ~~these subjects~~). Ads also carried stories about mistresses purchasing these items for their servants, and introducing them, so as to promote domestic bliss, and hence, get even better service from their servants.²⁶

On the other hand, these new developments also came with the promise of stepping into a ‘modern’ world where middle class subjects could ‘do’ for themselves. The assumption was that

²⁵ [McClintock](#) ~~Ibid.~~, 218-219.

²⁶ Laura Humphries, *Globalizing Housework: Domestic Labour in Middle-Class London Homes 1850-1914* (London: Routledge, 2021); Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).

the middle classes would, of course, function more rationally, and more efficiently than working-class servants, and thus do the work better, with the help of new machines and products like the refrigerator, the electric vacuum cleaner, electric, gas, or oil stove. In the process, the discourse went, they would style themselves as subjects who had freed themselves from the burden of a hierarchical social order, because their social 'inferiors' were no longer seen toiling for them in their homes. If, as McClintock writes, the ideal enshrined in Victorian advertising for domestic consumer goods was that 'no fingerprint of female labour' would soil the surfaces of the home, the inter-war period steadily produced literature about the virtues of the home in which the abject sight of a working class woman carrying out paid domestic labour would no longer be seen.²⁷

In 1924, Caroline Haslett formed the Electrical Association for Women in Britain, which lobbied for the spread of electricity as an aid to domestic labour, for women of all classes. Its members however were mostly women from the aristocracy.²⁸ More homes were indeed built in the 1920s with extensive supplies of running water and electricity (which in turn produced a market for electrical household appliances). Easily cleanable, 'rust-less' utensils, an expanding variety of new tinned foods, and ready-made clothes, simplified age old forms of domestic labour.²⁹ This was attended by a number of fashionable lifestyle changes which made it possible to make do with less servants, without home-owners having to get their hands dirty. Meals had fewer courses, black leaded fireplaces, and whitened door-steps were no longer de rigeur, food trolleys

²⁷McClintock, 219; Light, *Forever England*, 143.

²⁸ Caroline Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles 1650-1950*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982) 39-43.

²⁹ Noreen Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1976) 96, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/britaininnineteen00bran/mode/1up>.

were introduced, and in newly built houses, brass fixtures were replaced by painted ones, there was only one main door, and kitchen spaces were reduced into a single room.³⁰

This in turn, it could be argued, allowed middle class British women between the wars to enjoy a moment in history, in which they could have the best of two worlds. As Alison Light writes, '[t]he well-off woman of the 1930s could indeed be far freer than her Victorian grandmother, wrestling with the Angel in the House, or her daughter in the 1950s suburb, servantless.'³¹ With the help of both technology and servants, she might find herself 'emancipated' from the cares of reproductive labour and thus find time to take interest in matters that took her beyond the private sphere. The paradigm, however, remained that consumer durables and energy supplies would be purchased from ~~the free market~~~~-private sector~~, out of individual family incomes, and would be operated by women, both mistresses and maids, in individual households.

Yet, the terms on which domestic service was being supplied had begun to change much before war-service in World War II made it impossible for households to employ domestic labour, except under exceptional circumstances. If Woolf could speculate that one of the great changes that had suddenly transformed British society 'in or around December 1910,' was the change in the character of the cook, who now freely accessed the drawing room of her employers to borrow the newspapers or discuss a hat,³² it is significant to remember that the militant Domestic Workers Union of Great Britain and Ireland, the first trade union for women in domestic service, had been formed around 1909-10. Attempts to organize women in paid domestic service persisted through the inter-war years, despite troubles with employers and the Trade Union

³⁰ Davidson, 176.

³¹ Light, *Forever England*.

³² Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, 5.

Congress. Newly-formed unions for domestic workers repeatedly called for the need to drastically improve the terms of employment for domestic servants.³³

1d. Mothering Society

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, women had also laid some claim to the public sphere by claiming to bring values traditionally associated with the family into a wider ‘sphere of influence.’ Women’s supervision of the domestic space, of course, became increasingly important as the industrialized state began understanding populations in terms of biopower, which had to be subjected to surveillance and trained into being productive and docile bodies. As Chloe Taylor points out,

‘Foucault says that nineteenth century parents were told to watch over their children as they slept and bathed, to smell their clothes and scrutinize their sheets, it was mothers more than fathers who were so called upon. When Foucault writes about familial power in terms of such maternal care, he conceptualizes it as biopower, much as Simons has argued that biopower- which aims, like mothers, to keep subjects alive, healthy, and productive, and normal, or is a nurturing type of power- targets women in particular, and has women as its primary agents (Simons, 1996, 180, 191, 204).’³⁴

Keeping subjects ‘alive, healthy, and productive’ was of course not just related to women’s duties towards their children, but also towards other populations. As Jon Simmons points out, women’s involvement in the public sphere over the course of the nineteenth century was often accompanied by a discourse about bringing ‘maternal’ values to deal with social evils such as

³³Laura Schwartz, ‘“What We Think is needed is a Union of Domestic Workers Such as the Miners Have”: The Domestic Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland,’ *Twentieth Century British History* 25, No. 2 (2014): 174- 198, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwt028>.

³⁴ Chloe Taylor, ‘Foucault and Familial Power,’ *Hypatia*, 27, no 1, (Winter (2012)) 213; Jon Simmons, ‘Foucault’s Mother,’ in *Feminist Interpretations of Foucault*, ed. Susan Hekman (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 1996) 179-210.

drunkenness and prostitution, a discourse subsequently used to ‘justify their demand for political rights as lobbyists for these moral concerns.’³⁵

Woolf’s own life is a record for the deep love and attachment that she felt towards upper middle class women of an older generation than hers, including her mother Julia Stephen, and her beloved friend Violet Dickinson, who had entered the public realm, by undertaking tasks related to supervising populations on the terms that this discourse granted them.³⁶ This ideology also accompanies Eleanor Pargiter’s early social work in Woolf’s *The Years*, as well as Mrs Ramsay’s plans that she might be able to extend the work of supervising her family, and the working class inhabitants of the locality she lives in, into a more definite and recognized public role- one based on her ability to watch over and keep tabs on a population, visiting them in their homes:

‘... but more profoundly she ruminated the other problem, of rich and poor, and the things she saw with her own eyes, weekly, daily, here or in London, when she visited this widow, or that struggling person with a bag on her arm, and a note-book and pencil with which she wrote down in columns carefully ruled for the purpose wages and spendings, employment and unemployment, in the hope that thus she would cease to be a private woman whose charity was half a sop to her own indignation, half a relief to her own curiosity, and become, what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator elucidating the social problem.’³⁷

1e. Domestic Labour in the Age of Capital: Working Classes in Britain

The majority of British households, however, were unable to afford financial outlay on devices which made an extensive difference to the time and effort they expended in taking care of their houses, even if they shared in the subsidies to the cost of living provided by cheap imports from

³⁵Simmons, 194-195, cited by Chloe Taylor, [see in n343](#).

³⁶ See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997) ~~first published in 1996 by Chatto and Windus~~, 83, 165.

³⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 1927 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1930) 20, archive.org <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.176580/mode/2up>.

the colonies. Automated washing machines and refrigerators were unaffordable luxuries for the majority of the British population till well after the Second World War.³⁸

The middle of the nineteenth century had witnessed the rise of increasing public awareness, including the pioneering critiques of working class life in England by Marx and Engels, about the hazards of women participating in the paid industrial workforce, risking their health, as well as apparently causing their families great distress, by not performing an adequate degree of reproductive labour. From the 1840s, British state policy had attempted to stabilize the heteropatriarchal nuclear family as a social unit, banning the employment of women and small children in mines in 1842, and limiting women's employment ~~up~~ to twelve hours on weekdays in 1844. Mean real wages for men, in the meanwhile, gradually increased over the latter half of the nineteenth century (amounting to a forty percent increase by the dawn of the twentieth century) so as to facilitate the possibility of supporting small family at a subsistence level.³⁹

The movement to phase women out of the workplace and encourage them to take up unpaid reproductive labour full-time, according to Silvia Federici, tied women even more closely to the needs of the labour market and the capitalist discipline of work. In a context in which social mores concerning compulsory marriage and women's reproductive duties were strengthened, more women were rendered dependent on the husband's wage, and given the responsibility of making sure that the wage-earner's footsteps would be turned towards his home, rather than the public sphere, after working hours. Her labour was supposed to ensure that he would live in a state of adequate health and comfort, to be able to work efficiently for his working years, and

³⁸ Kay Smallshaw, *How to Run Your Home Without Help* ~~first published in London in 1949 by John Lehmann,~~ (London: Persephone Books, 2005) ~~first published in London in 1949 by John Lehmann,~~ 174- 202.

³⁹ Silvia Federici, *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism* (Toronto: PM Press, 2021) 38.

that the labour force would be reproduced in the next generation with children legitimately born into the marriage.⁴⁰

Various strands of social reform from the nineteenth century onwards, gave the proletarian housewife's home-making a prominent place in their activities. Octavia Hill's housing reform, for instance, focused on providing rented spaces at subsidized rates, where housewives would be encouraged to practice good housekeeping so that they might prove 'worthy' of improved domestic amenities, which the landlord might feel confident of installing in a well-kept house.⁴¹

Similarly, as the twentieth century approached, British capitalists, anticipating the Fordist model, rationalized their production processes to establish model townships like Saltaire, Port Sunlight, and Bourneville, which provided subsidized housing to their workforce. Moreover, a section of public opinion proposed the establishment of 'garden cities,' in the countryside, where the proletariat could work for industrialists while living and working in towns that resembled medieval communities. The spatial structures of these towns specifically strove to provide a minimum degree of domestic comfort in their architecture and layout. At the same time, by cutting down on public spaces where people could congregate, they ensured that the worker would necessarily go home after working hours. Moreover, employment policies limited women's participation in the factories attached to these townships. These measures were clearly meant to take the edge off working class mobilization, and to locate working class women's 'sphere of influence' firmly in the private sphere.⁴²

⁴⁰ Federici, 38.

⁴¹ Octavia Hill, *Octavia Hill and the Social Housing Debate*, ed Robert Wheelan (London: Civitas, 1998) epub.

⁴² David Renton, 'Housing: as it is, and as it might be,' *International Socialism*, Issue 134, 27th March 2012, <http://isj.org.uk/housing-as-it-is-and-as-it-might-be/#134renton10>; Leonore Davidoff, Jean l'Esperance, and Howard Newby 'Landscape with figures: Home and Community in English society,' in Mitchell, Juliet and Oakley, Ann (eds.) *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) 169-174; Alison Ravetz, 'The Home of

In the inter-war era, as Britain learned to accept her role as a subsidiary ally of the United States, the post New Deal American model continued to uphold these standards of compulsory heterosexuality and procreation. It was based on the idea that the 'family wage', paid to the male wage-earner, spent or 'administered' by the housewife, was the linchpin on which economic growth depended, even as more women took up paid work in the face of acute poverty after 1929. As Federici writes, the ideal housewife of the Progressive-Era, would continue to spend her days undertaking unpaid cooking and cleaning for her family. However, she had the additional responsibility of making sure her husband would feel romantic attraction for her throughout their years together, and hence confine himself to married life. After all, people seeking sex and romance in the public sphere would make it harder to police populations into serving the interests of the 'civilized,' sexually continent, imperial state:

“For the housewife this reorganization meant that she would have to continue to make children, but she would have to be wary that her hips might become too large (this is how the Calvary of diets began). She would continue washing dishes and floors but with polished nails and frills on her apron, and she would continue to slave from sunup to sundown but would have to spruce herself up adequately to greet her husband's return. At this point, saying no in bed became more difficult.”⁴³

If women with more access to social capital were allowed an ambivalent role in the shaping of European modernity, as consumers, the proletarian woman was also regarded as important for her role in *spending* her money carefully, (as opposed to the nineteenth century valorization of thrift or saving.) as this spending would boost the sluggish British economy which went through

Woman: A View from the Interior,' *Built Environment*, *Women and the Environment* Vol10:No. 1, *Women and the Environment* (1984) 8-17, [jstor.org http://www.jstor.org/stable/23286003](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23286003).

⁴³Federici,119.

a series of economic slumps in the inter-war years, until the arms race for the Second World War began.⁴⁴ J.M Keynes exhorted the housewives of England:

“Therefore, oh patriotic housewives of Britain, sally out tomorrow early into the streets and go to the wonderful sales that are everywhere advertised. You will do yourself good - for never were things so cheap, cheap beyond your dreams. Lay in stock of household linen, sheets and blankets to supply all your needs. And have the added joy that you are increasing employment, adding to the wealth of our country, because you are setting on foot useful activities, bringing a chance and hope to Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Belfast.”⁴⁵

1f. Working Class Housing in Britain:

The state spent the years immediately after the First World War trying to incentivize private players to build according to a set of guidelines, tentatively asking local governments to undertake working class housing projects, and trying to regulate rent. Their timid attempts at reform arrived in the midst of economic recession, widespread unemployment, a housing shortage, and a private real estate market which saw working class homes as milch cows to rack-rent, backed by the steady lifting of war-time restrictions on rent. Industrial communities often undertook rent strikes, in industrial cities in Scotland, especially in the Clyde region, and in the East End of London, as late as 1939. In the East End, for instance, women bore the brunt of police violence, when the bailiffs arrived while the men were at work.⁴⁶

In boom periods, when the private sector was willing to build, it found it profitable to create housing built according to modern standards for middle-class owner-occupiers, rather than for

⁴⁴Mariarosa Dalla Costa, ‘Family and Welfare in the New Deal,’ trans. Richard Braude, in *Women and the Subversion of the Community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019) first published in *Economia e Lavoro* 19, no. 3 (1985) 154-160, [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/women_and_the_subversion_of_community_9781629635965/mode/1up) https://archive.org/details/women_and_the_subversion_of_community_9781629635965/mode/1up.

⁴⁵ John Maynard Keynes, ‘Saving and Spending,’ in *Essays in Persuasion*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), quoted in Dalla Costa, 157.

⁴⁶ Noreen Branson *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1976) [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/britaininnineteen00bran/mode/1up) <https://archive.org/details/britaininnineteen00bran/mode/1up>; and Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971) esp 192-200, [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/britaininnineteen0000bran/mode/1up), <https://archive.org/details/britaininnineteen0000bran/mode/1up>.

working class subjects, who were looking for rented homes, including the building boom from 1931 to 1939. By the end of this boom period, the number of houses in Britain may have exceeded the number of families, but this boom had benefitted families who belonged economically to the top one-third of the population.⁴⁷

As early as 1918, however, the Tudor Water's Committee had laid down a changed template for working class houses, stipulating that the pre-war standards of narrow terrace housing in slums, for the working class, ought to give way to houses with more sunlight, access to gardening areas, and indoor coalhouses, and water closets. Much discussion was centered on the importance of sinks and bath tubs, and where they could be optimally placed, so that at least one portion of the house would receive a supply of running water.⁴⁸ Moreover, an important bone of contention in the first forty years of the twentieth century was the importance of the front parlour in houses. Where women's voices could be heard on the Tudor Waters' Committee, they stressed the importance of this room, as a space which went some way towards ensuring that the family members were not constantly on top of each other. This was despite the main architect, Raymond Unwin's opinion, that they were superfluous in working class houses.⁴⁹

The Wheatley Act of 1924 placed the initiative for public housing definitively on the shoulders of the local government, which in the 30s, went on to include slum clearance programmes. The dwellers were housed in flats which were small, bleak and functional, shaped by prejudice that the working classes would ruin anything better, like lifts, for example.⁵⁰ Moreover, the presence of basic amenities meant that the housewife was pressured to increase the extent of their homemaking, using the supplies of running water, fuel, and heating, to cook more extensive

⁴⁷ Branson and Heinemann, 184-189.

⁴⁸ Branson, 107- 108.

⁴⁹ Ravetz, 12- 13.

⁵⁰ Branson, 103- 116; Branson and Heinemann, 180-201.

meals, and keep their houses and family members in a higher state of cleanliness. This improved housekeeping provided the definitive proof that the family had achieved a higher, 'modern' state of living.

People who moved into these homes, of course, adapted the houses to their own needs, and sometimes found the houses lacking. The validity of the demand made by housewives for an additional parlour was borne out when people came to occupy the council homes, built on Unwin's plans, and manipulated them according to their own methods of occupying space. They were compelled to use the sculleries to which the architects had attempted to confine cooking and washing, as rooms for cooking and eating in, making this utility room extremely cramped.⁵¹

The need to make the homemakers' work-space the subject of public discourse was highlighted in the Borders Case (1938-39). Elsy Borders, the wife of a taxi driver, conducted her own case, after being sued for being in arrears with the mortgage for her house, earning the epithet of a 'modern Portia,' proving that the building society and the builders, who had built and financed her house, were conducting a jerry-building racket. The evidence provided by Borders, about the state of her own house, and the other houses built in the same or similar schemes, provided evidence of an inter-war homemaker's awareness of public and legal discourse on the topic of low-income housing, as well as of the dangers that a housewife's life in a modern, 'convenient' home could be filled with. As Borders argued, in these houses, alongside age old problems like damp, were new problems like faulty wiring, which exposed the family to electric shocks, transmitted through the floor.⁵²

1g. Domestic labour in a Changing World

⁵¹ Branson, 115.

⁵² Branson and Heinemann, 187- 189.

In this context, it is important to remember that the relationship of domestic labour to its times is complicated. As Dalla Costa writes,

And when we say 'precapitalist working conditions,' we do not refer only to the women who have to use brooms to sweep. Even the best equipped American kitchens do not reflect the present level of technological development; at most they represent the technology of the nineteenth century. If you are not paid by the hour, within certain limits, nobody cares how long it takes you to do the work.⁵³

On the other hand, as Ruth Schwartz Cowan points out, our domestic routines are also inflected by the methods of industrial production. Domestic and reproductive labour owe their present-day definition as women's work centred around the home, to the radical separation of home and waged work after the Industrial Revolution. While pre-industrial societies in the West often had strict regulations about the segregation of different jobs according to gender roles, the work that counted as productive labour did not always happen in a space distinct from the home, and hence men often performed tasks that were essential for the home to function. Moreover, like the industrial worker who is unable to negotiate the entire process of producing a commodity, and is confined to a part of the work, so also is ~~does~~ the industrialized housewife, who works ing with a number of mechanisms which she does not entirely understand or control, i.e. the appliances her family owns and the supplies of gas, electricity, and communication lines attached to her house. Schwartz Cowan provides the example of a farm inhabited by American settler-colonialists, in wher ~~ere~~ ie ~~h~~, if the oven malfunctioned, family members would be able to mend the oven ~~it~~ from the intimate knowledge they had of its workings, as they had built it ~~the oven~~ themselves. If an electric oven were to malfunction in a modern American household, the family members would have no such knowledge, ; on the basis of which they would be able to confidently undertake the

⁵³Dalla Costa, *Women and the Subversion of the Community*, first published in 1972, in the *Dalla Costa Reader*, 47.

task of fixing it.⁵⁴ If modernism's questioning of traditional relations between humans and the material world, as I will explain later in this Introduction, is based on the sudden explosion of technologies people could not entirely comprehend, but participated in, when such technologies were deployed in the daily life of the public sphere, domestic workers also occupied this ambivalent position, between being stuck with an understanding of older technologies, and working with newer ones.

As a 'Georgian' taking over from the Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells, the 'Edwardians,' in *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, Woolf would have known that she needed to change the terms on which novels depicted women's interactions with their homes. As this thesis will show, Woolf felt the need to contextualize this, by producing texts which worked with various turn-of-the-century traditions of women's writing about the relationship domestic and personal spaces had with the market for private property. Woolf's Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* and her Eleanor Pargiter in *The Years*, attempt to follow in Octavia Hill's footsteps, negotiating with working-class builders and housewives in order to establish a system of better housing. But Woolf complicates this project of moulding public opinion and the building industry, by adding to the narrative the voices of Crosby and Mrs McNab, as they undertake the work of maintaining various households. It is this deliberate strategy of showing women using and making spaces, which complicates an optimistic narrative about housing reform arriving via collaborations between a male-dominated building industry and reformist middle class women.

1h. Domestic labour and Various Feminisms in the Inter-War Years:

⁵⁴ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, 1983; (London: Free Association Books, 1989); esp 18-39.

Apart from witnessing the entry of women into jobs hitherto performed by men (albeit at lower wages,) the First World War also witnessed the beginning of a system of paying family allowances, deducted from the wages of soldiers, and paid directly to the soldiers' wives, proportionate to the number of children the family might have.⁵⁵ In the inter-war years, amidst large scale unemployment and fierce debate about the amount and nature of unemployment relief, Eleanor Rathbone attempted to consolidate the legacy of this policy, by campaigning for a state sponsored system of family allowances, which would be paid directly to the mother of a family. Rathbone argued that this was a better way of making sure families were provided for, rather than trusting private employers to pay a 'family wage' to the male bread winner, as negotiated by the trade unions through which the male labour force had organized itself. Rathbone stopped short of calling this allowance wages for domestic labour, stressing the working class homemaker's ability to work hard and stretch resources for her family out of love, ~~but a~~ At the same time, she emphasized that this remuneration would be an acknowledgement of the contribution of hitherto unpaid domestic labour, to the British economy.⁵⁶ The crowning achievement of her campaigns carried out through the inter-war years came four years after Woolf's death, as an amendment to the Family Allowances Act 1945, which made state allowances for each child, except the eldest, payable to the mother.

Indeed, the rise in campaigning for working class housing with basic amenities, and the state's impetus to placate these pressure groups was accompanied by the discourse that adequate housing for the proletariat might avert 'Bolshevism.'⁵⁷ Indeed, the spectre of a feminism which

⁵⁵ Suzie Fleming, Introductory Essay to ~~Eleanor Rathbone, *The Disinherited Family* by Eleanor Rathbone, 1924;~~ (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1986) ~~1924;~~ published as per the 1949 text published by George Allen and Unwin as *Family Allowances*, 45-46; Rathbone, 221-225, archive.org <https://archive.org/details/disinheritedfami0000rath/mode/1up>.

⁵⁶ Rathbone.

⁵⁷ Branson, 109.

would, in fact, take women out of their homes and into the workplace haunted Western Europe as the news of the first wave of Soviet reform arrived. During the war years, the newly-born Soviet Union had witnessed a rapid rise in public nurseries, dining rooms and laundries, as well as communal housing. Even after 1920, at a time when Russian families appeared to be moving back into a bourgeoisie framework, the activities of the *Zhenotdel*, the women's department of the All-Russia Communist Party (Bolsheviks), established by Inessa Armand and Allexandra Kollontai, continued to engage in the grass-root level creation of communally shared institutions, and pressing for the 'socialization of *byt*' as an essential condition for the emancipation of the Soviet woman.⁵⁸ As Benjamin's memoirs of Moscow illustrate, Russian interiors for communal living revealed to the European eye, the visual aesthetic that rooms could have, when free of a proliferation of objects for display. Space could be used in innovative ways, once the state had abolished private property.⁵⁹

Woolf, has, of course earned a place of pride in debates about the value of domestic labour, for being the first to articulate the argument that domestic labour should be remunerated with a wage payable to homemakers. In *Three Guineas* (1938), she openly articulates the need for a wage for domestic labour, for 'the mothers of educated men'.⁶⁰ At this point it is interesting to note that Woolf's arguments in this text include a trenchant critique of the military industrial nexus, pointing out that a money wage to housewives, would make it possible for them to resist the 'breadwinners' in their own homes, in turn, making it possible for women to live in the light of their own political consciences, and hence make an actual difference in ~~against~~ the war

⁵⁸ Carol Eubanks Hayden, 'The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party,' *Russian History*, Vol 3, no 2 (1976), 150-173, 166, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24649710>. *Byt* (russian): everyday life, everyday material practice, domestic life, way of life et all.

⁵⁹ Benjamin, 187-189.

⁶⁰ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch: New York, 1938,) first American edition, archive.org <https://archive.org/details/threeguineas00wool/mode/1up>, 168.

mongering of the thirties. Moreover, women earning wages for their reproductive labour would provide leeway to male earning members, because they would be less enslaved to the jobs they held on the capitalist marketplace for the sake of their families. She also makes the eugenicist argument that this would raise the birth rate in the middle classes ‘the very class in which the birth rate is falling, [...] the very class where births are desirable.’⁶¹

1i. The Co-Operative Movement and the Working Women’s Guild:

It is possible to conjecture that dwelling in Great Britain, through the scarcity and frequent industrial unrest of the inter-war years, Woolf would have had some general knowledge of the importance of housewives’ ability to make resources run far. As theorists of domestic labour have postulated, it is this ability that forms the backbone of a proletarian community’s ability to hold out without regular wages, during a strike.⁶² But Woolf’s main source of specific information about an international working class movement was in her proximity to the Women’s Co-operative Guild, (founded in 1883), where, although a number of middle class women occupied leadership roles, the proletarian women who were the majority of the members, sought to use the organization to empower themselves, attain professional skills, and enter the public sphere. Woolf was an organizer and chairwoman for monthly meetings of the Guild, in the suburb of Richmond, for four years after the First World War.

The Women’s Co-operative Guild, or the Working Women’s Guild, was a branch of the Co-Operative Movement. The Co-operative movement traced its roots to a number of working class movements in the first half of the nineteenth century. ~~It~~ ~~These~~ ~~movements~~ involved the establishment of provision stores which asked its buyers to own dividends in the store, so that

⁶¹ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 169.

⁶² Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Women and the Subversion of the Community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019) archive.org
https://archive.org/details/women_and_the_subversion_of_community_9781629635965/mode/1up.

they could share in the profits that accrued to the store from the buyers' purchases. The movements also used the capital they gained, to invest in housing for their share-holders, deployed this capital to buy agricultural land and set up production units for producing what they sold in their stores, and undertook the setting up of social service schemes.⁶³ The Guild was affiliated to the Co-operative movement, and insisted on the benefits that the Co-operative stores, present all over the British Isles, gave women who bore the responsibility of provisioning the household. 'Co-operation,' they argued, proved the presence of a kind of home-making where the 'the women's marketing basket,' could be utilized for a socialist system of buying and selling, since the movement allowed consumers to earn dividends, as shareholders of the shops in which they bought household goods. These dividends were given to the woman-customer in cash amounts, or through clothing clubs ~~wherethrough which~~ they could get clothes at a cheap rate.⁶⁴

The Guild balanced the radical nature of several of their demands, as they campaigned for equitable access to maternity benefit for working class women, including unmarried mothers, and for international peace, even up to the brink of the Second World War, (and thus participated in the political community to which Woolf addressed her feminist pacificism,) with the respectability of the claim that they represented the married women and mothers of Britain. Woolf herself was closely associated with the bringing of these testimonies into the public domain. She encouraged Margaret Llewelyn Davies, the secretary of the Guild, to publish the personal testimonies collected by a survey about the appalling conditions in which working class women were bearing children, even ~~women~~ whose husband's earned relatively high

⁶³ C. R. Fay, *Co-Operation At Home and Abroad: A Description and Analysis*, Vol 1, 1908-1920 (Frome and London: Butler and Tanner, 1925) 272-284, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/cooperationathom0000fayc/mode/1up>.

⁶⁴ Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Editor's Preface to *Life As We Have Known It*; (London: The Hogarth Press, 1931, New York: W.W. Norton, 1975) xi, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/lifeaswehaveknow00davi/page/n7/mode/2up?view=theater>.

and steady wages (so that they could patronize the co-operative stores). In 1915, the Woolfs had attempted to get Virginia's half-brother Gerald Duckworth to publish this book, which was later published as *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*. In 1931, another collection of letters by the Guildswomen about their lives, *Life As We Have Known It*, was published by the Hogarth Press, with an introductory letter by Woolf herself.

Woolf would have read the letters in *Maternity* and *Life As We Have Known It*, and thus known about the continuum between unpaid and paid domestic labour, in families where a few days' of illness for a family member, pushed a family into going without food. The women writing to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, wrote in stark terms, about the punitive conditions in which they budgeted for every penny of the male bread winner's wage, and perforce took on paid labour like domestic service, and various forms of 'home work,' among which laundry and sewing work were prominent. They also wrote about how reproductive labour made it impossible for them to rest after childbirth, in the absence of other adult women in their households, and caused them to routinely get out of bed within three days of delivering a child. They also frequently wrote about how they felt the heavy work of lifting rudimentary laundry equipment or just routine overwork, had seriously compromised their health as well as the health of the children they bore.

These guildswomen's testimonies thus leave clues that they would have been extremely significant interlocutors for Woolf. If the quest for an autonomous domestic space, a room of one's own, lies at the heart of Woolf's feminist explorations in the inter-war years, this literature would have resonated with her, an example being such as the memoirs of 'Mrs Layton,' recorded in *Life As We Have Known It*. Mrs Layton's life story narrates her journey towards becoming a midwife, via the Working Women's Guild, after spending her youth doing paid and unpaid domestic labour. She used her income as a midwife, not only to buy a house in her own name

while her husband was alive, but also to set up a little hut in her allotment garden, which she ~~had~~ decorated with pictures, and furnished with stoves for cooking, and heating, ~~where~~ she would cook, eat and spend time with another guildswoman in this hut, discussing papers to be read at meetings, and enjoying the view from her hut/ room of her own.⁶⁵

At the same time, Woolf's relationship with this text demonstrates her deep ambivalences about working-class women. On the one hand, Woolf's introductory letter frankly acknowledges the limits of middle-class powers of empathy, even in a gendered context, '[o]ne could not be Mrs Giles of Durham because one's body had never stood at the wash-tub; one's hands had never chopped up whatever meat makes up a miner's supper.'⁶⁶ On the other hand, this acknowledgement of the limits of the writer's context, frequently becomes a peg on which to hang an essentializing association of physicality with working class activity. As Alison Light points out, that while Woolf acknowledged that the material conditions of the relentless reproductive labour that shaped the women's bodies, and gave their political thought its critical edge, her narrative retains the study of aesthetics and of the 'finer things' in life, as prerogatives enjoyed by their middle class sisters. Woolf thus manages to assume a blindness to the facts that middle class women may also want material comforts, and that working-class women may well want to be more than the product of their physical conditions.⁶⁷

2. Personal Contexts:

2a. Virginia Woolf neé Stephen

⁶⁵ 'Mrs Layton,' in *Life As We Have Known It*, 1-55.

⁶⁶ Woolf, 'Introductory Letter' in *Life As We Have Known It*, xxi, also published as 'Memories of a Working Women's Guild' in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950) [archive.org https://archive.org/details/captainsdeathbed0000wool/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/captainsdeathbed0000wool/mode/1up).

⁶⁷ Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, (Penguin, 2007) ~~kindle edition~~, 205.

This finally brings us to the personal factors shaping Woolf's politics on domestic spaces and domestic labour. In her lifetime between 1882 and 1941, Virginia Woolf lived through a period of rapid change within the walls of British households, across economic strata. As Alison Light's *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* demonstrates, Woolf's life was shaped by her identity as the daughter of a household which employed seven maids, the wife of a family who employed a 'cook-general,' paying her 50 pounds a year, (while she and her husband came to earned up to 1,100 pounds a year,) and the homemaker who used the income from her books to undertake large scale changes in her house, and cooked meals that attempted to make the best of wartime scarcity.⁶⁸ The year of her death, 1941, witnessed the death knell of the British middle class system of employing domestic servants, when women above sixteen were called up for war work and households were required to cite exceptional circumstances in order to retain paid domestic workers.⁶⁹

The Woolfs appear to have been employers who followed the norms of their day. In retrospect, it is clear that they failed their own professed socialism, by paying their servants wages which kept them just above the poverty line, even though the working conditions in their home were good by the standards of their time. Virginia, on one hand, spilt much ink writing openly bigoted ideas about her maid's class position into her diary and personal letters, deploring the system that made the working classes 'parasites' upon the middle classes.⁷⁰ Both Virginia and Nellie gave each other 'notice' over and over again. On the other hand, as Light shows, she was exceptional by the standards of her time, for the demonstrative quality of her relationship with Nellie, openly

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 313.

⁷⁰ Woolf, see esp. Letter to Ethel Smyth, Thursday 16th October, 1930, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol IV, 1978; (London: The Hogarth Press, 1992) 230, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/lettersofvirgini0004wool/mode/1up>; entries for 11th July 1927 and 8th August 1929 in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol III, 1925- 1930 (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 146, 240 , archive.org, https://archive.org/details/diaryofvirginiaw0003wool_h1x5/mode/1up.

expressing affection, or ‘rowing’ with Nellie. The rows in themselves revealed a form of dialogue, departing from the one-sided maternal despotism that Woolf’s mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen had practiced.⁷¹

Despite the presence of paid domestic labour, throughout her life, Woolf was, of course, unable to get rid of the cares of home-making that devolved upon women, in a bourgeois household. Biographical matter, her diary and ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ reveal that, for her, as for the prototypical fin-de-siecle flaneuse, shopping was intimately tied to an understanding of the city, both as a child accompanying her half-sister, and later, as an adult. Moreover, young Virginia Stephen learnt the hard way, that the binarization of the patriarchal household into ‘Mr Breadwinner and Mrs Consumer,’ punished those who occupied the consumption side of this division, and enabled the domestic tyranny Woolf famously saw as the root of fascism.⁷² Writing ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ Woolf remembered the scenes that her father Leslie Stephen would create, when, after the death of older women in the household, the adolescents Vanessa and Virginia, would present him with the accounts of their housekeeping, upon which he would rage that his daughters were ruining him with extravagance. In Woolf’s memoir, this duty is remembered as the worst part of the sisters’ usual routine. Woolf wrote that she had never felt such unarticulated anger, ‘unbounded contempt for [her father] and pity for [Vanessa].’⁷³

2b. Bloomsbury

As the scholarship of Christopher Reed and Victoria Rosner has explored, Woolf and her associates in the Bloomsbury group, bonded over their need to find homes which broke away

⁷¹ Woolf, *Moments of Being* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985) 2nded, 165, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/momentsofbeing00wool/page/144/mode/2up>.

⁷² Woolf, *Three Guineas*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch: New York, 1938) first American edition, archive.org <https://archive.org/details/threeguineas00wool/mode/1up>.

⁷³ Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ in *Moments of Being*, 144.

from the constraints of their familial homes, in which they could openly live their lives through networks of kinship other than the heteropatriarchal families they had grown up in.⁷⁴ Woolf witnessed and participated in the establishment of homes which aspired to be different. The Bloomsbury Group became ‘the Bloomsbury group’ when Vanessa Stephen decided to move to Bloomsbury with her four siblings, dismantling the household in which she had grown up, upon the death of her father, in 1904. The male members of the original group were Vanessa and Virginia’s brother Thoby’s college friends and family acquaintances, along with Roger Fry, whom Vanessa and her husband Clive Bell, met in 1910. Many of them were, like Vanessa, committed to establishing themselves as modernist painters. Reed explores the new homes they came to inhabit over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, especially the Stephen siblings’ first home in Gordon Square, John Maynard Keynes’ rooms in Cambridge, the Bell’s home in Brunswick Square, Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s home in Tavistock Square, Vanessa and Duncan Grant’s studio in Gordon Square, and the group’s homes in villages in the South-East of England, Asheham, Charleston, and Rodmell. He points out that these sites were the sites that witnessed a re-interpretation of domestic spaces, on the one hand, by rejecting the suffocating, hierarchical spatial organization of the Victorian household, and on the other, by refusing to conform to the bare, functional domestic architecture of High Modernism, as propagated by Le Corbusier.

The Bloomsbury artists, Vanessa Bell (1879-1861), Duncan Grant (1885- 1978), and Roger Fry (1866-1934), used the surfaces of their homes, the walls, and the furniture, as canvases for formal experiments which combined diverse strands from the Arts and Crafts movement,

⁷⁴ Reed, *Not at Home*; Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*; (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004); Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 60-90, 120-175.

Victorian Aestheticism, French modernism with its various international influences, and Byzantine art, to produce the distinctive aesthetics of British Post-Impressionism. In Charleston, they often re-painted the same surfaces over the years, thus creating a dynamic, multi-layered domestic interior. This art, when displayed to the public, often in domestic interiors such as in the *Ideal Home* exhibition of 1913, or in the room-themed spaces of the Omega workshop, provoked a public hysteria, in which these aesthetics were decried as horrendous desecrations of the power dynamics of domestic spaces. ‘Post Impressionist Flat- What Would the Landlord Say?’, ran a headline in the *Mirror* in 1913, and according to contemporary gossip, the British royal family had reported, after seeing the Post-Impressionist room in the *Ideal Home*, that it was ‘the perfect example of how not to decorate a sitting room.’⁷⁵ The paintings that Bell, Grant, and Fry, painted in domestic spaces, brought to light themes that would not be prominently displayed in conventional houses, like Grant’s Matisse inspired male nudes, or Vanessa Bell’s paintings, in which abstract maternal figures assume monumental proportions, dominating the landscape of the painting.

2c. Vanessa Bell (1879- 1961)

As recent scholarship has shown, Vanessa Bell occupies a unique position among British Post-Impressionists for her unique interpretation of landscapes featuring women and children. In Bell’s *Studland Beach* (1912), the beach is populated by women and children, and women are depicted in the private act of preparing to bathe in the sea. The painting foregrounds the female

⁷⁵ Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 128.

body in loose undergarments, without making the viewer a voyeur vis-a-vis the process of undressing.⁷⁶ On the other hand, Bell also produced domestic scenes which departed from conventions of showcasing the interior populated by women and children, as the space of sentimental warmth, as can be seen for example in her *Nursery Tea* (1912). Bell's paintings are characterized by the flat application of colour, and the refusal to adopt linear perspective. This technique, in paintings like *The Conversation* (1913-16), finds expression in a refusal to perform the proprieties of privileging the human world, over the object world, by literally keeping the human and the non-human elements of the painting on the same plane.

At the same time, Bell's depictions of women's presence in domestic spaces, are noted for their depiction of women literally taking up space, i.e. filling up the canvas, with the colours in which they are represented, playing off against the colours and shapes of the ~~various~~ objects in the interior. In Bell's well-known 1912 painting of Woolf lounging in a red chair, with what appears to be a small piece of needlework in her hands, the feminine figure is lounging ~~in~~ among the voluminous folds of the chair, the woman's body and the furniture fitting each other's curves. Woolf's famously beautiful and feminine facial features are expunged or blurred, and in ~~despite~~ of the subject of the painting, i.e. a woman sitting and sewing indoors, Bell refuses to make the portrait a document of a conventionally beautiful woman engaged in a pursuit that signifies the subject's association with delicate, painstakingly-performed domestic pursuits. Both the lolling figure of the woman, and the bulging, lumpy armchair, defy conventional standards of aptness

⁷⁶ Lisa Tickner, 'Vanessa Bell: *Studland Beach*, Domesticity, and 'Significant Form,' *Representations*, Winter 1999 (No 65) Special Issue: New Perspectives in British Studies, 63-92, jstor.org, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2902962>.

for women and furniture, but the subject and the chair literally fit into each other, to make up the subject of the painting.⁷⁷

Significantly, the first thing Vanessa Stephen did when she moved to her first house in Bloomsbury was to redecorate the house on stylistic lines distinctly different from the Titian-inspired, late Victorian style of her parents' house. The innovations carried out in the Gordon Square house may well have been significant experiments for Vanessa, given that she would design individual items for interior décor (alongside paintings), and execute commissions for interiors both, as a participant in Roger Fry's Omega Workshops, in the 1910s, and as an independent artist, along with constantly creating art-work for her house Charleston, in Lewes, Sussex, experimenting with ever-changing colour schemes and designs for the surfaces of the rooms, from the end of the First World War, up until her death in 1961.⁷⁸

Woolf used the disposable income her writing gave her, to buy furnishings for her house and to incorporate the interests of those close to her, into her domestic space, via projects which gave her a lot of pleasure. As Vanessa Bell continued with Roger Fry's programme of making the 'decorative arts,' an integral part of British Post Impressionism, and thus facilitating a revolution in the aesthetics of domestic furnishings, Virginia received her sister's artwork into her house. These were not always presents, but also work she commissioned or paid for.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Bell also painted other portraits of Woolf indoors, similarly depicting her sitter confidently taking up space, her limbs comfortably extended along the surfaces made available to her by the furniture, circa 1912, and in 1934, (to judge solely from extant collections of finished portraits).

⁷⁸ It is important to note that Bell in turn took inspiration from Woolf's work. After reading Woolf's creation of a non-hierarchical narrative privileging simultaneity, in *The Waves*, Bell wrote about wanting to re-create this structure in the object world of a domestic space, the nursery floor: 'To me, painting a floor covered with toys and keeping them all in relation to each other, and the figures and the space of the floor and the light on it means something of the same sort that you seem to mean.' (Vanessa Bell, Letter to Virginia Woolf, 15th October 1931, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, ed. Regina Marler, New York: Pantheon Books, 1993, 367-368.)

⁷⁹ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 1996 (London: Vintage, 1996) 421-434; Nino Strachey, *Rooms of Their Own*, (n.p: National Trust, n.d); Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 217-230.

2d. Monk's House

She also spent on modifying her house in the village of Rodmell in Sussex, into a space which incorporated modern domestic technology, buying a solid fuel stove, an oil stove, a hot water range, a bath, a sink, and a lavatory. Significantly, in 1929, the year she wrote *A Room of One's Own*, she and Leonard Woolf paid for two rooms to be built, one of which became Leonard Woolf's study, and the other one became a bedroom for Virginia.⁸⁰ Most of these changes took place in the late 1920s, after the publication of *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Common Reader*, when Virginia's earnings from her books were beginning to exceed Leonard's. Yet, despite the fact that she had an independent income which gradually increased over time, Woolf found it markedly difficult to realize the dream of an autonomous domestic space, which lies at the heart of *A Room of One's Own*:

Anyhow my room is secure. For the first time since I married... 16 years - I have been spending money... I have carpeted the dining room & so on... For part of my misery was the perpetual limitation of everything, no chairs, or beds, no comfort, no beauty; & no freedom to move: all of which I determined then and there to win... And so came, with some argument, even tears one night (& how seldom I have ever cried!) to an agreement with Leonard about sharing money after a certain sum; & then opened a bank account; & now, at the lowest shall have £ 200 to put there on Jan 1st.⁸¹

~~The mention of e~~Chairs, carpets, and beds appear like a refrain across Woolf's diary entries about her finances, as the things that she longed to purchase. She saw the need to assert herself in matters of furniture; as crucial for the emotional economy she shared with the person with whom she shared her money.

In a related vein, her diaries also mention details ~~which that~~ reveal that domestic facilities which make a difference to the agent performing domestic labour, cannot be appreciated by the other

⁸⁰ Lee, esp 426.

⁸¹ Woolf, 18th December 1929, *The Diary* Vol III, 212.

members of the family. Writing about the installation of a kerosene-oil stove in her Rodmell house in 1929 Woolf points out:

“At the moment it is cooking my dinner in the glass dishes perfectly I hope, without smell, waste, or confusion; one turns handles, there is a thermometer. And so I see myself freer, more independent - & all one’s life is a struggle for freedom - able to come down here with a chop in a bag & live on my own. I go over the dishes I shall cook - the rich stews, the sauces. The adventurous strange dishes with dashes of wine in them. Of course Leonard puts a drag on, & I must be very cautious, like a child, not make too much noise playing.”⁸²

This passage is interesting because it outlines a number of other relationships with which Woolf’s relationship with her oil stove is inter-twined. On the one hand, Virginia feels infantilized by her husband with regard to this housewifely pursuit, which she, in fact, feels is a step towards freedom and autonomy. On the other hand, this ‘freedom’ also bears examination, because implicitly, the other presence she sees as a ‘drag’ on her freedom, is the paid domestic servant, who would presumably have cooked the dinner if the stove had been a less modern, more inconvenient one. The burden of being the agent of a state of un-freedom is thus placed on the working-class woman’s shoulders, to be counteracted by the joining of the forces of technology and the middle class woman’s search for autonomy. Woolf did indeed phase out the amount of domestic service in her household, after publishing *A Room of One’s Own*. After 1929, she cooked dinner in her own house for the rest of her life, while employing various women, especially Mabel Haskins, and Louie Everett, to come in during the morning hours to do cleaning work as well as an amount of cooking.⁸³

2e. Agnes Smith

⁸² Woolf, 25th September 1929, in *The Diary* Vol III, 257.

⁸³ Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*.

One slim chance of finding out what it meant to perform unpaid labour within a working class household came to Woolf during the Second World War, and was brought to her by correspondence brought in by *Three Guineas* (1938.)

Amongst the correspondence Woolf received from women from various parts of England, in response to *Three Guineas*, were letters from Agnes Smith, a weaver from Yorkshire, who had lost work in the thirties when she started her correspondence with Woolf, and consequently found war-work during the course of her correspondence. Smith's letters take Woolf to task for essentializing those not born in the educated classes, as only fit for work seen as menial, 'to hear some people talk you would think... a kitchen maid [was born] of a cross between a kitchen sink and a spinning frame.'⁸⁴ Smith points out how the single working class woman inhabits a nexus of familial responsibilities which are never recognized or legitimated as the responsibilities of male earners or as the responsibilities of 'mothers' of the British race. Smith wrote that on the one hand, she received unemployment benefit less than what male workers received and on the other hand, '... when at 17 - I found myself wage earner, housekeeper cook and nurse & also earning the sole family income - I did not find myself paid at a family rate - nor have I ever found any reduction in rent, rates or grocers bills or travelling expenses.'⁸⁵ In 1940, having found work, however, Agnes extended an interesting invitation to Virginia. She imagined Virginia coming to live with Agnes in her workman's cottage, writing during the day, and getting a meal ready for Agnes' return: 'It would be very nice to find you waiting when I got in at night.'⁸⁶ This invitation to Virginia to find out what it meant to be one of the housewives she had seen at the Co-operative Guild meetings, is located in fantasy and obscurity. Agnes Smith writes with the

⁸⁴ Agnes Smith, Letter to Virginia Woolf, quoted in Light *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, 207, 267.

⁸⁵ Smith, Letter to Virginia Woolf, November 7th 1938, in Anna Snaith ed., 'Three Guineas' Letters,' *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol 6 (2000) 100, jstor.org, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24906372>.

⁸⁶ Smith, quoted in Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, 268.

assumption that she is imagining such a hypothetical situation, rather than soberly asking Virginia to visit her, and in any case, Virginia's side of the correspondence has never been traced, though nine letters from Agnes have survived, among Woolf's papers.

Woolf's political understanding of ideas relevant to this thesis, thus reveal themselves to us in a palimpsestic manner, encompassing solidarity, trenchant critique, bigoted ideas, ambivalences, and utopic possibilities.

2f. Literary sources:

Despite the fact that Woolf would- have had so much exposure on issues related to reproductive labour, it is important to acknowledge historical discourses which Woolf was probably unaware of. We have little information to suggest that Woolf had much knowledge of feminist critiques of domestic labour articulated in America, by previous generations, in the nineteenth century, such as Melusina Fay Pierce (1836- 1923) or Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), or that Woolf would have been much aware of Utopian communes established in America by early communists, pooling together resources and sharing domestic spaces amongst several individuals and families.⁸⁷ Similarly, Woolf seems to have been unaware of communist feminist thought about abolishing the nuclear family, as produced through capitalism, except for a comment made in the context of women's domestic responsibilities in *A Room of One's Own*. This stray comment, given below, may or may not have been inspired by attempts to establish communal nurseries, in the USSR, immediately after the revolution (when homelessness among children was a raging crisis):

⁸⁷ Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (The MIT Press: Cambridge (MA) and London, 1982.)

‘You cannot, it seems, let children run about the streets. People who have seen them running wild in Russia say that the sight is not a pleasant one.’⁸⁸

The fact that Woolf did not have access to these strands of feminism which deconstructed the nuclear family, and sought to invent other methods of performing domestic labour, would explain the presence of a number of lacunae in Woolf’s thoughts on domestic labour. To return to ‘Memories of a Working Women’s Guild,’ for example, Woolf’s narrator imagines the remedy to the burdens in a mining family, i.e. providing a bath to the miner when he returns from work, and keeping the house free of coal dust, to be ‘labour saving appliances and housing reform.’⁸⁹ It is interesting that Woolf’s ideas stop at this point (even if the narrative is self-conscious about the limitations of the middle class narrator’s imagination) because *Life As We Know It*, does, in fact deal with a system of locating bodily hygiene outside the nuclear family - a system which was implemented after a strong agitation led by working-class women’s ~~organization~~ in the inter-war years, i.e. the pithead bath. From the proceedings on the Sankey Commission in 1919 onwards, women from mining communities, among them Elizabeth Andrewes, Mary Hart, and Agnes Brown, had agitated for baths located at the ‘head’ of the coal pits, where miners could wash, change, and have their work-clothes laundered. They argued that the dirt on the miner’s clothes and body, after a shift, belonged in the work place, and that women did not deserve the grueling work of heating and lifting large amounts of water, washing clothes worn in the mines, and cleaning up after ~~it, which was performed~~ on a daily basis, throughout the working week. As a result of this agitation pit-head baths did, in fact, get installed in a number of coal mines.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1935) 2nded, first published in 1929, 34, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/woolf_a-room/page/n3/mode/1up.

⁸⁹ Woolf, ‘Introductory Letter,’ in *Life As We Have Known It*, xx.

⁹⁰ Noreen Branson, 20; *Life As We Have Known It*, 136-139.

Woolf, would, however, have had access to various novelistic traditions of writing about domestic spaces. This thesis is structured as a series of in-depth explorations of the literary influences that can be productively juxtaposed with Woolf's oeuvre. This includes the ideals of Puritan colonialist domesticity as envisaged by one of Woolf's favourite authors, Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), a nineteenth century tradition of writing the 'lives' of women authors beginning with Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), the writings of Roger Fry about art and the English domestic interior, the novels of Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957) which trace the journey of a 'New Woman' through various private and public spaces, and the modernist English country-house novel as written by authors of Woolf's acquaintance. The chapterization provided at the end of this introduction will dwell upon the ways in which Woolf works with these traditions.

3. Theoretical framework:

When we are told in *To the Lighthouse*, that the subject of Mr Ramsay's research, 'subject and object and the nature of reality,' can be best understood if you 'think of a kitchen table, when you're not there,' we can map out the different relations the people in the household have to the kitchen table.⁹¹ Mr Ramsay is in fact never 'there' where the kitchen table is, and has no knowledge of what goes on around it, Mrs Ramsay has an extensive secondhand knowledge of the kitchen table, and the labour it witnesses on a daily basis, but she is never 'there' either. Mildred, Ellen, Mrs McNab, and Mrs Bast, the servants who wait upon the Ramsays, are, in fact, actually there. The narrative also produces a vision of the abandoned furniture in the house, existing and changing, when no human agent exists.

⁹¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 1927 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1930) 40, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.176580/mode/2up>.

As has been pointed out by Maurizia Boscagli and Susan Fraiman, the ‘Time Passes’ section of *To the Lighthouse*, creates a hauntingly evocative vision of the house, its architecture, furnishings, and objects of daily use when no socialized human perspective exists to categorize these objects.⁹² These objects slowly morph into different forms, even moving towards a state in which their discrete-ness (for human perception) will be annihilated, as they interact with the natural forces of the Hebrides, without human intervention. The counterpoint to this is the hard work accomplished by Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast, as they return the house into a state which can be deemed fit for inhabitation by bourgeois subjects, interacting with the new assemblages that have arrived in the household, to shape them into forms that resemble the trappings of middle-class British life after 1918:

‘Slowly and painfully, with broom and pail, mopping, scouring, Mrs. McNab, Mrs. Bast, stayed the corruption and the rot; rescued from the pool of Time that was fast closing over them now a basin, now a cupboard; fetched up from oblivion all the Waverley novels and a tea-set one morning; in the afternoon restored to sun and air a brass fender and a set of steel fire-irons... Oh, they said, the work!... Flopped on chairs, they contemplated now the magnificent conquest over taps and bath; now the more arduous, more partial triumph over long rows of books, black as ravens once, now white-stained, breeding pale mushrooms and secreting furtive spiders.’⁹³

Mrs McNab’s labour involves a sensuous interaction with these objects, carefully noting how these objects have deviated from bourgeois standards of usability, of ‘every groove, stain, knife, fork,’ like Crosby’s labour in *The Years*.

The kitchen table provides us with a significant point of entry into the theoretical framework of this dissertation, given that tables have played a significant role in the study of the individual’s orientation to what lies in front of them. As Sara Ahmed points out, both Husserl and Heidegger

⁹² Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 199- 208; Susan Fraiman, *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) 28.

⁹³ [Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 215.](#)

use the 'table' as a starting point for their enquiry into how they (and their wives, children, and domestic servants) are oriented to the world around them. Ahmed traces out how both men use the table in normative ways, i.e. to follow their sedentary occupations as men of letters, while the other members of the household, are either invisibilised, or seen following occupations suitable~~similar~~ to their age, sex, and class positions.⁹⁴ The philosopher is aware of his children, but does not fear being disturbed by them at his study table. ~~He~~ He is also found reading at a common table, enjoying the pleasures of family life as his children and his wife play games or do needlework, providing him with a domestic harmony, which enables him to get on with his professional life. As Ahmed points out, these philosophers participate in a wider culture which promotes the masculine home-owners orientation to the household as the norm, and hence, systematically invisibilizes the work of subaltern subjects who are perforce tied to domestic objects, and hence denied the chance to inhabit normative modes of relating to the domestic sphere. Ahmed then argues that subjects who dissent from this bourgeois heteropatriarchal norm must firstly, highlight the manner in which their modes of relating to domestic spaces differ from these standards, and secondly, put forward their creative modes of living in domestic spaces.

This dissertation will attempt to study how Woolf strategically places the praxis of domestic labour as a lens through which we can understand how our lives are entangled with various assemblages of non- human objects in our homes. We might consider the children in *The Waves*, articulating their piecemeal knowledge of their surroundings, as a engaged inform~~of~~ coming to terms with objects as portions of sensuous materiality, rather than a network of signifiers. “
“Look at the table-cloth, flying white along the table,” said Rhoda, ‘Now there are rounds of

⁹⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

white china, and silver streaks beside each plate.”⁹⁵ Rhoda’s emergence as a being with cognitive abilities is thus facilitated by the sensuous object-world around her. Moreover, Woolf makes the point that it is the quotidian performance of gendered work that enables human consciousness to arrive at this stage of cognition. As Bernard says:

“Mrs Constable, girt in a bath-towel, takes her lemon-coloured sponge and soaks it in water; it turns chocolate-brown; it drips; and, holding it high above me, shivering beneath her, she squeezes it. Water pours down the runnel of my spine. Bright arrows of sensation shoot on either side. I am covered with warm flesh. My dry crannies are wetted; my cold body is warmed; it is sluiced and gleaming. Water descends and sheets me like an eel. Now hot towels envelop me, and their roughness, as I rub my back, makes my blood purr. Rich and heavy sensations form on the roof of my mind...”⁹⁶

Here, Bernard’s awareness of his subjectivity, takes place in a material continuum between the water descending on him and his own body. This emergence into a state of subjectivity is made possible by the labour of Mrs Constable, the servant. On the one hand, Mrs Constable’s tending of the body could be read as the result of a gendered and class-based division of labour, which regards the cleaning of a human body as abject work relegated to female servants. Yet, Woolf’s prose refuses to divorce this domestic labour from either the sensuous apprehension of matter, or the ability to revel in subjective sensations. Both these aspects come to characterize Bernard’s evolution as a poet, as the text unfolds.

As the rest of this section will show, the framework in which this thesis can be placed, is a diverse toolbox of post-humanist schools of thought, which ask us to dismantle the supremacy of the human subject, who is seen as the sole subject, invested with agency over the world of ‘nature’ or materiality. Taking the supremacy of ‘human agency’ as a given is a cornerstone of

⁹⁵ Woolf, *The Waves*, 1929 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1960) 8, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.2478/mode/2up>.

⁹⁶ Woolf, *The Waves*, 19.

philosophical traditions in which subaltern human subjects are also frequently given the status of objects without agency, except to provide labour under exploitative conditions.

3a. 'Subject and Object and the Nature of Reality'

Philosophical thought about how the individual consciousness relates to the external world around it has conventionally been structured through the binary of subject and object. The subject is the conscious entity with agency, and that which it contemplates or acts upon is the object. Thus, the (by default human) subject dominates this hierarchy. As Jean Baudrillard writes, 'We have always lived off the splendor of the subject and the poverty of the object... The object is shamed, obscene, passive, prostituted, the incarnation of Evil, of pure alienation.'⁹⁷

Non-human material objects present themselves to the perceiving subject working within a social framework, as entities that exceed or transcend their sensuous materiality, and function as signifiers 'through' which we are able to access the 'meaning' which this object holds for us. As Bill Brown writes, we interact with objects 'to see what they disclose about history, society, nature or culture - above all, what they disclose about *us*.'⁹⁸ Indeed, as Baudrillard, extending Marx's concept of commodity fetishism writes, it is this ability to divorce the material quality of the object from its signification, that enables the proliferating markets of high and late capitalism, given that consumption then becomes a process ~~which~~ that recedes further and further away from the sphere of material needs, experienced by the human subject.

⁹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans Philippe Beitchmann and W.G.J. Niesluchowski, originally published in French in 1983, first published in English in 1990 (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008) 141.

⁹⁸ Bill Brown, Thing Theory, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1-(Autumn, 2001): 4, jstor.org, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28200123%2928%3A1%3C1%3ATT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4>.

As Baudrillard points out, the bourgeois domestic interior ~~is a site which~~ has traditionally been viewed as a site in which non-human objects, like furniture and furnishings, are interpreted as exceeding their spatial and temporal contours, in order to produce a rigorous set of signifiers, signifying the stable, ‘moral dimension’ of a set of heteropatriarchal values, which Baudrillard interprets thus:

‘There is a tendency to accumulate, to fill and close off the space. The emphasis is on unfunctionality, immovability, imposing presence and hierarchic labeling. Each room has a strictly defined role corresponding to one or another of the various functions of the family unit... The pieces of furniture confront one another, jostle one another, and implicate one another in a unity that is not so much spatial as moral in character... All this constitutes an organism whose structure is the patriarchal relationship founded on tradition and authority, and whose heart is the complex affective relationship that binds all the family members together.... [T]he primary function of furniture and objects here is to personify human relationships, to fill the space that they fill between them, and to be inhabited by a soul. The real dimension they occupy is captive to the moral dimension which it is their job to signify. They have as little autonomy in this space as the various family members enjoy in society. Human beings are indeed bound together in a collusion in which objects take on a certain density, an emotional value- what might be called a ‘presence... In their anthropomorphism the objects that furnish it become household gods, spatial incarnations of the emotional bonds and the permanence of the family group.’⁹⁹

What comes through in this formulation is the manner in which the qualities of stability and permanence are shored up in the furniture, via this frame of viewing the entities that make up the spaces of ‘home,’ so that they become items to be valued for the ‘emotional’ qualities they have been invested in. This method of rendering the household into an intricately wrought space of normative emotions depends upon the object-status of the things arrayed before the viewing subject. Some of the most studied settings in Woolf’s novels, are, of course, reminiscent of this order, such as the dinner table at the Ramsay’s in *To the Lighthouse*, the over-crowded Pargiter household in *The Years*, or the Stephen household in *Moments of Being*.

⁹⁹ Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Bennedict, first published in French by Editions Gallimard in 1968 (London and New York: Verso, 1996) 16.

This ~~of course~~ brings us to the fact that the position of the subject is hardly a ‘universal’ category. Not only is it confined to the human species, the ‘I’ who articulates their inferences from observations of the world as universal experiences, is usually a white male subject with access to capital and power, the ‘master’ of his household, as well as a member of a ‘master race.’ Moreover, as Benjamin’s image of the corpse of an aunt on a sofa illustrates, women in capitalist homes are expected to not only inhabit a realm of immanence in which they are closely coupled with the non-human objects in the household, but also required to inhabit the role of being the objects of the love and desire of their menfolk.

Martha Nussbaum, drawing on anti-pornography writing, points out that women’s relationships with men are often structured through sexual, economic and social inequalities which cause them to share a state of objectification with ‘things.’¹⁰⁰ Nussbaum mentions the characteristics that women and non-human objects share, separately or all at once, when they are objectified, as instrumentality, lack of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, being owned by another and lack of subjectivity. Nussbaum also writes that objectification is a wide spectrum. On one hand, it encompasses systematic denigration, by placing non-human objects and human beings on the same level, as the objects whose presence serves as a means to gratify the subject’s sense of status, as one who can dominate and deny autonomy to the objects of their gaze. On the other, it includes consenting relationships in which two parties can blur and share the boundaries they occupy, while respecting the individuality and autonomy of the entity whom they make the object of their gaze and actions.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Martha Nussbaum, ‘Objectification’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24(4)(1995): 249–291.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

For the last two decades, there has been a growing corpus of scholarship which has looked at modernism through the lens of object-oriented ontology, bringing to light an aesthetic which questions the ‘poverty’ of the object, as Baudrillard puts it.¹⁰² Given that ontology is the branch of philosophy that studies the question(s) of being, object oriented ontology is premised as a ‘flat’ ontology which refuses to hold on to the hierarchical binaries of subject/ object and human/ ‘nature.’ The roots of object oriented ontology lie in Bruno Latour’s understanding of agency being distributed between quasi-subjects and quasi-objects.¹⁰³ This is very much a part of the larger post-humanist turn towards questioning the supremacy of the ‘universal’ human subject over a world of objects, positing on the one hand, that the consciousness of the subject in philosophy is frequently that of a white bourgeois man, and on the other, that encounters do not always take place between active subjects and passive objects. Rather than being mere passive matter, the entities designated as objects also exert a counter-force, and shape the entities conventionally assigned the role of subject.¹⁰⁴ As Graham Harman points out, the object can never be exhaustively understood by any individual or group, who assign to themselves the position of a consciousness interpreting and manipulating objects. Any given object, according to Harman, will always have an interiority which will forever challenge and tantalize the subject.¹⁰⁵

Taking from Latour, Bill Brown uses the concept of ‘thing theory,’ first formulated in 2001, to work out the irreducible difference between ‘objects’ and ‘things.’ Brown writes that though

¹⁰² Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 141

¹⁰³ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); ‘A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans: Following Dedalus’ Labyrinth.’ In *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999) 174-215.

¹⁰⁴ See for instance, Graham Harman, *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 2002); Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: Re. press, 2009); Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, ed. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2011), Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁵ See Harman, esp *Tool Being*.

humans are socialized to routinely look ‘through’ objects, we are constantly interrupted by the contingent, physical nature of the objects that surround us, causing us to confront what Brown calls their ‘thingness.’ He points out that, although experiencing ‘personhood’ remains inseparable from a ‘routine’ of differentiating things from persons, ‘such routine can find itself challenged (dramatically or inconspicuously) either because, enmeshed as we are in the object world, we can’t at times differentiate ourselves from things, or because these things (however actively or passively) have come to resemble us.’¹⁰⁶

The literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has appealed to scholars of object-oriented ontology, firstly, because of the self-reflexive way in which modernism reflects upon the human subject’s location, in the age of high capitalism. As Marx points out capitalism thrives on a confusion of traditional ontological categories i.e. ‘material relations between persons and social relations between things.’¹⁰⁷ If the worth of human labour is determined by whatever labour lies ‘congealed’ in the commodities it produces, the worth of commodities and material objects that pass through the production process and/or the marketplace are determined through the social exchanges that take place. Thus, the commodities, as Marx points out, find the measure of their individual exchange value by measuring themselves against each other, like human beings in a society.¹⁰⁸

The myriad non-living objects that fill dwelling places, such as the rooms of Benjamin’s ‘Manorially Furnished Ten Room Apartment’ can be categorized as ‘stuff,’ to use Maurizia Boscagli’s term. Boscagli explains that:

¹⁰⁶ Bill Brown, *Other Things*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) 9.

¹⁰⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol I, trans Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, first published in German in 1867, first English edition in 1897, pdf from Marxists.org, 48.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ Marx, Chapter 1, ‘Commodities,’ in *Capital* Vol 1, 27-57.

‘The word ‘stuff’ appropriately expresses the everydayness of hybrid materiality: it has a mundane ring that also speaks, nevertheless, of the potential threat that all our possessions pose to us. ‘You have all that stuff?’... Stuff is the satellitary system of objects that continually accompanies and never leaves us; these are the prosthetic things that fill our pockets and purses, closets and trunks with which we furnish the self and the spaces we inhabit. Stuff is the expendable and necessary appendix that tells us that we exist and function, and yet weighs us down. It designates the useless and “used up” on its way to being thrown out, as we sense on contemplating the contents of a drawer of bric-à-brac. Stuff is unstable, recyclable, made of elements put in place by different networks of power and meaning, that encounter one another by chance and cohere only temporarily by affinity.’¹⁰⁹

Boscagli’s description of stuff thus opens up a space in which we are forced to acknowledge the fact that practically everything that urban modernity offers for us to consume is always commodified, and yet, the material existence of the object forces us to acknowledge that its presence in our lives cannot be exhausted by the value that it might signify among networks of exchange.

Much modernist writing, like Benjamin’s, attempts to understand the ambivalent, elusive nature of ‘stuff,’ and the forces shaping the one’s understanding of objects in the modern world, as an ever expanding tide of commodities flooded the markets of West Europe. As Bill Brown writes:

‘Whether you consider the constructivist effort to overcome ‘the rupture between things and people’ by dynamiz[ing] the thing into something connected like a co-worker with human practice or you confront the objects that act and speak on their own in the Circe episode of *Ulysses*, or you linger in front of Man Ray’s *Object To Be Destroyed*, you experience modernism’s persistent effort to blur (or expunge) the lines of modernity’s ontological map.’¹¹⁰

This aesthetic is usually understood as stemming from the widespread deployment of new forms of technology at the turn of the century, i.e, the cinema, the car, and the aeroplane, which

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin, 48-49, Boscagli, 5.

¹¹⁰ Brown, *Other Things*, 169, Brown quotes Boris Arvatov, referring to Constructivism, the art movement concentrated in the USSR in the inter-war years, which sought to produce a new aesthetic of material agglomerations for a post-Revolution society, in which the thing was imagined as ‘connected like a co-worker with human practice.’ Boris Arvatov, ‘Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)’ (1925), trans. Christina Kiaer, *October* 75 (Winter 1996): 3, [jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org/stable/779022), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/779022>.

appeared to supersede a Newtonian understanding of matter. In Boscagli's words, these new scientific marvels, 'gave a new sense of fluidity to everyday experience and gave rise to a kinetic apprehension of space... Matter here has no defined, apriori form, but rather could be thought of as temporarily aggregating into an event.'¹¹¹

3b. Material Feminisms:

If the technological changes attendant upon the first half of the twentieth century influenced radical changes in literary and visual aesthetics, it is important to note that Woolf locates her understanding of changing material conditions in a specifically feminine context. As Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own*, the canon of existing English literature laid out before the narrator, fails to provide precedent for an aesthetic which can convey what it means for women to grapple with the materiality of the domestic sphere:

...but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room. The rooms differ so completely; they are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horsehair or soft as feathers--one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this: time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics.²¹¹²

This passage illustrates what I feel is a crucial aspect of Woolf's work. The material aspects of the domestic sphere are not dross which the feminine writer needs to transcend, in order to ascend to the realm of thought or language. Instead, it is imperative for her to understand the manner in which women have permeated the material realm, which they inhabit and furnish with

¹¹¹ Boscagli, 18.

¹¹² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 131.

their labour, as well as the manner in which this close co-habitation with the materiality of the domestic interior has inflected the language and thought that a woman writer must seek to articulate.

Simone de Beauvoir's critique of how femininity has traditionally been aligned to the material world, or the realm of 'immanence,' to bodily processes, abjection, and those forms of consumption, production and reproduction deemed inferior, remains a cornerstone of feminist critiques of how dominant fields of philosophy have been shaped. Moreover, the post humanist turn in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century, has, in many respects, been spearheaded by material feminisms which choose to focus on the irreducible materiality of encounters taking place in the world. Recognizing that the sphere of abstraction or 'transcendence' has always functioned as a domain that excludes subjects who fall outside the standards of normative masculinity, feminist scholarship has worked out various fruitful methods of engaging with materiality on feminist terms.

Karen Barad's theorizations of specific encounters between entities or 'phenomena,' for instance, refuses to subscribe to a philosophy which seeks to rationalize events or objects by abstracting the meanings they signify, or establishing a clear separation between the human agent and the material world. Instead, for Barad, our encounters with 'reality' always take place so that we are embedded within the material realm, which we shape and are shaped by. Like the infant Bernard in *The Waves*, inching towards subjective self-expression, upon feeling the impact of an adult human body, warm water and hot towels, it is the presence of other material bodies which makes us aware of our own embodied existence. Moreover, as Barad writes:

Material conditions matter, not because they 'support' or 'sustain' or 'mediate' particular discourses that are actual generative factors in the formation of subjects, but

because both discourses and matter come to matter through processes of materialization and the iterative enfolding of phenomenon into apparatuses of bodily functions.¹¹³

As Barad and other material feminists have proved, attempting to establish a realm of thought outside the realm of matter, is a futile endeavor for philosophical traditions which attempt to step out of hierarchical structures, and instead it is fruitful to think within a paradigm of ‘entanglements.’ Entanglement as Barad sees it, is a paradigm which sees materiality as a realm which the we can never leave behind, given that the subjectivity of any body is deeply entangled with a host of proliferating forms of material entities which it co-exists with, as well as the subjectivities of these bodies.¹¹⁴

Barad argues that responsible, ethical action is furthered when we go beyond formulating agency as something that belongs solely to the subject, indeed, as something that could be formulated as an ‘attribute.’¹¹⁵ Instead, she formulates her concept of diffraction which involves reading one entity *through* another without deciding on subject and object in advance.¹¹⁶ It is however, important to delineate a strategic ‘agential cut,’ within the phenomenon, in order to attribute agency, so as to be able to take an ethical position and negotiate responsibility and accountability. Thus, we can understand how entities emerge, by studying the processes through which they establish themselves as ‘separate,’ inside the phenomenon within which they act.¹¹⁷ Thus Barad arrives at her formulation of ‘onto-epistemology,’ stating that, ‘knowing is a material practice of entanglement as well as a part of the world in its differential becoming.’¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009) 244.

¹¹⁴ Barad.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 177.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 30.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 110.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 89.

Resonating with Woolf's articulation of a room in a house as a place super-charged with the subjectivity of the feminine bodies, to the very bricks that make up the walls, Barad argues that space can never be formulated as a 'container' within which a phenomenon takes place. Rather, space is brought into being through the process of 'intra-acting' within the phenomenon.¹¹⁹

New Material feminism has thus found fertile ground in the study of 'assemblages' to use Jane Bennett's term. To study inter-connected relations between various forms of matter as 'assemblages,' involves a non-hierarchical methodology, focusing on how different, apparently discrete entities, are inextricably linked to each other, and unpacking the political movements that are wrought by these assemblages.¹²⁰

This brings us back to Maurizia Boscagli's 'Stuff Theory.' When studying the domestic interior, the thesis will study how Woolf's subjects and objects co-inhabit the domestic sphere through material connections, which in turn, inform the political orientations that various entities come to inhabit and/or perform. The assemblages located among the proliferating tides of commodity capitalism, as captured by the writer of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,' 'Street Haunting' and '*The London Scene*,' are brought into being by the space that they share, i.e. the domestic sphere, the shopping arcade, and the planet linked through imperial networks. The assemblages in turn shape the spaces they function in, through the economic and political valences of their constituent parts, and as well as the valences bring into being as they assemble. The 'self' that is thus furnished forth, is furnished through a nexus of political forces, contributed to by the entities it interacts with, the space that it dwells in, and the process of making an assemblage.

¹¹⁹ Barad, 89.

¹²⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

This thesis is going to trace out how Woolf works with this aesthetic and the various lenses through which she interprets it. Moreover when we come to the question of *why* Woolf would find this approach especially exciting, I would argue that Woolf grounds this ontological rupture in an understanding of reproductive labour, a grounding that raises fundamental questions about the relationship between an object and human labour. To return to the question raised in the first section of the Introduction, Woolf sees the modernism ushered in after 1910, as an aesthetic which factors in the issue of reproductive labour, in a world where relations between human subjects and the object world are rapidly changing.

3c. Domestic Labour

According to Heidegger, our understanding of the Being of a ‘useful thing,’ (alternately translated as ‘equipment’) is contingent upon its ‘handiness’(alternately translated as ‘readiness to hand’) when we come into contact with it, and the object’s being can be truly realized by the human subject when it performs the function it was meant to perform, i.e. a jug’s qualities of holding and pouring can be realized when it holds a liquid and/or a person pours from it, rather than in the making of the jug.¹²¹ But what if one’s knowledge of things came, not simply from our knowledge of how to use them, but also included a knowledge of making sure that those useful things were usable i.e. if we had to wash the jug, and pour water into the jug so that we might know the jug not only as a useful object, but as an object which required work and care in order to realize its qualities of pourability?

As I will explore in detail in the second chapter, British Post-Impressionism, the school of visual art that Woolf was most closely aligned to, was committed to an aesthetic involving which was

¹²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, first published in German in 1953 (New York: State of New York University Press, 1996) 64-65; ‘The Thing,’ in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Harper Perennial: New York, 1971) 164-167.

committed to the close observation of the domestic interior in order to render it into ‘significant form.’ As Woolf’s own sister Vanessa Bell would point out in 1925,

‘Even a kitchen coal scuttle may become the most exciting continuation of curves and hollows, deep shadows and silver edges, instead of a tiresome thing to be filled with coal, or a half worn out thing that will soon need renewal.’¹²²

Thinking about domesticity helps us to add a further twist to Brown’s Thing theory. If, according to Brown,

‘We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.’¹²³

If this is so, how would the subject who is aware of a feminine legacy of having to care for objects in the household so that they always function as they should, (and hence constantly aware of how things regularly do stop working for us) look at the objects of an interior? When we look at a curtain to decide whether we should wash it, we do not look at it as an object used for keeping out light, or trapping warmth, or as a cultural artifact. Instead, we look at the colour, the smell, and the texture of the curtain to figure out how the ‘form and colour’ of the curtain has interacted with what we classify as matter foreign to the curtain (i.e. dirt) in order to make a decision which factors in both the usefulness of the curtain and the aesthetic effect that the curtain has upon our senses. It is thus possible to hypothesize that the coal scuttle emerges as an object whose form is significant for the subject who dwells in close proximity to the scuttle, as a

¹²² Vanessa Bell, speech at Leighton Park school, January 1925, quoted in Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell: Portrait of a Bloomsbury Artist* (London: Tauris Parke, 1983) 204.

¹²³ Brown, ‘Thing Theory,’ 4.

paid or unpaid worker, making it possible for the subject to endow the object with ‘significance,’ even as the object, by being present, produces in the subject, an aesthetic perspective.

Heidegger begins his inquiry into the ‘thing,’ with a tale about a ‘whimsical and good looking maid from Thrace,’ who laughs at the philosopher contemplating the skies, and tells him that ‘things in front of his very nose and feet were unseen by him.’¹²⁴ Perhaps it is time to take this as something more than a corrective to the philosopher. We could read it instead as a call to ask the housemaid herself about her understanding of the philosophy that informs her daily praxis.

Yet, while dwelling on a sensuous apprehension of the material world, it is important to factor in Marx and Engel’s critique of the normative understanding of ‘nature’ as a realm of ‘sensuous certainty.’¹²⁵ Instead, Marx tells us, we need to be able to recognize that the presence of objects around us, even objects that appear to belong outside the human realm, like a cherry tree, are set before us, as a result of the processes~~the products~~ of human labour. As Sara Ahmed points out, the lack that has informed traditional phenomenological inquiry is this assumption that the object world is set out, ready for human perception, by being emptied of reminders of the processes through which these objects occupied these spaces:

‘History cannot simply be perceived on the surface of the object, even if how objects surface or take shape is an effect of such histories... Objects appear by being cut off from such histories of arrival, as histories that involve multiple generations, and the ‘work’ of bodies, which is of course the work of some bodies more than others.’¹²⁶

Perhaps, then, studying domestic labour could be a means of addressing the manner in which the very sensuous certainty manifested in the surfaces of the objects are in fact the sites where labour

¹²⁴ Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, trans. W.B. Barton and Vera Deustch, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1967), 3.

¹²⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The German Ideology,’ in *The Marx Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1978), 170.

¹²⁶ Ahmed, 41.

takes place, and hence, the laboring body of the domestic worker is brought into a sensuous contact with the labour of various actors, human and non-human, who have engendered this moment of contact between the domestic object and the domestic worker.

In the 'Time Passes' section of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf raises the question of Mrs McNab's awareness of the nature of temporality, labour, and the non-human world, only to foreclose this exploration without being able to answer the question of whether Mrs McNab differs from her employers on the question of subject and object and the nature of reality. However, in writing *The Years* ten years later, Woolf appears to have found a new method of discovering subaltern ideological dissent. Repeatedly, this thesis thus visits Woolf's comment, quoted at the beginning of the thesis, about the ageing servant Crosby's relationship to the house in which she has spent many years of service, and the objects she has studied from angles which her employers, the 'legitimate,' owners of the house and all it contains, have no knowledge of. The knowledge Crosby has gained about the domestic interior, 'on her knees,' is a symptom of her abject status in the household, upon which the well-being of the bourgeois Pargiters is based, but is at the same time, a legitimate knowledge which informs the praxis of reproductive labour. Crosby pounces upon chances to squirrel away things that her employers treat as the 'mere' stuff that makes up their home. She reclaims these objects and finally displays them in the precarious room of her own to which she retires after a lifetime of service. Crosby's salvaging is, on the one hand, meant to be read as a mark of her slavish dependence upon the aesthetic standards of the class which systematically exploited her labour, but on the other hand, can be read as Crosby's desire to subvert the laws of property and take away from her employers, the objects which have

shaped her life, even as her scrubbing and polishing have shaped the forms of these objects, ~~and~~ which she finally claims as her own.¹²⁷

In the context of an industrialized society, reproductive labour constructs a unique relationship to the end products of the worker's labour. The homemaker's work involves 'producing' certain items which meet the family's essential needs, like food and clothing, and at the same time 'reproducing,' not only in the sense of giving birth to children, but also in the sense of reproducing the conditions which make it possible for the members of the family, engaged in productive labour, to function as productive members of the labour force, day after day. The work of child bearing and child rearing makes it possible to replenish the labour force with a new generation. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, therefore, postulates that the binarization of the home and the workplace, as the spheres of consumption and production respectively, is invalid because the home is 'a centre of production,' the product created being the human worker.¹²⁸ Calling the home the centre of consumption is thus a discourse that deliberately devalues unpaid labour. Instead, Dalla Costa argues, that unpaid domestic labour contributes to the surplus that accrues to the capitalist, because this labour ensures the productivity of the labourer.¹²⁹

Theorizations of domestic labour have attempted to understand this labour in various ways, pointing out the necessary and skillful nature of the work, and how, usually, this work functions as a subsidy to the capitalist by allowing a better standard of living on a lower wage. This work can also resist patriarchal capitalism, for instance, by making it possible to feed communities during industrial strikes, as mentioned earlier, and also by homemakers' ability to refuse housework, and go on strike themselves in order to make the value of their labour understood.

¹²⁷ Woolf, *The Years*, 218.

¹²⁸ Dalla Costa, especially 'Preface to the Italian Edition of *Women and the Subversion of the Community*,' trans. Richard Braude, in the *Dalla Costa Reader*, first published in 1972, 36-37.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Selma James, for instance, points out that domestic work lies in continuum with other forms of unwaged work undertaken by unorganized workers and workers in the Third World who are central to capitalist accumulation. This is why, she points out, Virginia Woolf made a path-breaking contribution to our understanding of domestic labour, by articulating that domestic labour is a sector of unwaged work which forms the backbone of human society as we know it, and deserves a wage in a society with any pretensions to being a peaceful and equitable civilisation.¹³⁰

On the one hand, it can be argued that domestic labour allows the subject to engage in a more sensuous, unmediated relationship with the object world, than the waged labourer who is alienated from the product of his labour, selling units of his labour power in linear time, in exchange for a wage. According to Nancy Hartsock, this very attachment to producing items which are required for humans to subsist upon, and hence required for their use value, keeps women more in touch with the nuances of an ever-shifting material world than paid worker in the public sphere, working under capitalism, who is immersed in a the world of exchange values.¹³¹

But on the other hand, it is this very immersion in the material world, and in the production of things which can be used up by family members, that constitutes the grounds for oppression. As Simone de Beauvoir points out, much of the reason why unpaid domestic work is seen as excruciatingly exploitative, is because the work does not leave behind any lasting product through which the labourer could measure her achievements. At the same time, the work requires

¹³⁰ Selma James, 'The Challenge of Diversity: Reflections on a Conference (1990),' in *Race, Sex, and Class: A Perspective of Winning* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012) 209, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/sexraceclasspers0000jame/mode/1up>.

¹³¹ Nancy Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,' in *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*, 1998 (London and New York: Routledge, 2019) epub.

an immersion in the realm of what de Beauvoir calls ‘immanence,’ in order to produce a space ordered according to an established but varied routine, which members of the family recognize as home:

“The housewife who alienates herself in things depends, like things, on the whole world: linens turn gray, the roast burns, china breaks; these are absolute disasters because when things disappear, they disappear irremediably.”¹³²

This labour occupies a circular routine, resembling ‘the torment of Sisyphus,’ as tasks like washing dishes, washing clothes, and dusting have to be repeated over and over, the nuclear family being structured so as make the housewife’s labours contingent upon the way in which the family members treat this designated space of leisure, where they need not abide by the discipline of the public sphere.¹³³

In such a context, how do women claim personal spaces for themselves? Woolf located the condition that would facilitate the emergence of the woman writer, as the ability to establish a claim for a comfortable home-space on the basis of an income calibrated according to the standards of living in 1929.¹³⁴ After all, a normative home, with a husband and children, even when filled with signifiers of rest and leisure, is thus the site of ontological confusion for the homemaker, since there is never a place for her to relax in and hardly a place for her to write in.¹³⁵ The very nature of domestic labour is such that it keeps on expanding. As Caroline Davidson writes:

¹³² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier, first published in French in 1949 (New York: Vintage, 2011) 548, archive.org <https://archive.org/details/1949SimoneDeBeauvoirTheSecondSex/mode/1up>.

¹³³ De Beauvoir, 539.

¹³⁴ i.e. ‘five hundred pounds and a room of one’s own.’ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*.

¹³⁵ Selma James, *A Woman’s Place*, (~~np: 1953~~) first published as a column in *Correspondences* in 1952, (np: 1953) accessed from https://anth1001.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/james_a-womans-place.pdf.

“...it is evident that housework obeys Parkinson’s Law: ‘work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.’ In other words, women working outside the home always did their housework more quickly than those who were full-time housewives. They had to. In the same way, the spread of utilities and time-and-labour-saving appliances did not have any discernible long-term effect on the average housewife’s working hours. Time saved on one task was simply put to new use and the scope of housework redefined. A woman who gained an extra 45 minutes a day through the introduction of piped water into her house would use them to do more cleaning and washing. Similarly, a woman whose coal range was replaced with a gas stove would cook more elaborate meals than she had previously, because it was so much easier.”¹³⁶

Sara Ahmed points out that an individual’s ‘orientation’ to a domestic space is always inflected by a subject’s relationship to the standards of the heteropatriarchal family, reflected in culturally produced images of how a given space should be arranged. Yet, the material contours of a given space can be re-worked by a queer subject in order to produce an affect which dissents from these standards and sustains the subject’s well-being.¹³⁷

The contradictory nature of domestic labour, is responsible for the contradictory interpretations of domestic labour in Woolf’s oeuvre. Domestic labour is both a praxis which allows women to move beyond the subject-object relations determined for them within patriarchy, as well as a ‘duty’ women are exploited for being paid and unpaid practitioners of. On the one hand, Jane Carlyle is driven to her death by a life-time of driving out bed-bugs from her house, and Mrs Ramsay goes to an early grave worn out by the demands of provisioning an enormous family and a learned husband. On the other hand, Virginia and Vanessa Stephen marked their passage from the patriarchal household to Bloomsbury, by furnishing their new house with furnishings, which they felt were inspirations to them in their becoming artists. In doing so, they were imitating Charlotte Brontë’s act of claiming the parlour in Haworth Parsonage, by furnishing it with her own income, in order to substantiate her identity as a novelist. If Mrs McNab cleans up and tidies

¹³⁶ Davidson, 192.

¹³⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

the Ramsays' belongings and delivers them back to her employers, Crosby's acts of salvaging can be read as moments of de-Certeau-ian *perruque*, sneaking moments in which ~~shethey~~ manipulates time, space, and material, in order to perform activities which secure ~~hertheir~~ own pleasures, rather than those of ~~their~~ employers.¹³⁸

4. Review of Existing Literature:

This thesis drew on a number of traditions of scholarship in order to identify the gap it wished to address and to flesh out the various angles which it addressed. Firstly, it required a fairly extensive study of the groundwork laid down by the first and second generation of Woolfians to establish Woolf as a path breaking feminist writer, in order to understand Woolf's legacy as an explorer of feminine experiences of the world. The work of Ellen Hawkes, Jane Lilienfeld, Jane Marcus, Eileen Barrett, Patricia Cramer and Elizabeth Abel, along with an extensive reading of back numbers of the *Woolf Studies Annual*, and publications from the international Virginia Woolf Conferences, provided insights into how legacies of reading Woolf's understanding of relations between women and women's experiences of domesticity evolved, in the ever-expanding corpus of Woolf scholarship.¹³⁹

¹³⁸Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, 3rd ed., (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 25-26. de Certeau defines '*perruque*' as 'the workers own work disguised as work for the employer... work that is free, creative, and precisely not diverted towards profit.' *Perruque* cannot be strictly categorized as theft since it does not include taking anything of value, only 'scraps,' and the theft of time (since the employer expends his productivity for his own ends on 'company time' rather than for the employer.)

¹³⁹Ellen Hawkes, 'Woolf's Magical Garden of Women,' and Jane Lilienfeld 'Where the Spear Plants Grew: The Ramsay's Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*,' in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus, (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1981) 31-60, 148- 169; Elizabeth Abel, 'Narrative Structure and Female Development: The Case of *Mrs Dalloway*,' in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, (London and Hanover: University of New England Press, 1983) 103-125; Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, ed Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997.)

This then had to be collated with scholarship about how Woolf explores women's negotiations of the public sphere in order to studyrealize how Woolf understands British women's roles as flaneuses, writers, shoppers, homemakers, and consumers of imperial trade.¹⁴⁰ Rachel Bowlby's scholarship foregrounds Woolf's treatment of women in a state of transit, from Mrs Brown in her railway carriage to the narrator of 'Street Haunting,' to trace a feminine modernist aesthetic of viewing the world by; constantly shuttling between the public and the private (which includes both spaces demarcated as private, as well as the subject's interiority.) The earliest scholarship to trace Woolf's nuanced understanding of how the role of consumers and provisioners of households gave women a chance to enjoy commodity spectacle, and also victimized them by repeatedly holding up standards of ideal consumption was possibly Reginald Abbot's 1992 essay 'What Miss Kilman's Petticoat Means.' Ching-fang Tseng's essay on the relationship between flanerie, shopping, and home-making, establishes the connection between how women's roles as homemakers and the impact of these roles in the public sphere. Kathryn Simpson's study of

¹⁴⁰Jennifer Wicke, 'Mrs Dalloway goes to Market: Woolf, Keynes, and Modern Markets,' *Novel* 28, (Fall 1994), ~~pp.~~ 5-23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1345911>, accessed 3 September 2018; Rachel Bowlby, 'Walking, Women, and Writing: Virginia Woolf as *flaneuse*,' in *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing, and Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) and *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1997); Reginald Abbott, 'What Miss Kilman's Petticoat Means: Virginia Woolf, Spectacle, and Shopping,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, Spring 1992, 38 (no 1) 193-216, [jstor.org, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26284323](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26284323); Anna Snaith and Michael Whitworth, *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place*, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) ; SonitaSarker, 'Locating a Native Englishness in Virginia Woolf's *The London Scene*,' *NSWA Journal* 13, no 2 (Summer, 2001): 1-30, [jstor.org, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316806](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316806); Ching-fang Tseng, 'The Flaneur, the Flaneuse, and the Hostess: Virginia Woolf's (Un)Domesticating Flanerie in Mrs. Dalloway'. *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 32.1, (January 2006), ~~pp.~~ 219-58. <http://www.concentric-literature.url.tw/issues/Animals/9.pdf> last accessed on 3.9.2018, Kathryn Simpson, *Gifts, Markets, and Economies of Desire in Virginia Woolf*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008); Alice Wood, 'Made to Measure: Virginia Woolf in *Good Housekeeping*,' *Prose Studies* Vol 32, no (1, (2010), 12-24, [academia.edu, https://www.academia.edu/388648/Made_to_Measure_Virginia_Woolf_in_Good_Housekeeping_Magazine](https://www.academia.edu/388648/Made_to_Measure_Virginia_Woolf_in_Good_Housekeeping_Magazine); Wood, 'Facing Life As We Have Known It: Virginia Woolf and the Women's Co-operative Guild,' *Literature and History*, Vol 23, ~~(no~~ 2, (2014) 18-34, [academia.edu https://www.academia.edu/10267864/Facing_Life_as_We_Have_Known_It_Virginia_Woolf_and_the_Womens_Co-operative_Guild](https://www.academia.edu/10267864/Facing_Life_as_We_Have_Known_It_Virginia_Woolf_and_the_Womens_Co-operative_Guild).

practices of gift-giving in Woolf's oeuvre makes the (limited) argument, that within confines the capitalist marketplace, women sometimes manage to go beyond the mutually competitive, consumerist paradigm to which they are expected to conform. Studies of Woolf's *The London Scene*, by Sonita Sarker and Alice Wood, trace the manner in which the gendered subject belonging to inter-war Britain, locates herself vis-à-vis the tides of international trade. Alice Wood's scholarship also studies the way in which the middle class narrator positions herself vis-à-vis her working class sisters.

Spatial studies of women's roles as subjects who were closely associated with domestic spaces, has been explored in Woolf scholarship, from the 2000s onwards, most notably in Anna Snaith's scholarship. This line of enquiry has been consolidated by both literary and biographical scholars, including Andrea Zengulys, and Suzanna Zink.¹⁴¹ These textual studies reveal the different ways in which Woolf's subjects inhabit domestic spaces, focusing especially on *Night and Day* and *Jacob's Room*, to tease out domestic spaces that can be both enclosed, isolating spatial units, as well as sites of creativity.

The thesis required extensive reading of scholarship that explores Woolf's modernist aesthetics as proto-object oriented ontological texts. These included the work of Bill Brown and Maurizia Boscagli, as cited before, as well as the scholarship of Douglas Mao and Ann Banfield, which were important both for the theoretical paradigms explored, as well as literary criticism.¹⁴² Mao's 1998 text locates Woolf's oeuvre in the context of commodity capitalism, and then goes on to

¹⁴¹ Andrea P. Zengulys, "'Night and Day Is Dead'": Virginia Woolf in London 'Literary and Historic,' *Twentieth Century Literature*, 46/1 (2000): 56–77. Jstor.org, <https://doi.org/10.2307/441933>; Zengulys, 'Consummate Labour: Virginia Woolf's Trek to a Better Literature,' in *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2008): 145-190; Suzana Zink, *Virginia Woolf's Rooms and the Spaces of Modernity*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), kindle edition

¹⁴² Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Anne Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Boscagli; Brown, 2015.

show how objects constantly elide definition, as the varying subjectivities of characters in various texts, repeatedly fail to plumb the depths of these objects or capture them through mimesis. Although, pre-dating the establishment of object-oriented ontology as a philosophical school of thought, Mao begins the scholarly tradition of studying texts such as the short story 'Solid Objects,' (1920), *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Years* as paradigmatic examples of how non-human objects elide the human grasp. Most subsequent scholarship has also focused on these texts. Ann Banfield's work reads Woolf in the light of the philosophical traditions of Cambridge in the first decade of the twentieth century, the philosophical explorations of Bertrand Russell, and the aesthetics of Roger Fry, ~~to study how about the manner in which~~ these traditions attempted to move away from the dependence on human subjectivity as the basis for an episteme, noting that the body which receives the 'sense data' from the external world, is not to be conflated with the 'subject,' and that what is interpreted as the object is in fact a conglomeration of sensual effects that relate to factors located 'beyond' the object.

By factoring in domestic labour in Woolf's oeuvre, and taking an intensive look at the historical context of the domestic in inter-war Britain, the thesis attempts to attack a seam in Woolf's oeuvre which has not really invited scholarly attention. Domestic labour sometimes comes up in scholarship which explores issues of class and gender, ~~or in studying~~ feminine agency, and the expenditure of feminine energy in Woolf's oeuvre, but it rarely emerges as a theme. When it does establish itself as a central part of the argument, enquiries into the nature of this form of labour are not made, and acts of domestic labour are seen as self-evident practices, without studying the specific factors shaping this labour. Alison Light's biographical scholarship and Mary Lou Emery's essay on domestic labour in *To the Lighthouse*, stand out in this context, as

sustained engagements with the question of how the agent of domestic labour is shaped by their work.¹⁴³

It is also important to note, that scholarship which dwells extensively on changing standards of housing in the inter-war years, often also historicizes the conditions under which domestic labour takes place. This is a feature of Woolf scholarship undertaken by Victoria Rosner and Pam Morris. Ruth Hoberman's study demonstrates how of how 'kitsch' is an important part of Woolf's *The Years*, providing an aesthetic which commemorates the passing of women, who are expendable in patriarchal narratives of family history.¹⁴⁴ Hoberman mentions Crosby's room decorating in her retirement lodging in Richmond as an example of 'kitsch,' calling it the 'underside' of Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist art, which in Woolf's *Roger Fry* is closely guarded from the intervention of Fry's charwoman, thus giving me a vital clue to formulate my third chapter. James Harker's work on Woolf's use of 'Mrs Brown,' as a modernist stylistic intervention, breaking away from the dominant strands of both high and early modernism, provided a good place to start from, from which I could work out a more comprehensive schema of Woolf's understanding of domesticity.¹⁴⁵

The thesis takes inputs from these various strands of scholarship in order to contextualize the research gap that it seeks to address. By studying how domestic labour features in ontological relations in the domestic interior, it addresses a lacuna in Woolf studies, i.e. that domestic labour has never been studied as a trope that might address our study of Woolf's feminism.

¹⁴³Emery, Mary Lou. 'Robbed of Meaning: The Work at the Centre of *To the Lighthouse*.' *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 1 (1992): 217–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26284324>.

¹⁴⁴ Ruth Hoberman, 'Aesthetic Taste, Kitsch, and *The Years*,' *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol 11 (2005): 77-98, [jstor.org, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24906571](https://www.jstor.org/stable/24906571).

¹⁴⁵ James Harker, 'Misperceiving Virginia Woolf,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol 34, no 2(Winter 2011): 1-21, [jstor.org, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jmodelite.34.2.1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jmodelite.34.2.1).

5. Research gap:

Thus, my thesis argues that domestic labour lies at the heart of the woman writer's participation in the modernist questioning of the nature of being and matter. It will address the hitherto unstudied question of how domestic labour informs those aspects of Woolf's writing which question the supremacy of the masculine subject as the interpreter of objects in the domestic interior, and posit other, alternative ways of understanding the dynamics of a domestic space. In doing so, it will contribute to the study of Woolf's uniquely modernist and feminist aesthetics, as it locates the ways in which Woolf establishes the agency of non-human objects and gendered subjects, given that the question of an autonomous domestic space for the woman writer, is at the heart of Woolf's feminism.

6. Methodology and Chapters:

This thesis will adopt a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, it traces the way in which, in Woolf's oeuvre, a subject is defined by the objects with which she attempts to '*furnish* the self' to use Boscagli's term, while orienting herself towards a space which ought to be 'home.' On the other hand, it is crucial to take note of Woolf's narrative strategies which foreground the subject's own ability to use these 'things' creatively, rather than passively exist within a pre-given economy of domestic labour and domestic consumption. These processes take place in a socio-economic context where systems of signification ~~which~~ treat non-human objects - and frequently the housewife as well - as fungible, are at play.¹⁴⁶

Therefore, Barad's method of reading factors *through* each other, rather than establishing agency or causality as the attribute of a singular entity, is an instrumental part of the methodology

¹⁴⁶ Boscagli, 5; italics mine.

followed throughout this thesis.¹⁴⁷ It is only through the careful study of the dynamic agentic/auratic/ ontological qualities of subjects and/or objects that we are able to understand the hidden mechanisms of reproductive labour. It is through the study of domestic labour that we are able to grapple with the manner in which subjects and objects exist and interact with each other in their mutually entangled state. Correspondingly, the thesis attempts to read the private sphere through public discourses (which are correspondingly read through the private testimonies that shape them) and to read the sphere of literary work, conventionally read as a public, imagined realm of letters, through private spaces. Woolf repeatedly conjures up such spaces for us- where writing, reproductive labour, and politics are inextricably mixed up together.

As the thesis answers a *how* question, rather than a *why* or *what* question, it does not move linearly towards a singular answer. Instead, it creates a branching effect. It branches out into comprehensive explorations of the myriad factors at play when we consider ontological relations in the domestic interior with respect to the writings of Virginia Woolf. It studies the varied ways in which Woolf makes these relations an intrinsic part of her modernist narratives, highlighting the role of domestic labour in the gendered modernist subject's understanding of autonomy and creativity.

It depends on reading minute details in the text, in a sense, replicating the methodology of domestic labour- which depends on carefully noticing exactly what seems out of place to us, and putting it where it 'belongs,' only to be struck by the ever-changing, elusive objects which constantly evade our attempts to reduce to them to order, tempting us to appreciate the mutating aesthetics of this material world we can never become 'masters' of. The starting point of the thesis is an impulse to see reproductive labour as more than a self-evident category of gendered

¹⁴⁷ Barad, 30

oppression. It follows that it is only through a committed study of specific aspects of domestic labour, and the organization of the domestic interior, that we can understand how this gendered labour is exploited.

Along with Woolf's novels, feminist and modernist tracts, the thesis takes into consideration texts which are pushed to the margins of Woolf studies including the vast body of Woolf's literary journalism, and her extensive engagement with life-writing. By reading these against the grain of what is still a prevalent literary practice- i.e. that of reading Virginia Woolf as a writer entirely concerned with the abstruse workings of 'the mind,' in conjunction with a range of ~~other~~ texts by other authors, it becomes possible to create and read through a feminist palimpsest. It sees Woolf's project of building a personal space in conjunction with many other rooms imagined/ inhabited by dissidents from the spatial regimes of heteropatriarchy.

Moreover, as the previous sections of this Introduction have illustrated, Woolf's contribution as a feminist modernist is shaped by myriad historical and literary contexts. Accordingly, the thesis does not treat modernism as a monolithic construct, given that Woolf weaves interactions between domestic interiors and gendered subjects, into work in which she also engages with other contemporary contexts. The six chapters of the thesis dwell upon different aesthetic traditions that Virginia Woolf was witness to, focusing especially on the inter-war years. It focuses on various modernisms, i.e. modernist life-writing (with its roots in Victorian life-writing); the High Modernist novels of Dorothy Richardson, Modernist country house writing (with their roots in a long tradition of country house writing); Post-Impressionist art; and art criticism. It also works through an in-depth focus on other cultural formations which characterize the inter-war years, i.e. patterns of resource distribution in inter-war Britain, and the museumification of the British country-house.

The first chapter starts by considering an important legacy of representing the woman writer's relation to her home which Woolf inherited, i.e. a tradition of literary biography following Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). It explores Woolf's methods of excavating a history of subject and object relations in the domestic interior which can be reformulated beyond patriarchy.

The second chapter studies Woolf's relationship to the domestic arrangements of her contemporaries (specifically the masculine home-making of Roger Fry) and the contemporary aesthetics of ~~the~~ domestic spaces. This chapter unpacks a crucial aspect of Woolf's oeuvre, that of her participation in the invisibilization of subaltern figures from representations of the modernist domestic interior, on the grounds of race and class, by studying her biography of Roger Fry alongside her review of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

The third chapter dwells on a cultural phenomenon specific to Woolf's Britain, a discourse about the British country-house as a beloved and endangered piece of Britain's 'domestic' and/or imperial legacy. The country-house thus becomes a site where 'luxurious' and 'historic' domesticity was produced as an artifact. This domesticity implies the presence of a 'sovereign' subject. In *Orlando*, Woolf emerges as a participant in a gendered literary tradition of upstaging masculine prerogatives to sovereignty and property in the country house novel, a genre which found a new lease of life between the wars. Additionally, she also comes up with a method of re-narrativizing history by aligning reproductive labour to memorialization. Thus Woolf ultimately turns her back on methods that use objects as signifiers of historic processes, and turns to a formulation of history which refuses to turn away from the material realm to the abstract realms of British national history ~~to the material realm~~.

The fourth chapter dwells on the specific way in which Woolf, writing in the scarcity-driven inter-war years, studies how domestic labour functions as a praxis which is expected to subsidize 'domestic' scarcity, i.e. the material conditions of the household ~~which is~~ in continuum with the material-economic networks of the British Isles. It finally argues that *To the Lighthouse* contains a utopian longing for a society in which the well-being of families will be shaped by methods which ensure a better distribution of resources in the community, so that homemakers cease to be punished for conditions of household-scarcity created by economic forces.

The fifth chapter studies rented accommodation in London for 'bachelors' in the first half of the twentieth century, studying Woolf alongside the work of the pioneering modernist Dorothy Richardson, whose narrative methods are tantalizingly close to Woolf's own. It studies how Woolf and Richardson explore new forms of dwelling with furniture, in rooms located away from the patriarchal 'family-home.' It explores the new aesthetic that the writers create through their modernist prose, and argues that this aesthetic of a sensuous apprehension of form, matter, and colour, rejects the signifying systems of commodity capitalism and normative domesticity. Instead it creates a new form of joyous sharing of domestic space between objects and subjects, which respects the autonomy of both non-human objects and human subjects.

The last chapter, however, points out the limitations of this vision, when we return to the regimes of cleanliness that characterize these unorthodox 'lodgings' in the work of both writers. Initially, these domestic spaces might appear to champion unorthodox and messy living, on the one hand, and modern, efficient systems of sanitation, on the other hand. However, the chapter goes on to show that both these aspects are shaped by the pervasive need to exclude material traces ~~which that~~ remind the white feminine subject that she is now excluded from the node of power that was the prosperous bourgeois household.

It returns to Crosby in order to point out the cruel ironies of the ‘modernizing’ inter-war years, in which the myth of ‘labour-saving’ or ‘efficient’ home-making, is actually used to mask the fact that domestic labour has not in fact been reduced or made easier. Instead, it has simply morphed into other forms of policing boundaries of class, race, and gender, through the surfaces of the home. In a sense, Crosby’s life trajectory provides a glimpse of what it might mean to be able to achieve a utopic autonomous space where women can interact with domestic objects on their own terms, only to narrowly miss the utopic vision at the end of ‘Professions for Women,’ of women servants, refusing to wait on the patriarch and occupying his house. Given that Crosby does not just feature in *The Years*, but also appears in *Three Guineas*, Woolf leaves us with a figure who is a reminder of the fact that there are no easy, harmonious resolutions to relations in the domestic interior, or to the problem of domestic labour, under an imperial patriarchy and a military industrial complex.

The thesis thus reaches a descriptive understanding of Woolf’s methods of understanding the domestic interior through its subject-object relations and the praxes of domestic labour. Woolf’s methods of working with historical traditions, her blindnesses, her utopian visions, her conversations with the polyphonic modernisms around her are traced, to follow the various, often contradictory aspects of her responses. If Woolf can be read as the bearer of tidings of an eventual dismantling of the patriarchal house, she can also be blinded by the promises of inter-war bourgeois modernity. She is also a writer who stays with the trouble instead of siding with the piece-meal domestic reforms that characterized the Western hemisphere of her times. The thesis thus attempts to provide a comprehensive context to Woolf’s quest for a feminist ‘room,’ and/ or household, and the ways in which various entities might exist in these spaces

Chapter 1: Inhabiting a House of One's Own: Woolf and Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*

'You have won rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men. You are able, though not without great labour and effort, to pay the rent. You are earning your five hundred pounds a year. But this freedom is only the beginning; the room is your own but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms?'

- Woolf, 'Professions for Women'¹⁴⁸

This chapter attempts to read Woolf's interpretations of traditions of reconciling intellectual labour, especially the creative labour of writing, with reproductive labour. The chapter will deal extensively with Woolf's lifelong engagement with Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), pausing along the way to explore other related texts, especially Woolf's autobiographical writings, in order to enquire into discourses about the British middle-class woman's 'home', that Woolf inherited and negotiated with.

As the quotation from 'Professions for Women,' at the beginning of this chapter shows, Woolf argues that (if and) when a woman ~~is~~ should be able to access a personal, autonomous space, she may well want to engage in acts of care and creativity for the material contours of this space. The possibilities for human contact this space engenders ('whom are you going to share it with?') go hand in hand with the possibilities for creative encounters with decorations and furnishings ('how are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it?')

1. '... Their Difficulties, and How She Overcame Them'

¹⁴⁸ Woolf, 'Professions for Women,' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, 1942 (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1970) 241, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/deathofmothand00wool/mode/1up>.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) appears as a marginal but significant presence throughout Woolf's oeuvre. Woolf's first published piece was a short unsigned article in the *Guardian* of 21st December, 1904 entitled 'Haworth, November, 1904,' a first person reflection on a trip to the erstwhile house of the Brontës.¹⁴⁹ Gaskell's *Life* appears again in Woolf's categorically feminist writings, 'Women and Fiction' (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). In 'Women and Fiction' Woolf, trying to understand why women writing in the nineteenth century favoured the form of the novel, comments 'Charlotte Brontë put down her pen to pick the eyes out of the potatoes.'¹⁵⁰ This detail is of course taken from the first chapter of the second volume of *The Life*.¹⁵¹ For Woolf, this is an example of the routine household interruptions middle-class women must accommodate when they attempt creative paid work, a form of petty, but mercilessly routine, oppression. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf uses *The Life* extensively to cite the Revd. Patrick Brontë as an example of a Victorian patriarch afflicted with what she calls an 'infantile fixation,' his tyrannical opposition to Charlotte's suitor Arthur Nicholls shortening her brief happiness in a companionate marriage before her death.¹⁵²

Most interestingly, in mid-1938, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* figures in an exchange of letters between Woolf and her nephew Julian Bell's lover Ling Su-Hua, based in China. In a letter to Julian Bell on 14th October 1935, then working on a teaching assignment in China, Woolf (with characteristic casual racism) comments in passing, 'I suppose you are teaching the Chinks about

¹⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Haworth, 1904,' in *Books and Portraits: Some Further Selections from the Literary and Biographical Writings of Virginia Woolf* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1977) first published in *The Guardian*, December 21st 1904, 166, archive.org

<https://archive.org/details/booksportraitsso00wool/mode/1up>.

¹⁵⁰ Woolf, 'Women and Fiction' in *Granite and Rainbow* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1958) 78, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/graniterainbowes00wool/mode/1up>.

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë, 1857*; (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers) archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/lifeofcharlotteb00gask/mode/1up>

¹⁵² Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 199.

Mrs Gaskell - which seems an odd thing to do.’¹⁵³ However, after Julian Bell’s death in the Spanish Civil War, Woolf, writing to Julian Bell’s Chinese acquaintance, Ling Su-Hua, responds to her request for reading material in order to be able to write better English, by assuring her about her grasp over the language, and providing a list of writers. ~~Woolf, and~~ sends two books, promising to send others Ling Su-Hua might request, the two texts being Lamb’s *Essays* and Gaskell’s *Life*. Woolf writes:

‘I am sending you two little books, one is the life of Charlotte Brontë, the other Lamb[sic] *Essays*. I think Lamb wrote very good English prose - but do not bother to read it as an exercise; only for pleasure - The life of Charlotte Brontë [sic] will perhaps give you a feeling for the lives of women writers in England in the 19th century - their difficulties, and how she overcame them. And it is a very interesting life in other ways.’¹⁵⁴

This would show an interesting turn in Woolf’s attempt to negotiate with the racial Other. Instead of imagining the English, university educated, middle class Julian Bell teaching Mrs Gaskell to the ‘Chinks,’ as a part of a program on which, according to Hermione Lee, Woolf herself was one of the writers being taught, Woolf here sends material about exploitative social conditions in nineteenth century England which Brontë had to contend with, historicizing a tradition of feminist resistance in the world of English letters. *The Life* was material she had herself drawn upon for *Three Guineas*, published the month before this letter. Indeed, the present of this book could be read as a gesture on Woolf’s part to invite ~~the gaze of~~ the Chinese subject to critique patriarchy in the history of Britain, the imperial power whose subjects had taken it upon themselves to document and analyse non-European cultures, including those of China.

2. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*: 1857 to 1938

¹⁵³ Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol 5 (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1977) 432, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/lettersofvirgini05wool/mode/1up>.

¹⁵⁴ Woolf, 27th July 1938, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol 6 (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1980) 259, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/lettersofvirgini0000wool_u0n9/mode/1up.

Thus, the marginal but persistent presence of Gaskell's *Life* across the arc of Woolf's career as a published writer, and her choice of the text as one that would give 'a feeling for the lives of women writers in England in the 19th century',¹⁵⁵ raises a few questions. Woolf was born in 1882, twenty-five years after the first publication of Gaskell's text. By this time, as Lucasta Miller points out in *The Brontë Myth*, a number of aspects of ~~what would characterise~~ the intense interest taken by the Anglophone world in the lives of the Brontë family, since the first agitation over the identities of Curer, Ellis, and Acton Bell after the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847, had emerged established themselves as a part of the literary scene.¹⁵⁵ The first biography of a woman author in the Anglophone tradition, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, set the tone for a reading of Charlotte Brontë as a woman who, having lived a harsh life, beset by tragedy, was exposed to much that would account for the 'morbid' and 'coarse' elements in her writing, but who strove, and ultimately managed, to reconcile her feminine duties with-to her difficult father and her 'Genius.' Gaskell's work, despite several important factual errors and/or bowdlerizations, attempts to understand the gendered context in which the middle class nineteenth century woman author wrote:

‘When a man becomes an author, it is probably merely a change of employment to him. He takes a portion of that time which has hitherto been devoted to some other study or pursuit; he gives up something of the legal or medical profession, in which he has hitherto endeavoured to serve others, or relinquishes part of the trade or business by which he has been striving to gain a livelihood; and another merchant, or lawyer, or doctor, steps into his vacant place, and probably does as well as he. But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother, as well as she whom God has appointed to fill that particular place: a woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use

¹⁵⁵Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2005.) epub.

and service of others. In an humble and faithful spirit must she labour to do what is not impossible, or God would not have set her to do it.¹⁵⁶

In the hands of later authors, however, as Lucasta Miller points out, Charlotte Brontë became a simplified Victorian Angel in the House, a virtuous daughter who put her father's needs before all else and kept his household in the most perfect order.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, Miller adds, Gaskell's narrative, filled with material details about the family's domestic life, and the landscape surrounding Haworth, fuelled the Victorian passion for relic collecting, and travelling to houses and landscapes identified as the haunts of the distinguished.¹⁵⁸ Traces of this tradition can be clearly noticed in Woolf's 'Haworth, November 1904.'

Between 1904 and 1938, (when Woolf wrote to Ling Su-Hua) however, the status enjoyed by Gaskell's *Life* would change. Moreover, Gaskell's method of privileging photographic realism as a narrative device, which had been a cornerstone of the sentimental tradition of memorializing Charlotte Brontë, dwelling lovingly over the contours of the house, over which 'Miss Brontë' once presided and, kept it in a state of 'the most dainty order, most exquisite cleanliness,' was on the wane.¹⁵⁹ Beginning roughly after the publication of May Sinclair's *The Three Brontës* in 1912, onwards, there was an interest in studying the 'souls' of the Brontës, rather than the material conditions of their lives, which eventually moved into a tradition of Brontë

¹⁵⁶ Gaskell, *The Life*, 358. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 1857; (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers) archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/lifeofcharlotteb00gask/mode/1up>

¹⁵⁷ Miller, Chapter 4; for readings of the Brontës lives in this tradition see for example, Laura Carter Holloway, *An Hour with Charlotte Brontë, or, Flowers from a Yorkshire Moor*; (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883); archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/hourwithcharlott00bron/page/n7/mode/2up>; Marion Harland, *Charlotte Brontë at Home*, (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1899) epub, Ellis H. Chadwick, *In the Footsteps of the Brontës*; (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1914); archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/infootstepsofbro00chadrich/page/n5/mode/2up>; for analyses of how Gaskell's and Brontë's attitudes to women and writing inform the *Life*, please see, for example, Deirdre d'Albortis, "'Bookmaking out of the Remains of the Dead': Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*," *Victorian Studies* 39 (1995), 1–31, Anne Tarranto, Introduction to *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (Barnes and Noble, 2009) epub; Linda H. Peterson, 'Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*' in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*; (Cambridge: CUP, 2007) 59-74.

¹⁵⁸ Miller.

¹⁵⁹ Gaskell, *The Life*, 5.

psychobiography.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, the norms of post-Carlylean biography, which had dominated the second half of the nineteenth century were being dismantled by the modernists such as Lytton Strachey, and Woolf herself, most noticeably in *Orlando* and *Flush*.¹⁶¹ As has often been pointed out, Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) inaugurated a sly, irreverent style of life-writing, refusing to subscribe to the Victorian norms of hero-worshipping 'great men.'¹⁶² This new style found its way into inter-war biographies of the Bronte siblings, such as Rosamond Langbridge's *Charlotte Bronte: A Psychological Study* (1929) and E.F. Benson's *Charlotte Brontë* (1932), which attempted to do away with the Victorian tradition of sentimentally reading Charlotte as an Angel in the House.¹⁶³

In this context, the persistence of Gaskell's *Life* in Woolf's thought, even after a different tradition of Brontë biography had emerged, ~~thus~~ makes it worth enquiring whether the earlier tradition did, in fact, hold something which Woolf could salvage. This chapter will show that Gaskell's text delineates some aspects of women's strategies of claiming domestic spaces in the context of life-writing, and is thus of critical importance to Woolf's understanding of how women can claim autonomous spaces, by manipulating the objects which fill domestic spaces, and by inscribing their labour onto these surfaces.

¹⁶⁰ May Sinclair, *The Three Brontës*, 1912, ~~Project accessed from~~ Gutenberg.org, ~~on 9th April, 2021~~, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11698/pg11698.html>; Miller, Chapter 5; for a pioneering example of Brontë psychobiography, please see, Lucille Dooley, 'Psycho Analysis of Charlotte Brontë: As a Type of Woman of Genius,' *The American Journal of Psychology*, XXXI, no 3, July 1920, ~~accessed from~~ [archive.org on 9th April 2021, <https://archive.org/details/jstor-1413538/page/n1/mode/lup>](https://archive.org/details/jstor-1413538/page/n1/mode/lup)

¹⁶¹ For context on Woolf and biography please see, for example, Alison Booth, Chapter One and Two in *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), ~~kindle edition~~; Elena Gualteri, 'The Impossible Art: Virginia Woolf on Modern Biography,' *The Cambridge Quarterly*, [Literary Biography Special Issue](https://www.jstor.org/stable/42968076), 29, no 4, ~~Literary Biography Special Issue~~, (2000), 349- 361, jstor.org, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42968076>; S. P. Rosenbaum, 'Virginia Woolf and the Proper Writing of Lives,' in *Edwardian Bloomsbury*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994.)

¹⁶² Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, 1918, Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2447/pg2447.html>.

¹⁶³ Miller, Chapter 5; E.F. Benson, *Charlotte Brontë*, (New York, London, Toronto: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1932) project Gutenberg, <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400031h.html>. It is interesting to note that Woolf emphatically disliked the Benson biography, lambasting it in a letter to her friend Eleanor Cecil in 1932 (Woolf, 25th July 1932, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol 5, 80.)

This in turn requires a detailed study of some aspects of the nineteenth century tradition of studying the lives of authors.

3. 'Homes and Haunts':

Visiting the houses of men of letters has been a popular pursuit for British scholars and tourists, (and those who might occupy a liminal category between both), since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Alison Booth attributes this to the rising status of the 'author' since the Enlightenment, the demand for authorial relics, attendant on the growth of literary biography as a genre, and a Post-Romantic interest in the 'antique and picturesque.'¹⁶⁴ This was, of course, accompanied by a style of writing topographical prose which described travels to the home of a celebrated writer, describing the surrounding landscape, the spatial layout of the house, and the author's personal effects in loving detail, [seen](#) for instance, in the nineteenth century biographies of Charlotte Brontë cited [previously above](#). As both Booth and Andrea P. Zemgulys have argued, Woolf was the daughter of Leslie Stephen who was the chair of the Carlyle Memorial Fund in 1894, and thus witnessed the institutionalization of the Carlyles' house as a museum at close quarters. In childhood and in adult life, Woolf did occasionally visit 'Great Men's houses' as well as those of Victorian women of letters. She would therefore have been acutely aware of

¹⁶⁴ Alison Booth, *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries* (Oxford: OUP, 2016) 5. Many of the texts and authors cited in this chapter, are covered in Booth's extensive analysis in this volume. However, her research is more focused on the historical context of the houses of famous English authors, and the present context in which these survive.

domestic structures across London, and elsewhere in England, being preserved in order to create ‘literary’ spaces.¹⁶⁵

In *Night and Day*, the quotidian objects used by the dead poet Allardyce are corralled into a special corner of the Hilberry house which functions as a ‘shrine’ to his memory. While the other members of his family are memorialized through signifiers of status, such as portraits, crested china, and swords, Allardyce is remembered by his ink splashed writing desk, which is placed under his portrait, adorned with his worn out quill pen, a battered manuscript of a poem, and his old pair of slippers left on the floor.¹⁶⁶ The visual effect of such an arrangement is that the objects still reveal the fact that they originated in mass production processes (unlike portraits or china with the family arms on it), but have also acquired unique auratic qualities after becoming the possessions of a famous writer.

When a woman writer was involved, the discourse surrounding her home became additionally complex, since her legacy was interpreted as a legacy available through her writing as well as the traces of her performance of feminine roles, in the space of her home. The auratic quality sought in the objects used by a writer like Richard Allardyce, in *Night and Day*, to write his oeuvre, could be sought, in the woman writer’s case, in the various objects that shaped the domestic spaces she had inhabited, because, it could be argued, they must have received her domestic labour upon their bodies.

In a sense this tradition was inaugurated by Gaskell herself. Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, as mentioned before, foregrounds the Brontë sisters’ ability to combine their domestic

¹⁶⁵Booth, *Homes and Haunts*; Andrea P. Zemgulys, ‘“Night and Day Is Dead”: Virginia Woolf in London – “Literary and Historic,”’ *Twentieth Century Literature*, 46/1 (2000), 56–77. Jstor.org, <https://doi.org/10.2307/441933>; Zemgulys, ‘Consummate Labour: Virginia Woolf’s Trek to a Better Literature,’ in *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage*, Cambridge: CUP, 2008, 145-190.

¹⁶⁶ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 15.

duties with their literary pursuits. Haworth and Keighley, as she describes them in the beginning of the book, are to be distinguished by the scrupulously clean state of the stone houses, presumably scrubbed clean by the ‘notable Yorkshire housewife,’ and moreover, ‘[s]uch glimpses into the interior as a passer-by obtains, reveal a rough abundance of the means of living, and diligent and active habits in the women.’¹⁶⁷ Haworth Parsonage, however, when reached at the end of this journey, is in a state of cleanliness described in superior moral terms:

‘Everything about the place tells of the most dainty order, the most exquisite cleanliness. The door-steps are spotless; the small old-fashioned window-panes glitter like looking-glass. Inside and outside of that house cleanliness goes up into its essence, purity.’¹⁶⁸

Moreover, this perfection was enabled by the ability of the Brontë sisters to pay attention to ‘duty.’ As mentioned before,² Gaskell provides a memorable story of Charlotte ‘breaking off in the full flow of inspiration,’ to attend to the potatoes, reconciling her love for Tabby with her standards of housekeeping, as well as an equally striking narrative of Emily Brontë baking bread:

‘When [Emily was] at home, she took the principal part of the cooking upon herself, and did all the household ironing; and after Tabby grew old and infirm, it was Emily who made all the bread for the family; and any one passing by the kitchen-door, might have seen her studying German out of an open book, propped up before her, as she kneaded the dough; but no study, however interesting, interfered with the goodness of the bread, which was always light and excellent. Books were, indeed, a very common sight in that kitchen; the girls were taught by their father theoretically, and by their aunt practically, that to take an active part in all household work was, in their position, woman’s simple duty; but, in their careful employment of time, they found many an odd five minutes for reading while watching the cakes, and managed the union of two kinds of employment better than King Alfred.’²¹⁶⁹

Gaskell, sitting with Charlotte Brontë in the parlour possibly furnished with Brontë’s income,² writes that ‘I soon observed that her habits of order were such that she could not go on with the conversation, if a chair was out of its place; everything was arranged with delicate

¹⁶⁷ Gaskell, *The Life*, 2.

¹⁶⁸ Gaskell, *The Life*, 5.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 143.

regularity.’¹⁷⁰ Indeed, order and the prevalence of set patterns regulating the lives of the inhabitants, and their relationship to the spatial layout of the home, appears to have been a distinguishing feature of life at Haworth Parsonage:

‘People in Haworth have assured me that, according to the hour of day—nay, the very minute—could they have told what the inhabitants of the parsonage were about,’ a routine which was dominated by the needs and the decisions of the head of the household, Revd. Patrick Brontë, such as his requirements about his meal-times, and his need to dine alone, and their Aunt Branwell, who had the charge of bringing up the girls.¹⁷¹

Mrs Ellis H. Chadwick, (the pen-name of Esther Alice Chadwick) a late practitioner of Victorian biography, would continue this tradition. Reviewed by Woolf in 1910, Chadwick’s *Homes and Haunts of Mrs Gaskell* represents Gaskell as a paragon of wifedom, motherhood, and housekeeping and reads like a debasement of Gaskell’s exploration of daily life at Haworth Parsonage, in its anxiety to stress that Gaskell performed all the feminine roles required of her to perfection. Defending Gaskell from Dickens’ caricature of the woman writer Mrs Jellyby, Chadwick writes:

‘Evidently the well-known women writers of the day - Charlotte Brontë, Mrs Gaskell, Harriet Martineau, and George Eliot- did not deserve to be satirized as Mrs Jellyby, for they were all neat, tidy, and methodical, and knew how to manage a house, as well as write a novel.’¹⁷²

Chadwick’s Gaskell retains the ‘housewifely’ skills she learnt in her childhood in rural Cheshire in the early nineteenth century, while installing modern amenities in a house she bought with her

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 632.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 191.

¹⁷²Ellis H Chadwick, *The Homes and Haunts of Mrs Gaskell*; (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1910) 267, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/mrsgaskellhaunts00chadrich/page/266/mode/2up?q=dickens>.

income from writing, thus looking forward to the ideal consumer-homemaker of late nineteenth century Britain.¹⁷³

The use of home and the performance of unpaid domestic labour, as an interpretive framework within which the woman writer could be contained, remained in use in the inter-war period, for example, in David Cecil's 1934 definition of Gaskell as a skilled but quintessentially minor writer. As Susan Hamilton has pointed out, Cecil circumscribes Gaskell's literary imagination to the 'Victorian drawing room,' her artistry being explained by her being a consummate housewife, 'her tidy feminine mind would have been ashamed to let her inspiration appear before the world in so careless and ill-fitting a dress.'¹⁷⁴

This criticism exemplifies the discourse that allowed certain women writers to gain respectability, as writers who did not compromise their femininity, even if their writing circulated in the public sphere. As one might notice in Woolf's 'Professions for Women,' the Angel in the House does not strictly try to stop the aspiring woman writer from writing, but instead strives to coerce her into writing that which fits the terms on which the Angel inhabits the House. In 'Professions for Women' Woolf is keenly aware of the fact that, in the early twentieth century, writing for a living *per se* is no longer incompatible with femininity, provided that the female author does not rebel against the unpaid labour she is expected to provide to her family and acquaintances, and that her work does not transgress against the 'purity' that those responsibilities are supposed to signify.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York and London: Routledge, 1985).

¹⁷⁴ David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable, 1934), 197-241, [archive.org https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.80706/page/n211/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.80706/page/n211/mode/2up); Susan Hamilton, 'Gaskell Then And Now,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 184.

¹⁷⁵ Woolf, 'Professions for Women,' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, esp 237.

To an extent, Gaskell herself is responsible for creating this domestic framework, in order to praise the woman writer. Although she has been re-visited by feminist scholarship which has explored the subversive aspects of Gaskell's emphasis on feminine nurturance and maternity, Gaskell can also be read as a part of a nineteenth century movement to encourage 're-familialization' in the industrial proletariat.¹⁷⁶

Thus far, the *Life* would seem to be a text that stood for a tradition of life writing that Woolf vehemently opposed, especially in the context of remembering the lives of women writers. In her review of Chadwick, for instance, Woolf calls out Chadwick for fixating on Gaskell's dwellings, instead of attempting to analyse Gaskell's depiction of working_-class domesticity.¹⁷⁷ Woolf, instead, points out that Chadwick does not pay anymore attention to details in Gaskell's writings, which interpret reproductive labour and care-work in working_-class contexts, in order to show working_-class solidarity especially in the light of the structural basis of working_-class exploitation.¹⁷⁸

Thus, while this chapter ultimately argues that Woolf finds much to salvage in the Gaskell-ian tradition of life-writing, it is important to note that Woolf also critiques everything that has gone wrong with this tradition of privileging domestic objects in domestic spaces, associated with literary women, as the perfect memento mori for commemorating their genteel lives. This appears to be the context in which Woolf attempted to give 'Women and Fiction,' the ostensible subject of *A Room of One's Own*, a meaning different from what she felt it had come to mean in her time, an academic field devoted to biographies, writings describing 'homes and haunts,'

¹⁷⁶ For a discussion of the re-familialization of the proletariat in the nineteenth century please see Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) first published in 2003 in French by Gallimard, 83.

¹⁷⁷ Woolf, 'Mrs Gaskell' in *Books and Portraits*, first published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, September 29th 1910, 137-140.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 139-140.

articles that could be titled ‘a tribute to the Brontës and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage,’ and lives of Jane Austen. ‘For myself,’ Mary Beeton claims, ‘I should not mind if the homes and haunts of Mary Russell Mitford were closed to the public for a century at least.’¹⁷⁹ When Woolf writes about the role domestic settings play in the life of literary women, she uses a variety of strategies which reveal the ways in which the patriarchal bourgeoisie household manages to sustain systematic inequalities through the course of the nineteenth century, the ‘difficulties’ she asked Ling Su-Hua to appreciate.

As the rest of the chapter will show, she refuses to provide easy answers about how women writers might harmoniously reconcile their ‘duties’ to the public and private spheres, as championed by Victorian biographers. If modernist life-writing, as pioneered by Lytton Strachey, was about an irreverent examination of the nuances of a person’s character, and of the manner in which they were shaped by the zeitgeist of their times, Woolf uses this genre for even newer ends. Woolf’s use of autobiography as a modernist genre has two aspects. Firstly, she uses it in order to study methods in which domestic spaces and their regimes of labour can exploit women’s bodies and capacities for reproductive labour. At the same time, Woolf also uses life-writing to explore the means through which women can claim private spaces on their own terms. By studying these methods of claiming space, and performing domestic labour, Woolf maps a paradigm of dissent from a patriarchal discourse about the dichotomy between intellectual and reproductive labour.

4. Modernist-Victorian Homes and Haunts:

¹⁷⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 3, 69.

4a. ‘For a Woman of Genius to Spend her Time Chasing Beetles, Scouring Saucepans, Instead of Writing Books’¹⁸⁰

Woolf’s fleeting references to Jane Carlyle as the person who receives the modernist reader’s sympathy for being the victim of a ‘horrible domestic tradition,’ her essays ‘Geraldine and Jane,’ and ‘Great Men’s Houses,’ and her review of *The Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, are full of reconstructions of how women’s creativity is snuffed out by regimes of domestic labour.¹⁸¹ Woolf provides a memorable feminist reading of the Carlyle household as a ‘battlefield where daily, summer and winter, mistress and maid fought against dirt and cold for cleanliness and warmth,’ a space where Carlyle’s genius was ‘served’ by gendered labour divided along class lines, a labour that left its inscription upon the spatial contours of the house,

‘The stairs, carved as they are and wide and dignified, seem worn by the feet of harassed women carrying tin cans. The high panelled rooms seem to echo with the sound of pumping and scrubbing.’¹⁸²

She also imagines a detailed litany of the things that preyed upon Jane Carlyle:

‘February after February Mrs Carlyle lay coughing in the large four-poster hung with maroon curtains in which she was born, and as she coughed the many problems of the incessant battle, against dirt, against cold, came before her. The horsehair couch needed recovering, the drawing room paper with its small, dark pattern needed cleaning; the yellow varnish on the panels was cracked and peeling- all must be stitched, cleansed,

¹⁸⁰ Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, 5.

¹⁸¹ Woolf, ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,’ ‘Geraldine and Jane’ in *The Second Common Reader*, first published in London in 1932 by the Hogarth Press (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1986) 186-201, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/secondcommonread00virg_0/mode/1up; ‘Great Men’s Houses’ in *The London Scene*, ‘The Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle’ in *The Essays* Vol 1, 1905; for reading on Woolf’s literary relationship with Jane Welsh Carlyle and the house at Cheyne Row please see, for example, Booth, *Homes and Haunts*, 205-254; Marie Laniel, ‘Revisiting a Great Man’s House: Virginia Woolf’s Carlylean Pilgrimages,’ *Carlyle Studies Annual* (Saint Joseph’s University Press, Philadelphia), 24 (2008) : 117-32, Proquest, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/revisiting-great-mans-house-virginia-woolfs/docview/205799202/se-2>.

¹⁸² Woolf, ‘Great Men’s Houses’ in *The London Scene*, 33

scoured with her own hands; and had she, or had she not, demolished the bugs that bred and bred in the ancient wood panelling?’¹⁸³

Jane Welsh Carlyle’s standards of cleanliness are threatened from many quarters, such as the impoverished Mudie sisters whose shawls are suspected of being a source of ‘bugs.’¹⁸⁴ Jane Carlyle’s life is thus the record of the human cost of ‘the torment of Sisyphus’ involved in supervising a household and in the production of docile bodies, from the series of maids hired and fired by the Carlyles, to the Mudies who have to be cajoled and reproached into a state of being suitably settled into domestic service, to the bodies of the furniture, the couch, the paper, the varnish on the panels, and the panels themselves — what with the human and non-human bodies involved always threatening to breed bugs.¹⁸⁵

Woolf’s writings on Jane Carlyle thus deconstruct the myth of the angelic, supervisory mother/housewife figure in the bourgeois household. In ‘Professions for Women’, the Angel in the House, is expected to distribute her attention over all the components of the household, human and non-human- children, husband, servants, friends, animals, food, medicine, and the various physical components of the house that need ‘maintenance.’ Similarly, the Angel in the House’s attempts to supervise the house, involve flitting from place to place as she executes ‘the difficult arts of family life’- from the table at which she takes the leg of the chicken, to the draught in which she sits, to and the bedroom she invades when re the recalcitrant child of the family tries to get away from her discourse of ‘purity.’¹⁸⁶ The Angel is thus expected to distribute herself all over the house, without claiming any space as a room of her own.

¹⁸³ Woolf, ‘Great Men’s Houses’ in *The London Scene*, 33 Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ ‘Woolf, ‘Geraldine and Jane’ in *The Second Common Reader* 1932; (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1986) 191-193.

¹⁸⁵ *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, cited in Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*; (London: William Collins, 2003); Chapter 1.

¹⁸⁶ Woolf, ‘Professions for Women,’ 236.

In the context of gendered approaches to the work of ‘writing’ with a household, Sara Ahmed points out that ‘[a]Attention involves a political economy,’ that there is a world of difference between Husserl contemplating the spatial contours of his domestic world as he faces his writing table in his study, and Adrienne Rich trying, as a young mother, to write and negotiate the claims her child made upon her at the same time.¹⁸⁷

4b. 22 Hyde Park Gate

In this context, it is interesting to think of the continuum that the human and non-human entities in the household occupy, in this vision of the bourgeoisie family. Seen in this light, Woolf’s autobiographical writings about her childhood, are a searching exploration of how the spatial layout of the home and its inanimate ‘contents’ are crucial mediators of the relationship between housekeeping and the perpetuation of a gendered system of inhabiting space.

As Sara Ahmed points out about objects on display in the family home, such as wedding presents:

‘The family home puts objects on display objects that measure sociality in terms of the heterosexual gift... That these objects are on display, that they make visible the fantasy of a good life, depends on returning such a direction with a “yes”... In the conventional family home what appears requires following a certain line, the family line that directs our gaze. The heterosexual couple becomes a “point” along this line, which is given to the child as its inheritance or background. The pressure, given in this way, can orientate us toward the future: it is where the child is being asked to direct its desire by accepting the family line as its own inheritance.’¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Sara Ahmed, 32.

¹⁸⁸ Ahmed, 90.

Written eighty and sixty years before Ahmed, in ‘22 Hyde Park Gate’ and ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ Woolf’s memories of the Stephen household negotiate the pressures of inheriting a ‘family line’ based upon the labour of women and servants, differentiated along the positions that women living in the household are expected to occupy. The physically ever-expanding household, to which storeys, designed by Woolf’s mother, Julia Stephen, are added as the family grows, is described by Woolf as containing a proliferating mass of ‘stuff,’ tracing the family’s history of belonging to an intellectual middle-class milieu:

‘One never knew when one rummaged in the many dark cupboards and wardrobes whether one would disinter Herbert Duckworth’s barrister’s wig, my father’s clergyman’s collar, or a sheet scribbled over with drawings by Thackeray which we afterwards sold to Pierpont Morgan for a considerable sum. Old letters filled dozens of black tin boxes. One opened them and got a terrific whiff of the past. There were chests of heavy family plate. There were hoards of china and glass.’¹⁸⁹

The task of arranging these miscellaneous objects into a coherent system and maintaining the order that they had been arranged into was, of course, Julia Stephen’s task, a presence Woolf recalls with ambivalent love. The younger Stephen children, for instance, did their lessons supervised by their mother in the dining room, a temporary space being cleared for their education in a place whose ‘proper’ use was for dinner, the time at which the room looked its best: ‘At dinner time with all its silver candles, silver dishes, knives and forks and napkins, the dinner table looked very festive.’¹⁹⁰ The better study in the house was, of course, the study designed by Julia for Leslie Stephen, the patriarch, and the most important scholar in the household whose emotional needs, and proto-Carlylean ‘nervous’ state had to be accommodated at all costs by his wife and daughters. The dining room at the children’s study-time, however,

¹⁸⁹ Woolf, ‘Old Bloomsbury,’ *Moments of Being*, 192.

¹⁹⁰ Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ *Moments of Being*, 117.

was an intermediate space which had to be shielded from the spectre of other, even more marginalized spaces:

‘The basement was a dark insanitary place for seven maids to live in. “It’s like hell,” one of them burst out to my mother as we sat at lessons in the dining room. My mother at once assumed the frozen dignity of the Victorian matron; and said (perhaps): “Leave the room”; and she (unfortunate girl) vanished behind the red plush curtain which, hooped round a semi-circular wire, and anchored by a great gold knob, hid the door that led from the dining room to the pantry.’¹⁹¹

The textures of the gold and plush, which no doubt helped to make the dining table into a space of pleasurable socialization, also play their part in literally padding the middle class children from the parts of the house which are not so hospitable. On occasion, of course, the structure of the house fails to sustain this system:

‘Once when a pipe burst and some young man visitor-Peter Studd?- volunteered help and rushed upstairs with a bucket, he penetrated to the servants’ bedrooms, and my mother, I noted, seemed a little ‘provoked’, a little perhaps ashamed, that he had seen what must have been their rather shabby rooms.’¹⁹²

Moreover, if Julia Stephen is able to construct a system that makes the house spell comfort to the adult inhabitants, the readings that the child Virginia takes of the architecture of the house and the system of arranging objects, tends to differ. For instance, we might look closely at Woolf’s early memory of sexual assault by Gerald Duckworth at the Stephens’ holiday home at St Ives: ‘There was a slab outside the dining room door for standing dishes upon. Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this, and as I sat there he began to explore my body.’¹⁹³

For ~~the~~ small child, ~~for whom~~ the relative proportions of the house and its fixtures are not accessible as they are to adult men, i.e., She can only peep into the looking glass in the same hall, ~~into which she peeps,~~ having to reach up on tiptoe. Moreover, and she finds out that the

¹⁹¹ Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past’ *Moments of Being* ~~Ibid~~, 116-117.

¹⁹² ~~Ibid~~ Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ *Moments of Being*, 118-119.

¹⁹³ ~~Ibid~~, 69

slab which should be used for keeping dishes, from which the Stephen family should be served at meals, ~~finds that not only~~ can ~~the shelf~~ be used in other ways, ~~and -but also~~ that she herself can be used in the economy her mother endorses, i.e. that of ‘offering up’ women and girl-children to older men, like the dishes being served.

Beginning as it famously does, with the child Virginia’s sensual perception of the object world outside her, of the patterns of the fabric on her mother’s lap, of the waves splashing as she lay warm in bed while the wind blew out the window blind, and a host of other memories, ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ takes as its starting point the child subject’s awareness of an external world of pleasure, from which she exists separately, but also participates in: ‘The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked.’¹⁹⁴ The use to which Gerald Duckworth puts the furniture of his stepfather’s house is a violation of the child’s understanding of herself, as it violates her feeling of autonomy over the spatial dimensions she occupies: ‘(I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped he would stop...’)¹⁹⁵

Virginia Stephen’s fraught relationship with finding an autonomous space within the familial household becomes even more difficult in her adolescence, when George Duckworth appoints himself the guardian of his younger sisters. The structure of the patriarchal household appears to negotiate the death of Julia Stephen by placing the ~~worklabour~~ of domestic supervision, budgeting, and emotional labour for Leslie Stephen, onto the shoulders of the eldest daughter available, and the task of indoctrinating the daughters of the family into ‘society’ is taken up by

¹⁹⁴ Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past’ *Moments of Being*, ¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 66

¹⁹⁵ ~~*Ibid*, Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past,’ *Moments of Being*, 69.~~

George. In this context it is interesting to read Woolf's words in 'A Sketch of the Past,' and 'Hyde Park Gate' alongside 'Professions for Women,' a text that also claims to be a personal narrative. 'A Sketch of the Past' contains a detailed description of the layout of the room she lives in, reflecting that people would be amused and pitying if they could see the 'unwholesome' life that she led as a girl of fifteen: 'And I suppose that, if one of them had read *To the Lighthouse*, or *A Room of One's Own*, or *The Common Reader*, he or she might say: "This room explains a great deal."¹⁹⁶ Being given a room of one's own within the family house, was a mark that 'we had become, [Vanessa] at eighteen, I at fifteen, young ladies.'¹⁹⁷ ~~Her~~The room, Woolf tells us, was converted from a night-nursery for the Stephen children, at George Duckworth's expense, and that, along with a desk from her half-sister Stella, and Greek books presumably provided by her father,

"The sleeping side [of the room] was dominated by the long Chippendale (imitation) looking glass, given me by George in the hope that I should look into it and learn to do my hair and take general care for my appearance."¹⁹⁸

In 'Professions for Women' Woolf had described the Angel entering the room of the writer, while she tried to write, in '22 Hyde Park Gate,' George Duckworth comes in to Virginia's room while she is 'spelling out [her] Greek,' pressurizing her to accompany him to the meals, dances, and theatres, as befitted a young woman of her social class.¹⁹⁹ Indeed it would appear that in the absence of the Angel/ Mother figure who keeps an eye on each room, making sure it is running according to patriarchy's rules, George himself, the patriarch who deserves to be made 'happy at home' by his sisters, feels entitled to intrude in person into his sister's privacy.²⁰⁰

Moreover, the space that George intrudes upon, is a space ~~to~~ which he is entitled to by the fact

¹⁹⁶ ~~Ibid.~~ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past' *Moments of Being*, 124.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 122.

¹⁹⁸ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past,' 122; Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Woolf, '22 Hyde Park Gate,' in *Moments of Being*, 172.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

that he has paid for this room to be made into Virginia's room, along with the various other treats and presents he pays the girls. The sisters are expected to return the favour of being treated as young ladies who deserve rooms of their own, by behaving as George would expect young ladies to behave. If Leslie Stephen feels entitled to inflict 'brutal' demands for emotional labour from his daughters, at the appointed time, when they provide him with the weekly accounts of household expenses for him to pay for, George feels entitled to practice sexual assault on Virginia, on the 'sleeping side' of the room, which is dominated by the thing he has bought as appropriate for her.

Thus the lines from 'Professions for Women' quoted at the beginning of the chapter, Woolf's memories of her life in the Stephen household, can be viewed as the problem of being unable to claim a space in a house owned by men, where she does not have to pay rent, but in return for the privilege of giving her a room, the predators in her household, George/ Angel, are free to access that same room, an access which is guaranteed by the fact that George furnished it. To return to Boscagli's idea of 'stuff' consisting of 'the prosthetic things that fill our pockets, and purses, closets and trunks with which we furnish the self and the spaces we inhabit,' these prosthetics need not always be of the 'self's' choosing, but rather, can be tacked onto the space they inhabit through unequal and exploitative economic and sexual transactions.²⁰¹

Thus, Woolf's modernist autobiography, written during the first two years of WWII, and her essay on the domestic life of the Carlyle's takes up the Victorian trope of using the writer's home as a congregation of auratic objects and surfaces, which 'tell the story' of the author's life. However, Woolf uses this trope in a Stracheyan fashion to expose the underbelly of the regimes that make the house what it is, ~~by constantly reproducing the domestic space~~, an exposé which

²⁰¹Boscagli, 5.

reveals the systematic inequality and oppression upon which these regimes are based. However, as the next section will show, Woolf also traces out a tradition of claiming domestic spaces and imagines ways in which this paradigm could be implemented in Woolf's own milieu.

5. 'Black-Leading the Stoves, Making the Beds, and Sweeping the Floors'

In this context, it is interesting to return to *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, as a source ~~in~~from which Woolf; may have also have seen a precedent for a feminine strategy of claiming a domestic space ~~along with~~and agency over one's own body, in lived experience as well as ~~in~~a textual strategy. This is plausible, given that Gaskell's narrative of domestic arrangements at Haworth Parsonage, often exceeds the framework of Charlotte as housewife, dedicated to order, cleanliness, and the needs and comforts of her father and husband. This excess is generated through small details, and excerpts from letters by the Brontës themselves, creating the effect of a palimpsestic text. Sara Ahmed argues,

“Doing things depends not so much on intrinsic capacity or even dispositions or habits, but on the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things ‘have a place’ or are ‘in place.’ Bodies inhabit space by how they reach for objects just as objects extend what we can reach.”²⁰²

The Brontë sisters do not have spaces of their own, free from the intervention of senior members of their family. However, they are able to find ways of claiming spaces.

For example, in describing the routine enforced upon the sisters by older members of the family, Gaskell writes:

“At certain times the girls would be sewing in their aunt's bedroom—the chamber which, in former days, before they had outstripped her in their learning, had served them as a school-room; at certain (early) hours they had their meals; from six to eight, Miss Branwell read aloud to Mr. Brontë; at punctual eight, the household assembled to evening

²⁰²Ahmed, 109-110.

prayers in his study; and by nine he, Miss Branwell, and Tabby, were all in bed,—*the girls free to pace up and down (like restless wild animals) in the parlour*, talking over plans and projects, and thoughts of what was to be their future life.²⁰³ (my italics)

Though constricted by a rigid routine, by behaving like ‘wild animals’ from time to time, the sisters are able to claim a certain part of the house at certain times.

In Emily’s ‘diary-paper’ of July 26th, 1837, the sketch of the drawing room shows a large table dominating the room, over which books and papers are prominently scattered, with Emily and Anne seated at two ends of the table. This is not a picture of a family in thrall to the needs of Patrick Brontë, (indeed one cannot imagine Virginia writing similarly in the family drawing room at 22 Hyde Park Gate) but rather of the sisters claiming the room allotted to inter-family socialization, to carry out their own work in conversation with one another. To judge from the contents of the paper, the sisters are simultaneously discussing the Gondal saga, as well as a future when the sisters will be comfortably seated in the same room, having established a successful school.²⁰⁴

Gaskell’s description of the parlour at a later time, runs thus,

‘The parlour has been evidently refurnished within the last few years, since Miss Brontë’s success has enabled her to have a little more money to spend. Everything fits into, and is in harmony with, the idea of a country parsonage, possessed by people of very moderate means. The prevailing colour of the room is crimson, to make a warm setting for the cold grey landscape without. There is her likeness by Richmond, and an engraving from Lawrence’s picture of Thackeray; and two recesses, on each side of the high, narrow, old-fashioned mantelpiece, filled with books,— books given to her, books she has bought, and which tell of her individual pursuits and tastes; not standard books.’²⁰⁵

²⁰³Gaskell, *The Life*, 191-192.

²⁰⁴ ‘Emily Brontë’s diary paper, 1837,’ British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/emily-brontes-diary-1837>. ‘Emily Brontë’s Letters and Diary Papers,’ [Transcript](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/diary_papers#diary), http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/diary_papers#diary.

²⁰⁵ Gaskell, *The Life*, 632.

Gaskell's *Life* clearly designates 'the parlour' at the time of her first visit, as Charlotte's domain, the room having been furnished with her income from her books, the furnishing including a portrait of Charlotte herself, by George Richmond, (aboth consequences of her becoming a published author,) another of one of her favourite authors, and books that belong to Charlotteher. The principal room meant for socializing in the house is therefore a room of her own where she entertains her friends, or continues to walk up and down at night, as she did with her sisters. Moreover, at the time of her wedding, Gaskell tells us, -Brontë she made over a room as a study for her husband Arthur Nicholls, a 'small flagged passage-room, hitherto used only for-stores (which was behind her sitting-room).'²⁰⁶ Brontë thus kept what would probably have been the better room as her own space, expecting her husband to accommodate himself to a smaller space for his personal room. Thus, while Gaskell does not appear to overtly challenge Patrick Brontë's position as the head of the household, yet her narration of the spatiality of the Parsonage, places the space of Charlotte's writing as the centre of the household.

Thus, the sisters' appear to have illustrated Ahmed's words about 'reaching' out for spaces, and claiming them, through their bodily movements (i.e. tramping over the kitchen) and by using objects to 'extend' their presence within the confines of the house whichthat formally belongs to the patriarch, by spreading their belongings and thus, using personal objects to demarcate a domain. Examples of the latter would include Charlotte re-furnishing the parlour, to demarcate it as 'her' space, and by Emily and Anne simply spreading their books and papers over the surface of a table in order to claim a space.

Moreover, claiming the domestic sphere is not merely a matter of having the income to claim a space, or claiming it through intellectual labour. Perhaps it is possible to read a history of

²⁰⁶ Gaskell, *The Life*, *Ibid*, 244.

claiming spaces through bodily labour, if we look at certain aspects of *The Life*. Brontë's letter to Ellen Nussey wanting to be a housemaid, can be read as proof of her blindness to issues of class, but, I would argue, can also be read more subversively:

“For my own part, I am as yet ‘wanting a situation’ like a housemaid out of place. By the way, I have lately discovered I have quite a talent for cleaning, sweeping up hearths, dusting rooms, making beds, &c.; so, if everything else fails, I can turn my hand to that, if anybody will give me good wages for little labour. I won’t be a cook; I hate cooking. I won’t be a nurserymaid, nor a lady’s maid, far less a lady’s companion, or a mantua-maker, or a straw-bonnet maker, or a taker-in of plain work. I won’t be anything but a housemaid...”²⁰⁷

Again, writing about the way in which the sisters manage without Tabby, their faithful servant, in 1839, Brontë writes:

“In the meantime, Emily and I are sufficiently busy, as you may suppose: I manage the ironing, and keep the rooms clean; Emily does the baking, and attends to the kitchen. We are such odd animals, that we prefer this mode of contrivance to having a new face amongst us. Besides, we do not despair of Tabby’s return, and she shall not be supplanted by a stranger in her absence. I excited aunt’s wrath very much by burning the clothes, the first time I attempted to iron; but I do better now. Human feelings are queer things; I am much happier black-leading the stoves, making the beds, and sweeping the floors at home, than I should be living like a fine lady anywhere else.”²⁰⁸

As Charlotte points out, ‘human feelings are queer things,’ her own feelings of happiness being a response to the care that the clothes, stoves, beds require of her, like Crosby’s feelings of dedication towards the minute grooves and stains of the domestic interior she has shaped with her labour. Brontë’s words register the power of the sisters’ solidarity with Tabby, as well as the power of the ‘things’ at Haworth Parsonage that provoke an affective bond between Charlotte and themselves, allowing her to cross class lines, through the care she takes of them. Brontë’s understanding of being at home, then, is not a matter of Charlotte and her sisters being dutiful to her ailing and rigid father, and dissipated brother, but as a matter of preference for a system of

²⁰⁷Gaskell, *The Life*, 175.

²⁰⁸Gaskell, *The Life*, 187.

life in which she, ~~and~~ her sisters, and Tabby are able to live together on their own terms. It thus involves the creation of a community based upon mutual support in writing and domestic labour.

For instance, the younger Brontës ‘struck’ by not eating meals, when Reverend Brontë and Miss Branwell wanted to replace Tabby, when Tabby fell ill.²⁰⁹

Indeed, the kitchen at Haworth Parsonage can be read as a place where the Brontës’ claimed the agency to lay down their own terms as to how they would ‘extend’ themselves into a space.

While Gaskell’s report of Emily in the kitchen frames her within a discourse of the literary Angel in the House, there are other ways of looking at her relationship with the space of the kitchen. As

Lucasta Miller points out in her reading of Emily Brontë’s fragmentary diary papers, Emily appears to have been at a person capable of taking delight in the everyday, while blurring the

lines between the fictional and the quotidian:

“Two consecutive sentences— “The Gondals are discovering the interior of Gaaldine Sally moseley is washing in the back-kitchin.”—suggest that Emily is as comfortable in the invented kingdom of Gondal as she is in the actual world of the washerwoman. She can expand her imagination to fill vast tracts of unexplored land, or she can contract it to the cramped enclosure of the back kitchen. This combination of high-flown fantasy with the solidity of the everyday anticipates the style of *Wuthering Heights*, in which extremes of melodrama coexist with close attention to realist detail, such as the vast oak dresser with its pewter dishes and silver jugs which the narrator, Lockwood, notices as he enters the living room of Heathcliff’s home.”²¹⁰

In this context, it is interesting to look at Gaskell’s extended quotation from one of Charlotte’s letters to Emily, in which Charlotte writes;

“I should like uncommonly to be in the dining-room at home, or in the kitchen, or in the back kitchen. I should like even to be cutting up the hash, with the clerk and some register people at the other table, and you standing by, watching that I put enough flour, not too much pepper, and, above all, that I save the best pieces of the leg of mutton for

²⁰⁹ Gaskell, *The Life*, ~~ibid.~~, 169-170. Indeed, this would be a departure from Gaskell’s depiction of strikes in her fiction, in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, where, although women function as public figures with substantial agency in the context of strikes, the actual work of ‘striking’ is performed by men.

²¹⁰ Miller, Chapter 7.

Tiger and Keeper, the first of which personages would be jumping about the dish and carving-knife, and the latter standing like a devouring flame on the kitchen-floor. To complete the picture, Tabby blowing the fire, in order to boil the potatoes to a sort of vegetable glue! How divine are these recollections to me at this moment!²¹¹

The kitchen, as Charlotte remembers it, is a place where the women of the family, and men subservient to Reverend Brontë in the hierarchy of the church, carry out their work. However, within this space, hierarchies of age break down, as Charlotte mixes the hash under her younger sister Emily's supervision. Moreover, the best of the food is kept aside for those who ought to be, quite literally, receiving the bare bones.

It is also interesting to note that in this passage, Tabby is making the potatoes as she thinks fit, even if Charlotte thinks ~~they~~ will turn out 'a kind of vegetable glue,' without any mediation from Charlotte ~~grand~~ Emily, the 'dainty housekeeper,' and ~~the~~ excellent baker of bread. In this instance, instead of trying to compromise between dainty housekeeping, and Tabby's autonomy, the community at the Haworth Parsonage kitchen chooses to let Tabby boil potatoes as she thinks fit, so that Tabby too can extend herself into this space and claim it as her own.

These excerpts from *The Life*, and Brontë's personal papers have been quoted, because, they appear to poignantly illustrate how a gendered attachment to a domestic space takes place.

Discussing 'inhabitation' Sara Ahmed writes:

It is a process of becoming intimate with where one is: an intimacy that feels like inhabiting a secret room that is concealed from the view of others. Loving one's home is not about being into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating the space with bodily matter: home as *overflowing* and *flowing over*.²¹²

Charlotte Brontë's process of expanding her body into a home she loves is intimately tied to her sense of pleasure in the domestic labour she performs in this space. Indeed, rather than thinking

²¹¹ Gaskell, *The Life*, 276.

²¹² Ahmed, 11.

of her vision of ‘overflowing’ plenitude in the kitchen as a secret room, I would argue it makes sense to see it as a shared room with a secret *logic* which gives Charlotte pleasure in the process of mixing the hash, and sweeping the hearth. Charlotte’s memories also speak to Woolf’s question: ‘whom will you share [the room] with?’

In a sense, then, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* uses a narrative that privileges photographic realism, to exceed a narrative about ‘housewifely duty’ - instead it becomes a narrative about how clothes, the iron, stoves, beds, floors, Tabby, Charlotte, Emily, Anne, the curates, Tiger, and Keeper, all come together in a community with a private logic of solidarity, pleasure, labour and care, which exceeds the stranglehold of a regime of ‘dainty housekeeping,’ and other ‘angelic’ ways of inhabiting a house. Domestic labour thus emerges as the link through which relations between women and the non-human objects that they care for, can be re-configured into relations of mutual care, instead of being relations which uphold ~~the~~ regimes of normativity, as exemplified in Baudrillard’s critique cited in the Introduction. Thus, if *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* sets in motion a trend for appreciating women writers for being housewives, who did not rock the patriarchal boat, despite their claims to the public sphere of letters, it also sets in motion a tradition of understanding feminine self-expression and creativity as ‘entangled,’ to use Barad’s term, with the material sphere of the domestic interior.

6. From Gaskell and Brontë to Woolf: Claiming Spaces, Claiming Labour

6a. *Flush*: Comedic Victorian Houses:

Perhaps it is possible to see the Brontës’ methods of turning the household into an eccentric and enjoyable space in Woolf’s creation of the eccentric, ludic Victorian interior in *Flush* (1933), the ‘biography’ of the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s pet dog. Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth

Barrett Browning are connected in Woolf's writing, as the well-known tale of how Mr Barrett Browning confined his talented daughter to his house and drove her to elope, immediately precedes Woolf's indictment of Patrick Brontë, for sabotaging his daughter's plans to marry a man of her choice, in *Three Guineas*.²¹³

Flush is an interesting text, because, as Karalyn Kendall-Morwick has pointed out in her reading of *Flush* as Woolf's attempt at writing a multi-species *bildung*, the text refuses to allow a stable frame of interpretation to be imposed onto the furniture. *Flush*'s understanding, which privileges smell and touch over sight and sound, ('Love was chiefly smell; form and colour were smell; music and architecture, law, politics, and science were smell. To him religion itself was smell') stands outside prevailing codes of domesticity, or human systems of interpreting the aesthetics of the domestic interior.²¹⁴ Moreover, the ever proliferating Victorian interior is never far from the marketplace where everything, from crystal balls for seances to *Flush* himself, can be commodified.²¹⁵

Even more interestingly, *Flush* uses narrative strategy to upstage a patriarchal hierarchy of furniture:

‘Since the Mitfords had fallen on evil days - Kerenhappock was the only servant - the chair covers were made by Miss Mitford herself and of the cheapest material; the most important article of furniture seems to have been a large table; the most important room a large greenhouse...’²¹⁶

²¹³ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 199.

²¹⁴ Woolf, *Flush: A Biography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1933) 122, [Archive.org, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.173588/mode/1up#page/122](https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.173588/mode/1up#page/122).

²¹⁵ Woolf, *Flush: A Biography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1933), [Archive.org, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.173588/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.173588/mode/1up); Karalyn Kendall-Morwick, 'Mongrel Fiction: Canine Bildung and Feminist Critique of Anthropocentrism in Woolf's *Flush*,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, 60, No 3 (Fall 2014), 506-526, [jstor.org, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26421742](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26421742).

²¹⁶ Woolf, *Flush*. 14-15.

Woolf's textual strategy removes Dr Mitford, the head of the household from his central position within the space of the home. The most 'important' parts of the house are the greenhouse and the table where the daughter of the house, the primary breadwinner of the family, writes, rather than other spaces which are traditionally arranged in order to uphold hierarchies of age and gender, such as the hearth or tables at which meals are taken. Indeed, perhaps the hand-stitched chair covers made of the cheapest material, could be seen as ~~items~~ that flyies against the registers of good taste in the eyes of the head of the household, with his predilection for consuming expensive china and trading in luxury items, pedigreed horses and dogs.²¹⁷

6b. Rooms of One's Own:

It is interesting to trace the influence of the Brontë-Gaskell tradition of claiming domestic space, by looking at Woolf's representations of how she and her sister managed to get away from the patriarchal household in which they were born. Woolf's commitment to *The Life* as a text to refer to throughout her life, becomes poignant when the tales recounted in *The Life* are juxtaposed with the autobiographical tales about Vanessa and Virginia in their Bloomsbury house, as recounted by Woolf in the texts collated in *Moments of Being*.

To begin with, Woolf's memories of the move from Kensington to Bloomsbury dwell upon the increase in personal space for Vanessa and Virginia:

But what was extraordinarily exhilarating was the extraordinary increase of space... Here Vanessa and I each had a sitting room; there was the large double drawing room; and a study on the ground floor.²¹⁸

²¹⁷ It is worth noting that Woolf published an excoriating review of Constance Hill's *Mary Russell Mitford and Her Surroundings* (1920) damning Hill for concentrating on Mitford's home in order to prove that she was a dutiful daughter and a 'lady' despite all the hardships in her life. (Woolf, 'An Imperfect Lady' in *Times Literary Supplement*, May 6, 1920, in Vol 3, *The Essays*, also as 'Outlines' in *The Common Reader*, 1925 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1948) 232-240, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.27898/mode/1up>.)

²¹⁸ Woolf, 'Old Bloomsbury,' in *Moments of Being*, 182.

Like Charlotte Brontë, Vanessa claims her new freedom by decorating and furnishing the rooms of her own, experimenting with new trends in painting and domestic decor, influenced by [the](#) artists whose work she admired, John Singer Sargent, and Charles Wellington Furse, creating a bright, well-lit domestic interior, breaking away from the pre-Raphaelite and late Victorian [red and black](#) visual aesthetic, ~~dominated by red and black shades that~~ characterized her parents' house. Woolf writes about the house in Gordon Square:

“To make it all newer and fresher, the house had been completely done up. Needless to say, the Watts-Venetian tradition of red plush and black paint had been reversed; we had entered the Sargent-Furse era; white and green chintzes were everywhere; and instead of Morris wall-papers with their intricate patterns we decorated our walls with washes of plain distemper. We were full of experiments and reforms. We were going to do without table napkins, we were to have [large supplies of] Bromo instead; we were going to paint, to write, to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine o'clock. Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial.”²¹⁹

It is significant that Woolf, upon recuperating from the nervous breakdown occasioned by Leslie Stephen's death, found herself in a new house decorated by Vanessa, whose oeuvre is famous for works which revel in rendering public spaces as feminine and private spaces. The domestic space thus becomes a site of experimentation, inaugurating Bloomsbury's methods of experimenting with various forms of queer domesticity outside the institution of marriage, by breaking up the routine of family life, with its aesthetics, meal times, and dining table protocol, no longer dictated by the preference of the patriarch.

While Vanessa and Virginia share a programme of re-inventing domestic spaces, like Charlotte and Emily at Haworth, it is also important to note that the Stephen sisters are, of course, more prosperous than the Brontës, having inherited money from their father; (even if, as Virginia

²¹⁹ Ibid. For Vanessa Bell's relationship to her art and interior decoration, including Gordon Square, see for example Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, 1983, [2018: Tauris Parke, epub](#), esp Chapter 3, 'Changing Places: 1904-1906;') [\(2018 Tauris Parke\) epub](#) Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004, especially 20-34.

would point out, in later years, her brothers, like Branwell Brontë, used up more than their fair share).²²⁰ Thus while Vanessa negotiates with the emotional and managerial burdens of having to confront the sheer materiality of years of familial history accumulating in one house, unlike the Brontës, she does not have to perform the labour of manipulating the unwieldy components of the household herself. Instead this labour is passed on to working class men:

‘She had sold; she had burnt; she had sorted; she had torn up. Sometimes I [i.e. Virginia] believe, she had actually to get men with hammers to batter down- so wedged into each other had the cabinets become.’²²¹

For a few brief years in her life, however, Virginia Stephen did undertake a form of paid domestic labour. Between 1911-1912, she acted as landlady and housekeeper, at a house in Brunswick Square in Bloomsbury, which she shared with her brother and three young bachelors, including Leonard Woolf, who soon became her suitor. As later chapters will explore, the figure of the landlady and patterns of domestic labour in rented ‘bachelor’s’ lodgings, are an integral part of modernism, including feminist modernisms. Correspondence from this period reveals that Woolf, or Virginia Stephen as she was then, appears to be marking out a liminal space for herself between being a sister, and a woman friend, and between being landlady and housekeeper (a role that could belong to a mistress or a servant,) by replacing the Victorian familial home with several rented accommodations, albeit one for male bachelors, over which she presides. In the housekeeping agreement between Virginia Stephen and Leonard Woolf, Virginia stipulates fixed mealtimes, and a fixed menu, which can be changed only with prior notice. Lodgers are expected to help themselves to the meals which will be placed on trays in the hall, and emphasis is placed

²²⁰ Woolf, Letter to Ethel Smyth, June 8th, 1933, *Letters*, Vol V, 195.

²²¹ Woolf, ‘Old Bloomsbury,’ 184.

on fact that tenants are expected to put the trays back, as soon as they have finished eating.²²²

Even if this arrangement still keeps in place a system where the servants are expected to remain as inconspicuous as possible, the housekeeper is less committed to expecting the maids to put up with whatever the employers/ paying ‘gentleman lodgers’ might demand of them, than Julia Stephen was. This agreement reveals that Woolf treats her inmates as responsible adults, and negotiates for a deal which will lighten the load on Sophie Farrell and Maud, the servants in the house.

It is significant then, to look at Duncan Grant’s painting of Virginia, Leonard, and Maynard Keynes in Fitzroy Square in 1912, depicting the three of them on the roof of the building, as a contrast to Woolf’s autobiographical writings about 22 Hyde Park Gate. The three subjects are perched on the sloping surface of the roof, with Virginia lying down in between the two men. Her position is at once thrillingly dangerous, given that she might fall off the slope, as well as a remarkably comfortable place, where she can take her extend her body as she wishes without taking the two men on either side of her body as threats to the integrity of her person. In contrast to the proprieties of the Victorian home of her childhood in which she would be pinned to the role of a victim to predatory men, Virginia is here occupying a safe space, which is literally liminal, between the tiles of the roof of the private house, and the open air of the public environs of the neighbourhood, to unorthodox ends.

6c. ‘Capable of Doing Heaven Knows What’:

It is pertinent, in this context, to return to ‘Mrs Brown’, the protagonist of Woolf’s paradigmatic narrative about how modernist writers ought to write about ‘life.’ To go back to the study of

²²² Letter from Virginia Stephen to Leonard Woolf, 2nd December, 1911, in *The Flight of the Mind: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol I, 1888-1912, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975) 485, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/lettersofvirgini0001wool/mode/lup>, cited in Lee 305-306.

Woolf's narrative in this essay, cited at the beginning of this thesis, perhaps it is possible to say that Woolf appears to be taking from Gaskell, not her apparent validation of compulsory domesticity for women, but instead, is using her methods of using lived experience to substantiate women's claims to the spaces they live and work in. Rejecting the order of 'a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged' or neatly sewn buttons, Woolf's image of life is the ever changing, contingent, scrappy life of Mrs Brown's house, where dripping umbrellas make puddles, and meals are eaten out of saucers.²²³ Such a house might well be temperamentally aligned to the slap-happy kitchen in Haworth Parsonage where potatoes are cooked into 'vegetable glue,' and the experimental house in Gordon Square where table napkins are abolished and replaced with supplies of Bromo.

Mrs Brown, whom Woolf calls 'life itself,' is not, unlike the lady author, a person who, in her domestic milieu must perform a variety of well-defined roles, such as daughter, wife, or sick-nurse. Instead, living in a house all by herself, not performing any familial role, she remains 'an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place, wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what.'²²⁴ Like the Victorian Angel in the House, the 'good' artist as housewife, Mrs Brown is capable of assuming myriad roles, but unlike the Angel, these are not roles that she assumes in order to supervise and serve her household, or become a housewifely figure to readers. Rather, writing Mrs Brown's life would, in Woolf's eyes, produce the paradigmatic Modernist text. Mrs Brown's shape-shifting would forever unsettle the reading public who are anxious about their failure to understand what she is 'made of' and possibly lead them to a more authentic understanding of 'life itself' in a rapidly changing world, in which human subjects and non-human objects come together to create ever-

²²³ Woolf, 'Modern Fiction,' 189; *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*. 5.

²²⁴ Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, 24.

dynamic entanglements.²²⁵ As outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, Woolf's specific intervention in this context is to make sure that Mrs Brown's labour features as a key component of this entanglement.

6d. 'The Kitchen Maid Curled Up in the Arm Chair Reading Plato':

In *Three Guineas* Woolf compares the narrator's situation, as a woman who has been asked by an educated man, how to prevent war, to the situation of a maidservant called Mary, peeling potatoes in the kitchen, being asked by a ducal master to help him construe a passage in Pindar. If such a thing were to happen, Woolf tells us, the likeliest situation would be that 'Mary would be surprised and run screaming to Louisa the cook, "Lawks, Louie, Master must be mad!"'²²⁶ However, kitchen-maids and the daughters of educated men alike will attempt to construe Pindar if their lives depend on it, and similarly, in a context in which women of all classes in England are confronted with quantities of text announcing 'Air Raid Precautions,' regardless of the degree of literacy they may claim, the daughters of educated men are grappling with questions of how to prevent war, since their lives now depend upon it. Woolf is here exploiting the comic difference between women of her own class, who no less than their men-folk, expect conversation about 'people and politics; war and peace' at dinner, and regard it as normal that 'maids should cook the dinner and wash up afterwards.'²²⁷ The wit of Woolf's words apparently lies in the ludicrousness of a woman with a class background like Woolf's, using working class registers of speech, and making a loud proclamation of incompetence, like 'Mary,' the kitchen-maid. Woolf's words, thus, do not establish the lack of knowledge shared by kitchen-

²²⁵ Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, 19.

²²⁶ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 130.

²²⁷ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 3-4.

maids and their 'mistresses,' as a site for solidarity between classes, but as a site for farcical comedy.

However, there is another feminist text, which, although pushed to the margins of Woolf's published oeuvre, for being a draft of a speech rather than a published work, offers a moment in which women across classes can share space when they capture the patriarchal household. In 1931, Woolf re-worked an idea she had published in 1929, in her most famous feminist text, in a speech, 'Professions for Women,' delivered to the London branch of the National Society for Women's Service. In one of the drafts of this speech, Woolf returns to the imagery of personal space, but this time the room has expanded into a house, which women who have performed paid and unpaid domestic labour, have hi-jacked from the owner and bread winner, taking over spaces and activities which were hitherto taboo to them, and the master of the house is unable to dismiss them, because then he would have to do the work himself:

“He goes into the library- an august apartment which he is accustomed to have all to himself- and finds the kitchen maid curled up in the arm chair reading Plato. He goes into the kitchen and there is the cook engaged in writing a mass in B flat. He goes into the billiard room and finds the parlourmaid knocking up a fine break at the table. He goes into the billiard room and there is the housemaid working out a mathematical problem. What is he to do? He has been accustomed all these years to have that sumptuous mansion all to himself, to be master in his own house. Well of course, his first instinct is to dismiss the whole crew. But he reflects that then he would have to do the work of the house himself and he has not been trained to do it.- Nature has denied him certain <quite essential> gifts. He therefore says that that these women servants may practice their silly little amusements in their spare time, but that if he finds them neglecting their sacred duties which nature has imposed on them he will do something very dreadful indeed.”²²⁸

The narrative then produces another hypothetical situation, i.e. that the servants have saved up enough money to hire their own rooms, placing the patriarch into the ironic situation of telling himself, 'I am the breadwinner, how am I going to support a wife and family, if my wife and

²²⁸ Woolf, 'Speech Before the London/ National Society for Women's Service, January 21, 1931,' in *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: The New York Public Library and Readex Books, 1977) xxxiii, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/pargitersnovel00wool/mode/1up>

family can support themselves?’ He has to confront the fact that women can give up being ‘wives, mothers, housemaids, parlourmaids and cooks,’ and become:

‘...doctors, civil servants, meteorologists, dental surgeons, librarians, solicitors’ clerks, agricultural workers, analytical chemists, investigators of industrial psychology, barristers at law, makers of scientific models, accountants, hospital dieticians, political organizers, store-keepers, artists, horticultural instructors, publicity managers, architects, insurance representatives, dealers in antiques, bankers, actuaries, managers of house property, court dress makers, aero engineers, history instructors, company directors, organizers of peace crusades, newspaper representatives, technical officers in royal airship works...’²²⁹

On the one hand, this would appear to be a simplistic narrative in which domestic labour is a form of exploitation which can be left behind, if working-class women can adjust to the logic of capitalism and ‘better themselves,’ moving on to better paying professions. On the other hand, Woolf’s image of the ‘maids’ claiming the bedroom, library, and billiard room to do mathematics, read, and play billiards, is worth staying with, as the image of a moment in which agents of paid domestic labour overthrow the order of 22 Hyde Park Gate and 24 Cheyne Row, extending their presence over the spaces which they have serviced without being able to claim. In this fantasy, the kitchen maid comes out of the kitchen, not on the basis of favours issued to her by the master of the house. Instead, she, but takes up an activity according to her own desire to read, think, or play a sport. At the same time, the kitchen can also be re-invented as a space in which a mass in B Minor can be composed. Like Charlotte Brontë upholding Tabby’s rights to boil the potatoes exactly as she pleases, in this one passage, in a public speech read out to an audience of ‘professional’ women, Woolf produces this moment in which she recognizes the right of working class women to seek what pleases them in the houses they service, rather than what society demands of them. We therefore witness a re-formulation of ‘subject and object and

²²⁹ Woolf, ‘Speech Before the London/ National Society for Women’s Service, January 21, 1931,’ in *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: The New York Public Library and Readex Books, 1977) xxxiii, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/pargitersnovel00wool/mode/lup>.

the nature of reality', where both the kitchen table and the cook are re-invented, as when domestic labour and the labour of writing 'a mass in B Minor' come to share the same space.

Moreover, I would argue that Woolf sees this moment as having been born out of years of labour towards this house filled with ~~these~~ very armchairs, books, papers, billiard tables and sports equipment that these women have taken care of, so that the various spaces of the house, could be identified as private chambers, libraries, kitchens, and billiard rooms. For the most part, tThese rooms and these objects are used in a conventional manner, without Woolf delineating a method of dwelling in them, different from the ways of the master of the house. However, there is also a spark of difference in the fact that ~~the~~ music is being composed in the kitchen,; Pperhaps, ~~using~~ the very kitchen table of *To the Lighthouse* is being used as a supporting surface, in order to record the composition of original music, a work of creation no less abstruse than the work of producing abstract systems of thought, as Mr Ramsay endeavours to do.

Thus we come full circle to the quotation with which we had begun this chapter, variations of which are present in both the extant versions of 'Professions for Women,' which have survived. Woolf gives us some details about the nature of the decorations that might take place, along with details about how economic contingencies have informed the domestic labour that is carried on here:

'You have [*already a room*] earned a room; you have paid the rent for it. I suspect that the sofa turns into a bed, and the wash stand is covered with a check cloth by day to look as much like a table as possible. You picked up the carpet at the Caledonian market for half a crown or so, on condition that you carried it home under your arm. <And I convict you of eating poached eggs instead of mutton chops- because poached eggs are cheaper.> But these things are your own- you have bought them with your own money.'²³⁰ (punctuation as present in source text)

²³⁰ Woolf, 'Speech Before the London/ National Society for Women's Service, January 21, 1931,' xxxiv.

Woolf's Mrs Brown, who comes from a so-called 'good' family, 'who kept servants,' dwells in a space in which her existence is inextricably enmeshed in the objects of her household. However, Woolf ends the draft version of 'Professions for Women,' with a call to women of various class backgrounds, to move out of the patriarchal household, and embark on the work of furnishing, decorating, and sharing the room of one's own. This work is accomplished with the help of the things that have been taken from their orthodox positions (the bed folds into a sofa, the washstand is covered with a check table-cloth,) or secured into these autonomous domestic spaces with great effort (the carpet from a second-hand market in the rented room-). It is with the help of these furnishings that women assert their identity as working women, who work towards co-existing with the domestic objects and rooms that make their lives meaningful.

Thus, this chapter dwells upon Woolf's engagement with traditions of life writing in order to establish a basic paradigm on which this thesis operates- that the inhabitation of an autonomous domestic space depends upon the politics of the multivalent, ever-changing relationships between the gendered subject and the human and non-human parts of this domestic space. The fifth chapter will return to this paradigm, dwelling on the affective relationship that develops between the 'movables' that populate the gendered subject's personal space, in Woolf and Dorothy Richardson's work. I will argue that these writers delineate an aesthetic which is intrinsically shaped by a knowledge of both the paid and unpaid labour through which subject and object come to shape each other. In the next chapter, however, we will stay with Woolf's engagement with life-writing, and trace out how Woolf takes up a markedly different approach when dealing with men who engage in domestic labour and home-making.

Chapter 2: Home Making: Masculine Homemakers in Woolf's reading of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roger Fry: A Biography*

‘...and having settled my household staff and habitation, made me a table and a chair, and all as handsome about me as I could, I began to keep my journal; of which I shall here give you the copy’²- Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, (1719)²³¹

This chapter will attempt to read Woolf's *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940) alongside Woolf's essay 'Robinson Crusoe,' first published in *Nation and Athenaeum*, 6th February 1926, and reprinted in *The Second Common Reader* (1932). Although apparently making an incongruous comparison, this chapter will unpack the ways in which Woolf's brief essay, fairly neglected by Woolf scholars, explores ideas about 'home-making.' These were ideas Woolf re-visited when she came to write the biography of her friend, the painter and pioneering art critic, Roger Fry. As I will show, questions of how to 'make' a home, i.e. to create an assemblage that could be claimed as a domestic space, and how to 'use' such a space in a fulfilling and creative manner were of pressing importance to the British Post-Impressionists, and hence to Woolf, who was close to many of the artists involved in this movement.

If the first chapter attempted to show how women 'extend' themselves over spaces, manipulating objects, as well as their own labouring bodies, to create domestic spaces in which they and the objects around them fit each other, this chapter is about two masculine homemakers engaged in the acts of 'making' their homes. The chapter will focus on the terms on which Woolf represents the household and work of Defoe's protagonist and of the Post-Impressionist artist, to show how the household objects in these texts repeatedly tantalize and throw challenges to these homemakers when they attempt to make them, as they construct their houses, or in the case of

²³¹ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Michael Shinagel (1975; New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1994), 52.

Fry, to represent them in their paintings. It will also attempt to read the silences at the heart of the two texts - and thus try to understand Woolf's blind spots about ~~the participation of~~ subaltern subjects involved in productive and reproductive labour who participated in~~that went into~~ the functioning of Crusoe's and Fry's homes.

1. The Background to Roger Fry's Domestic Arts:

Roger Fry (1866 - 1934) was senior to most of his peers in the Bloomsbury group, and had spent the early years of his career garnering a reputation as a promising art critic of Old Masters. By taking up the cause of Post Impressionism and hosting the first Post- Impressionist Exhibition in London in 1910, (with the support of his friends in Bloomsbury,) Fry established himself as an avant garde artist and intellectual, an outsider to the ranks of the British artistic establishment and the British public, both of whom desecrated Post Impressionism as an assault upon the standards of art.

As Christopher Reed has illustrated, the roots of Fry's career were shaped by a tradition of dissent from the artistic standards of the British bourgeoisie, as he began his career, having 'worshipped the Ruskin idol' in his youth, through associations with various guilds and workshops associated with the Arts and Crafts movement.²³²

Fry's interest in Ruskin may well have influenced his later Post- Impressionist phase, given Ruskin's emphasis on breaking away from visual art as a technically perfect simulacra of the visible world, by valuing Gothic art as art which reflected a profound creative impetus, producing a brilliant result, in spite of the fact that it was composed of 'fragments full of

²³² Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 36.

imperfection.²³³ Ruskin also contrasted the Gothic with the methods of industrial production through which commodities were produced in Victorian England. Significantly, Ruskin does not cite the external appearance of an architectural edifice, but cites an interior space, a room:

‘And now, reader, look round this English room of yours, about which you have been proud so often, because the work of it was so good and strong, and the ornaments of it so finished. Examine again all those accurate mouldings, and perfect polishings, and unerring adjustments of the seasoned wood and tempered steel. Many a time you have exulted over them, and thought how great England was, because her slightest work was done so thoroughly. Alas! if read rightly, these perfectnesses are signs of a slavery in our England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African, or helot Greek.’²³⁴

It is significant, given the scope of the present chapter, that Ruskin’s politics swings between a critique of capitalism under which the labourer is alienated from the product of his labour, and a glorification of a past in which the labourer was denied any political autonomy, even if he found a creative output in producing, in Northern Europe, the art that came to be known as Gothic.

However, coming to other aesthetic thinkers of the nineteenth century, we also find intersections between critiques of the aesthetics of commodity capitalism and strong socialist traditions present in the nineteenth century. In his essay ‘The Beauty of Life,’ (1880) Morris, too, takes up the task of illustrating how an individual room could be furnished by breaking away from the mores of the time, asking his audience, as a rule, to ‘Have nothing in your homes nothing that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.’²³⁵ Morris’s critique of capitalism in this essay was based on the fact that capitalism perpetuated a society in which inequalities were ever increasing, and that modern standards of ‘comfort’ in domestic surroundings were accessible

²³³ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, Vol II, (London: Smith and Elder, 1867) 160, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/stonesvenicevol00ruskgoog/mode/1up>.

²³⁴ Ruskin, 163-4.

²³⁵ William Morris, ‘The Beauty of Life,’ delivered before the Birmingham Society for Arts and School of Design, February 19 1880, in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (Longmans, Green and Co, 1919) ~~first published by Ellis and White in 1882~~, accessed from Marxists.org, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter3.htm>, XHTML version.

only through a market which sold various gradations of commodities, which imitated the ugly and/or useless items which the capitalist class consumed and reaped profits from.²³⁶ Morris linked the degenerate standards of British aesthetics to imperialism, describing how the aesthetics of the various artisanal traditions of India had degenerated rapidly in the process of producing goods which could be marketed as exotic luxuries to the British public, or as cheap items meant for mass consumption.²³⁷ The ‘decorative’ or ‘lesser’ arts (i.e. arts which were practiced through the production of items which had a use value as well as an aesthetic value) were of prime importance to Morris because of their wide presence in the daily lives of people.²³⁸ ‘Decoration’ was of prime importance to give people ‘pleasure in the things they must perform use’ and ~~to give people~~ ‘pleasure in the things they must perform make.’²³⁹

This critique of the unavailability of beautiful things in Britain’s homes, and in the lives of the British people, was supplemented by a critique of the mores of domestic decorum. Socialists in the nineteenth century, like Edward Carpenter and Robert Blatchford, routinely critiqued genteel standards of living in Britain, pointing out how the male householder’s position was of a man who routinely refused to perform any labour within the house, and, to use Blatchford’s terms, aspired to a standard of living in which he would be a ‘victim to [his] furniture, and [his] wife a

²³⁶ William Morris, ‘The Beauty of Life.’

²³⁷ Morris, ‘The Art of the People,’ delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, February 19, 1879, in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter2.htm>.

²³⁸ Morris, ‘The Lesser Arts,’ ~~delivered before the Trades’ Guild for Learning, 4th December 1877,~~ in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, ~~delivered before the Trades’ Guild for Learning, 4th December 1877,~~ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter1.htm>.

²³⁹ Ibid.

slave' to it.'²⁴⁰ For Edward Carpenter, this state of affairs was the manifestation of a society whose morals had been skewed by ~~the logic of~~ the class structure of society:

‘...where to converse with a domestic at the dinner table would be an unpardonable breach of etiquette; where it is assumed as a matter of course that you do nothing for yourself – to lighten the burden which your presence in the world necessarily casts upon others; where to be discovered washing your own linen, or cooking your dinner, or up to the elbows in dough on baking day, or helping to get the coals in, or scrubbing your own floor, or cleaning out your privy, would pass a sentence of lifelong banishment on you; where all dirty work, at least such work as is considered dirty by the “educated” people in a household is thrust upon young and ignorant girls; where children are brought up to feel far more shame at any little breach of social decorum – at an “h” dropped, or a knife used in the wrong place at dinner, or a wrong appellation given to a visitor – than at glaring acts of selfishness and uncharitableness.’²⁴¹

2. The Omega Workshops:

The visual modernism that Fry and the Bloomsbury group pioneered was therefore a visual movement that took an anti-capitalist, pro-artisanal politics from a late Victorian movement, and amalgamated it with artistic techniques from the non-Western world (inflected through the work of the Continental Post-Impressionists.) The domestic space was also given primacy as a place where an authentic aesthetic could be produced and appreciated.

As Reed points out, by the 1910s, not only had the legacy of the Arts and Crafts movement been co-opted by large scale retail businesses, but also ~~by that~~ a range of ‘artistic’ workshops which employed working class labour to produce artisanal home wares, ~~such as from~~ Arthur H. Mackmurdo’s (Fry’s employer’s) Century Guild ~~and to~~ the French couturier Paul Poiret’s Ecole Martin, ~~both of which~~ were structured like capitalist enterprises. These guilds functioned through

²⁴⁰ Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England* (London: Clarion Newspaper Company and Walter Scott, 1895) 41, Marxists.org, https://www.marxists.org/archive/blatchford/1894/merrie_england.pdf.

²⁴¹ Edward Carpenter, ‘England’s Ideal,’ article published in May 1884 issue of *To-Day*, Marxists.org, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/carpenter/1884/englands-ideal.htm>, html version.

an artistic hierarchy, with designs being curated by middle class stakeholders and executed by artisans.²⁴²

The Omega workshops opened in Fitzroy Square in Bloomsbury in 1913. As Fry wrote in 1924, the Omega had taken up the burden of an aesthetic discourse with its roots in Ruskin's critique of 'the English room,' marked with the soulless mechanical skill of an industrialized society. It also took inspiration from William Morris' experiments in producing furniture and household items, and attempted to create a movement which once more 'allowed the artist the possibility of utilizing his gifts in applied design'.²⁴³ The Omega Workshops were thus founded in a spirit of protest against the artistic standards of mass produced domestic commodities, lambasted by Fry in his description of a railway dining room, quoted and analyzed by Woolf in her biography,

'If I were to go on to tell of the legs of the tables, of the electric-light fittings, of the chairs into the wooden seats of which some tremendous mechanical force has deeply impressed a large distorted anthemion- if I were to tell of all these things, my reader and I might both begin to realise with painful acuteness something of the horrible toil involved in all this display. Display is indeed the end and explanation of it all. Not one of these things has been made because the maker enjoyed the making, not one has been bought because its contemplation would give anyone any pleasure. Display was the end and explanation of it all...

...Now consider the case of those men whose life-work it is to stimulate this eczematous eruption of pattern on the surface of modern manufactures. *Their business is to produce, not expressive design, but dead patterns.* They are compelled, therefore, to spend their lives behaving in an entirely idiotic and senseless manner, and that with the certainty that no one will ever get positive pleasure from the result; for one may hazard the statement that until I made the effort just now, no one of the thousands who use the refreshment-rooms ever really *looked* at the designs.'²⁴⁴ (my italics, except last)

²⁴² Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 35-50, 111-132.

²⁴³ Roger Fry, 'The Present Situation,' unpublished lecture, 1924, cited by Christopher Reed in *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, Domesticity*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 111.

²⁴⁴ Fry, 'Art and Socialism,' *Vision and Design*; (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920); ~~originally published in 1912, accessed from~~ Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/54154/54154-h/54154-h.htm>; Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940) 188, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/rogerfryabiograp010045mbp/mode/lup>

From the beginning, the Omega produced items that belonged in the domestic interior, i.e. furniture, carpets, earthenware, fabric, wallpaper, cushions, screens, lampshades, boxes, and fans, and executed commissions for interior decoration. They participated in the Ideal Home Exhibition of 1913, exhibiting a number of model domestic interiors.

Along with this prioritizing of a reform of the domestic interior, Fry brought in an aesthetic of playfulness and newness in these domestic objects. This can be seen in Woolf's re-telling of an interviewer's experience of being shown around the workshop:

'It is time,' said Mr Fry, 'that the spirit of fun was introduced into the furniture and into fabrics...' Then Mr Fry showed him a chair. He said it was 'a conversational chair,' a witty chair; he could imagine Max Beerbohm sitting on it... Then there was a design for a wall decoration... 'If people get tired of one landscape,' said Mr Fry, 'they can easily have another. It can be done in a very short time...'²⁴⁵

In contrast to the bourgeois household which pushed for immutable arrangements of its furniture to signify the fixedness of their family 'values,' the Post-Impressionists championed a shifting, ludic domestic interior.

This was an artistic principle the Omega artists had championed in their own homes, i.e. an aesthetic of understanding the 'making' of the domestic space as an accretive process. The surfaces of the homes which Fry, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant lived in were always being painted, and re-painted, as the artists evolved ~~over~~ the course of their careers.²⁴⁶ Omega commodities, similarly, came with a sense of inhabiting an ever changing landscape, within the home, as opposed to the conventional association of the home with stability and the hierarchies of family life. Woolf would describe Fry's house, Durbins, as a dynamic crowded space, containing 'paintings and carvings, Italian cabinets and Chippendale chairs, blue Persian plates, delicately glazed, and rough yellow peasant pottery bought for farthings at fairs,' to which new

²⁴⁵ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 194-195.

²⁴⁶ Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 35-50, 169-198.

things were being added, to make it seem an antidote to the country houses being promoted in the inter-war years, as homes worthy of preservation on aesthetic grounds: ‘It was a stored, but not a congested, house, a place to live in, not a museum.’²⁴⁷ It was also a place for significant experiments with systems of domestic labour, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

It is also significant to note that the Omega functioned as a collective, and works of art did not bear individual signatures. It also functioned on the principle that artists involved would be guaranteed a minimum wage (five shillings per half day, which was the average wages of a clerk) for a maximum of three days a week, freeing them to pursue their own art for the rest of their time.²⁴⁸ The goods produced were, however, priced at rates that made them prohibitively expensive for most consumers except the upper and upper middle classes.

This approach to home-making was out of sync with its times, on aesthetic as well as economic grounds. Not only was it out of sync with the bourgeois standards of High Victorian furnishing, which continued to exercise a powerful influence in everyday aesthetics, but it was also too different to be assimilated into the dominant avant garde aesthetics of the inter-war years.

Mass production and a dislike for ‘feminine’ (i.e. unmanly) art and design came to characterize the avant-garde architectural aesthetic that came to define High Modernism. The Omega folded in 1919, a casualty to the war. As early as 1913 Wyndham Lewis had dismissed the Omega’s standards of home-making both for looking back to Victorian standards, and failing to perform the heroic masculinity demanded by the spirit of the age, since their ‘Idol [was] still prettiness with its mid- Victorian languish of the neck,’ and the main artists in the workshop were

²⁴⁷ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 163.

²⁴⁸ Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 126.

~~apparently incapable of creating~~ ~~being unable to create~~ anything that would 'rise above the level of a pleasant tea party.'²⁴⁹

Le Corbusier's 1923 *Towards a New Architecture* with its valorization of mass production and standardization, and of the masculine, top-tier engineer as the hero of modernity, states the importance of an original plan for a house, and its strict execution, describing the utopic possibilities of building standardized houses on a large scale, even by pouring concrete into house-shaped moulds.²⁵⁰ In Le Corbusier's scheme the excellence of the house was to be measured by its closeness to the original plan drawn on modern, simplified lines, an idea which he applied to the interiors of the house and its furnishings, as well as its external framework. Participating in modernism's critique of the proliferation of objects in the domestic interior, Corbusier advised his reader to have most of his furniture built into the body of the house, and to get rid of movable items of furniture, like wardrobes, cabinets, book cases, wash stands, mantelpieces, dressers, and sideboards, along with ornate light fittings, wall papers, and curtains.²⁵¹

If such an aesthetic overlaps with British Post-Impressionism in that it argues against the proliferation of redundant mass-produced furnishings, it is also an aesthetic in which there is no space for a dweller in such rooms to quickly and easily change a wall painting according to their fancy if they get tired of it, as Fry had claimed the Omega could accomplish. Instead, they are expected to somehow accommodate their possessions according to the plan conceived by the

²⁴⁹ Wyndham Lewis, Frederick Etchells, C.J. Hamilton, E. Wadsworth, letter to Roger Fry, c. summer or autumn 1913, ~~reproduced~~ in 'The Ideal Home Rumpus,' Quentin Bell and Stephen Chaplin in *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs, Commentary, and Criticism*, ed. S.P. Rosenbaum, Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1975, 337, accessed from archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/bloomsburygroup00rose/page/337/mode/1up?view=theater>.

²⁵⁰ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells, first published in English in London: John Rodeker, 1931; (Dover Publications: New York, 1986;)-227-265.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 115-123.

High Modernist architect, or civil engineer, and executed by an invisibilized blue collar workforce. According to Corbusier, the decorative arts were a redundant category and its practitioners were either feeble minded or frauds.²⁵²

As Reed points out, this is the context in which the British Post-Impressionists came to see themselves as a besieged minority, producing ‘amusing’ art which valued eccentricity and comic detail, in a political climate which overwhelmingly embraced the values of mass production to produce a bare, pre-ordained domestic interior, which the inhabitant had to use as a passive consumer.²⁵³ High Modernist home-planning thus replaced patriarchal Victorian domesticity with a different form of ‘hygienic’ existence, conceived by a master-architect who celebrated the ‘virile’ values of white-collar masculinity.

3. Leslie Stephen, Roger Fry, and Virginia Woolf:

At this point, it is interesting to consider that Woolf’s role as a sympathetic bystander to Roger Fry’s travails, as the leader of the British Post-Impressionists, and her affiliation to Fry’s modernism, rather than Le Corbusier’s, may well have been influenced by her personal experience.

It is poignant to remember, from the last chapter, that Woolf’s sharpest criticism of her own father was on the very point of his systematic exploitation of the domestic economy of labour in order to torment his adolescent daughters, with a display of temper, when he examined the household account books to see if the housekeeping had happened on his terms:

‘And over the whole week brooded the horror, the recurring terror of Wednesday. On that day the weekly books were given him. Early that morning we knew whether they were

²⁵² [Le Corbusier](#) *Ibid*, 7.

²⁵³ Reed, ‘Bloomsbury Rooms,’ 251-277.

under or over the danger mark - eleven pounds if I remember right. On a bad Wednesday we ate our lunch in the anticipation of torture. The books were presented directly after lunch. He put on his glasses. Then he read the figures. Then down came his fist on the account book. His veins filled; his face flushed. Then there was an inarticulate roar. Then he shouted ... 'I am ruined.'²² Then he beat his breast. Then he went through an extraordinary dramatisation of self pity, horror, anger... With a deep groan and with ostentatiously trembling hands he wrote out the cheque. Slowly with many groans the pen and the account book were put away. Then he sank into his chair and sat spectacularly with his head on his breast... I was speechless. Never have I felt such rage and such frustration. For not a word of what I felt - that unbounded contempt for him and of pity for Nessa - could be expressed... *Roger Fry said that civilisation means awareness; he was uncivilised in his extreme unawareness.*²⁵⁴ (my italics)

Perhaps it is no co-incidence that Virginia remembers Fry's strictures about civilization in the context of a personal experience of masculine tyranny in a domestic space. As previously explored, Virginia and Vanessa's move to Bloomsbury was a step towards cultivating a different kind of domestic order, in which Leslie Stephen's daughters would no longer be vulnerable to the patriarch's unchecked emotional abuse, if they failed to meet the standards of domesticity he expected. They would be free to adapt what they had inherited from the breakup of their family home into a new standard of domesticity, breaking up the visual order and daily rituals of their childhood family.²⁵⁵

From 1910 onwards, Fry would have counted among their male contemporaries who were participants in the housekeeping projects the sisters were working at. Perhaps more importantly, Virginia Stephen would have found out that he was someone who could also be entrusted with feminine care-work, when she travelled to Broussa (modern day Bursa in Turkey) to nurse Vanessa after a miscarriage. Her biography of Fry is full of praise for this time, especially for the way in which Fry balanced his aesthetic commitments to painting with taking care of domestic

²⁵⁴ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past,' in *Moments of Being*, 144.

²⁵⁵ Woolf, 'Old Bloomsbury' in *Moments of Being*, 185.

concerns, in order to make life easy for the invalid, and to flourish in the odd assortment of things that his domestic personal space was now furnished with:

“Bed, food, and litter all had to be improvised from the most inappropriate materials - he had full scope for his ingenuity; he ventured into the kitchen, and returned triumphant with a dish or two... Soon therefore his room at the hotel was littered with stuffs and pots and silks, mixed with chessmen, medicine bottles and paintboxes.”²⁵⁶

Woolf would also have known that Fry had built his house, Durbins, in an experimental fashion so that the household could be run on more efficient lines, and be more easy for paid domestic workers to service, with minimal furniture and staircases for servants to dust and polish, and with what furniture there was being in oakwood, which did not easily show up marks. The house had much modern technology such as central heating, electricity, a spin mop, a dumb waiter between the cook’s room and the ‘houseplace’ where meals were eaten, a telephone, an electric bell for servants (so they need not hover about at appointed times), and flushing water closets. The maids also had rooms which were better than the basement rooms of Victorian servants, even if they were much colder and more uncomfortable than the rest of the house. Lottie Hope and Nellie Boxall, the servants who went to work at Durbins in 1909, came to work for the Woolfs in 1916.²⁵⁷

Fry was also, as Woolf pointed out in her biography, capable of performing domestic labour as a matter of routine, and not simply in times of crisis. Following his wife Helen Fry’s institutionalization in 1910, Fry extensively managed his domestic affairs by himself, combining the domestic labour he needed to keep himself going, with his commitment to his art. In Roger Fry Fry’s studio is not the room of Jacob Flanders, which is well provided with domestic

²⁵⁶Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 171.

²⁵⁷Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, 108, 133.

comforts produced by working class women, but rather a place where Fryhe cooks 'odd meals for himself with the smell of paint hanging over the frying pan.'²⁵⁸

It was an untidy room. He cooked there, slept there, painted there and wrote there. There was always a picture on the easel, and on the table an arrangement of flowers or of fruit, or eggs or of onions - some still life that the charwoman was admonished on a placard 'Do not touch.'... the room was if possible still more untidy. Mrs Filmer had obeyed the command on the placard 'Do not touch.' Mrs Filmer had not touched. Rows of dusty medicine bottles stood on the mantelpiece; frying pans were mixed with palettes; some plates held salad, others scrapings of congealed paint. The floor was strewn with papers. There were the pots he was making, there were samples of stuffs and designs for the Omega. But on the table, protected by its placard, was the still life - those symbols of detachment, those tokens of a spiritual reality immune from destruction, the immortal apples, the eternal eggs. He was delighted to stop work and to begin talking. But directly the friend was gone, the article would be finished, and directly the light dawned upon the very untidy room he would be at work upon his picture. Whatever the theory, whatever the connection between the rhythms of life and of art, there could be no doubt about the sensation - he had survived the war.²⁵⁹

In a contrast to the 'genius' of Leslie Stephen, which could only flourish when shut away from the rest of the household in his study, while household cares were taken care of by women, Fry's studio is a place where various activities and various kinds of labour jostle with each other, and the work of producing art, has to share space with the work of cooking food and cleaning. Eggs and apples, after all, can be cooked or eaten, as well as painted. Single objects thus come to participate in myriad roles, as food, ornaments, or 'subjects' of still lifes, just as the subject is simultaneously cook, housekeeper, artist, and social being. As Claudia Tobin writes:

Woolf's ekphrastic description reveals the artist's studio as a site in which the jostling relations between 'art' and 'life' are played out. The disordered objects subvert their owner's narrative revealing that the spheres of 'art' and 'life' interpenetrate more than Fry's aesthetic theory acknowledges. Different rhythms (cooking, sleeping, painting and writing) not only 'play against each other' but also interact and permeate the same space. In a similar way, when reading Fry's criticism, Woolf described a feeling of contact with his vibrational presence: 'we never feel shut off alone in a studio; morality and conduct,

²⁵⁸Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 246.

²⁵⁹Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 201, 215 .

even if they are called by other names, are present; eating and drinking and love-making hum and murmur on the other side of the page' (RF, 228).²⁶⁰

Woolf presents the years of the First World War, as years in which Fry copes with various problems in the Omega, and in his home spaces, soldiering on despite the profound disillusionment that the barbarity and senseless patriotism of the war, occasioned in the Bloomsbury group. If, on one hand, Fry persists in figuring out how to make beautiful and useful objects that will adorn the houses of other people, as mentioned before, he also has to increasingly deal with the processes of reproductive labour, in Durbins, ~~and~~ his studio spaces. Woolf thus creates a masculine homemaker willing to turn his hand to any kind of domestic labour - the figure who takes from women the burden of performing the role of the Angel in the House, who is expected to cope with any kind of domestic crisis. Fry cooks, eats, and washes up afterwards when he is unable to hire suitable paid labour, and deals with coal shortages occasioned by the war by trying out tricks to heat his house himself: 'The pipes froze; he mounted the roof at Durbins with a pail of boiling water but failed to thaw them.'²⁶¹

Most strikingly, Fry cooks a *boeuf en daube*, a dish immortalized by Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*. However, unlike Mrs Ramsay's dinner party, which performs the hierarchies of the bourgeoisie dining table, where the housewife eagerly seeks confirmation that her food is appreciated by her husband, children, and guests, rather than taking her own pleasure in eating the food, Fry's preparation is a dish that provides sustenance and frees the cook, ~~so that he can~~ devote time to his artistic pursuits, or other tasks:

'I've made a *boeuf en daube* which is a dream and will last us about five days so all I need is to boil peas or something,' and he could read or write while he watched the pot.²⁶²

²⁶⁰ Claudia Tobin, *Modernism and Still Life: Artists, Writers, Dancers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) 64-65; Tobin cites Woolf's *Roger Fry* from the London: Hogarth Press, 1991 edition.

²⁶¹ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 206.

²⁶² *Ibid*, 283.

Woolf's postulation that human nature changed 'in or around December 1910,' has been linked to the timing of the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London, which opened in that month, organized by Fry. If, according to Woolf, the character of 'the Georgian cook' changed into someone who participated in the life of society beyond her basement kitchen, freely entering the living room of her employers 'now to borrow *The Daily Herald*, now to ask advice about a hat,' ~~at this time~~, it becomes possible to link the British proponents of Post Impressionism with the shaking up of domestic hierarchies.²⁶³ In *Roger Fry*, published in 1940, Woolf's Fry takes part in these domestic conversations, deferring to his charwoman, to learn methods of curing indigestion, around the year 1892:

'His charwoman had cured her husband of indigestion by putting isinglass in his tea- might it not be worthwhile for Lady Fry to try the same cure upon Sir Edward [Fry's parents]? ... Undoubtedly, sitting at other people's feet, whether they were the feet of art experts or of psychical researchers or of old charwomen with a hoard of nostrums under their black bonnets, was a characteristic [of Fry]...' ²⁶⁴(first ellipses Woolf's)

According to Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, Woolf's imperative need to make her biography of Fry, written and revised between April 1938 and June 1940, with first the imminent threat, and then the outbreak of the ~~S~~second ~~W~~world ~~W~~war, looming in the background, into an 'apologia for Bloomsbury,' defending Fry as someone who adopted 'the best way of checking Nazism,' by 'travelling about England addressing masses of people, who'd never looked at a picture,' was shaped by the fact that Fry, sixteen years her senior, can be read as a father figure in her life, a contrast to Leslie Stephen.²⁶⁵ As Kooistra points out, that for Woolf, if Leslie Stephen was the man whose 'life would have entirely ended mine' by making it impossible for her to become a

²⁶³ Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,' 5.

²⁶⁴ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 87.

²⁶⁵ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, 'Virginia Woolf's *Roger Fry*: A Bloomsbury Memorial,' *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol 2 (1996), 26-28, jstor.org, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24906390>; Woolf, Letter to Benedict Nicolson 13th Aug 1940, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol VI, 413-415.

writer, due to the exacting domestic standards he wanted his household to be run on, Roger Fry was the person ‘who kept me on the right path, more than anyone, as far as writing goes.’²⁶⁶ Fry’s domestic habits may well have served as a model of how a woman’s artistic career could flourish in the company of a man who did not ask women in his life to produce domestic bliss for him, and was capable of taking care of other people, and himself. Moreover, Fry was a facilitator for women’s participation in Post Impressionism, and Vanessa and Virginia browned their skin and wore clothes with African patterns, baring their shoulders and legs in public, to become ‘indecent’ figures from a Gauguin canvas, on the last day of the first Post- Impressionist Exhibition.²⁶⁷

4. Admiring Crusoe: Post -Impressionist Form

In this context it is interesting to look at Woolf’s treatment of *Robinson Crusoe* and attempt to understand why Woolf found Defoe’s aesthetics significant, in a novel about a white man surviving on a lonely (but not entirely uninhabited) island, by adopting various inventive methods of procuring food, shelter and clothing, in the early days of mercantilism and settler colonialism.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶Kooistra, 28.

²⁶⁷ Woolf would have had good opportunity observe Fry’s relationship to women in a domestic context, as Vanessa Bell and Fry were lovers, even if she glossed over this relationship in the biography. (Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 290.)

²⁶⁸ It is also interesting to remember that Defoe was present as an influence on Woolf’s imagination at moments when she undertook pathbreaking literary work herself. Woolf stated in her diary that she wanted to write a Sapphic ‘Defoe narrative,’ on 14th March 1927, later returning to this entry to write in the margin ‘*Orlando* leading to *The Waves*,’ on 8th July 1933. This train of thought was started by her meeting with a woman called Faith Henderson, whom Woolf described as ‘an unattractive woman, penniless, alone,’ and imagined her setting off on travels. Woolf was also deeply appreciative of Defoe’s evocation of London as a terrain traversed by dispossessed women in *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxanna* (1724). Woolf argued that Defoe needed to be remembered not merely as the writer of *Robinson Crusoe* but also for his picaresque novels. (Please see, Woolf, 12th April 1919, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol I, 263; ‘Defoe’ in *The Common Reader* 121-131; *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol III, 131).

To begin with, Woolf states that she wishes to avoid reading Defoe's text as a precursor to a British imperial tradition of schoolboy adventure stories, or dwell on its reputation as a proto-romantic reflection on man in a 'natural' state of solitude, and instead focus on Defoe's reliance on '[r]eality, fact, substance,' which finally 'comes in the end to make common actions dignified and common objects beautiful.'²⁶⁹ Here, Woolf would appear to be moved by the manner in which the narrative does not allow Robinson or the reader to take objects as self-evident, but rather shows the various items Robinson makes or adapts, as exemplars of Bill Brown's thingness. It dwells upon Robinson's sensual relationship to each item, mapping its physical contours, as Robinson keeps working with the thing, to determine whether it will be useful to Robinson:

‘There are no sunsets and no sunrises; there is no solitude and no soul. There is, on the contrary, staring us full in the face nothing but a large earthenware pot.’²⁷⁰

The basic implements ~~are~~ used to undertake various forms of labour on the desert island, are located far away from the standardized processes of commercial production that were increasingly gaining traction in Crusoe's day. As Woolf writes:

‘To dig, to plant, to bake, to build - how serious these simple occupations are; hatchets, scissors, logs, axes - how beautiful these simple objects become. Unimpeded by comment, the story marches on with magnificent downright simplicity.’²⁷¹

Woolf's admiration of Defoe's choice to write a narrative that foregrounds 'a large earthenware pot,' the material project on which Crusoe spends a great deal of time working, instead of a romantic narrative about reflections upon solitude, becomes significant if we look at the aesthetic

²⁶⁹ Woolf, Virginia, 'Robinson Crusoe,' first published in *Nation and Athenaeum*, 6th February 1926, ' in *The Second Common Reader* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1986) first published in London in 1932 by the Hogarth Press, [archive.org, https://archive.org/details/secondcommonread00virg_0/mode/1upCommon-Reader-II](https://archive.org/details/secondcommonread00virg_0/mode/1upCommon-Reader-II), first published in *Nation and Athenaeum*, 6th February 1926, 57.

²⁷⁰ Woolf, 'Robinson Crusoe,' 58.

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, 57.

context which Woolf would have witnessed at close quarters.²⁷² To begin with, Defoe's brief but masterful style as quoted by Woolf in her essay, conveys a range of emotions through brief factual description. An example would be Crusoe's sense of desolation upon the loss of his fellow sailors being conveyed by the information that the last traces of them are 'three of their hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows.' This narrative technique comes close to Fry's formulation of Primitivism as adopted by Post Impressionism, as a system of expressing the emotions evoked by what they painted, through a process of trying to 'unload [detail] to simplify the drawing and painting, by which natural objects are evoked, in order to recover the lost expressiveness and life.'²⁷³ In a sense this aesthetic could be seen as foreshadowing the object oriented turn away from the viewing of objects as signifiers of their relationship to a world of objects arranged in sequences that made sense via the logic of commodity capitalism, as inflected through the 'culture industry.' This aesthetic moves towards an acknowledgement of the Heideggerian awareness of the magical quality of entities, which forever intrigue and elude the human subject.²⁷⁴ In a sense, Woolf's very description of how Crusoe focused on the use value of objects, rather than cocooning the material details of his life in a discourse which peddles in clichés about man's subjectivity, actually privileges the 'thing-ness' of the object, the object being presented in the narrative as a physical presence 'staring us full in the face,' rather than as a 'vessel' for the values that human beings have ascribed to it. Woolf's attribution of the verb 'staring' to the pot thus locates agency to the pot, as much as to the eponymous protagonist of Defoe's novel, whose ruminations, and dogged labour are supposed to be the main subject of

²⁷² Ibid, 58.

²⁷³ Roger Fry in 'The Post-Impressionists,' in *The Roger Fry Reader*, ed. Christopher Reed, first published in the catalogue *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, 1910, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1996,) 84, accessed from archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/rogerfryreader00roge/page/n5/mode/1up?view=theater>.

²⁷⁴ Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing,' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, 1971 (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001):161-184; 'Heidegger on Things: Of Worldly Things,' 6th July 2018, Neologikon blog, <https://neologikonblog.wordpress.com/tag/heidegger-on-things/>.

the novel, in popular modes of reading the novel (expecting ‘sunrises and sunsets’ to be the mere backdrop for Crusoe, rather than as entities which emerge ‘staring us full in the face,’ i.e. in the foreground, like the pot.) As I will subsequently substantiate by quoting from Defoe’s text, the work of fashioning the earthenware pot Robinson has sourced from the earth, is a work of revealing and reveling in the physicality of the pot. The pot emerges as an object of wonder, and the contact between the pot and Robinson, brings to birth both the pot, and Robinson’s identity as a man who makes pots in his unique, amateur fashion.

A similar aesthetic can be seen in Woolf’s appreciation of Vanessa Bell’s art, known for its monumental, simplified representation of domestic themes, as painting that eschews explicitly emotional subjects, creating a situation where ‘[o]ur emotion has been given the slip.’ Yet, writes Woolf, this produces an effect which communicates that the artist is ‘somebody to whom the visible world had given a shock of emotion every day of the week.’²⁷⁵ Woolf writes:

‘One feels that if a canvas of hers hung on the wall, it would never lose its lustre. It would never mix itself up with the loquacities and trivialities of domestic life. It would go on saying something of its own imperturbably. And perhaps by degrees- who knows- one would become an inmate of this strange painters’ world, in which mortality does not enter, and psychology is held at bay, and there are no words.’²⁷⁶

As pointed out in the Introduction, Bell’s paintings are notable for dismantling conventional hierarchies, by refusing to use perspective in order to privilege the human world over the non-human. Woolf here seems to be describing an aesthetic object which would not fall simplistically into an appointed place in a domestic interior (given that this piece was written for an exhibition where it was expected that the art on display would be sold to private purchasers, for some of

²⁷⁵ Woolf, ‘Foreword to *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*,’ first published as a foreword to a catalogue of twenty seven paintings by Vanessa Bell, Feb 4, 1930, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol 5, ‘1930,’ ed, Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke, (London: The Hogarth Press, 2009,) 181 for analysis of Vanessa Bell’s painting, see for example, Frances Spalding.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

whom, presumably, the 'wall' on which the canvas would hang, with its lustre undimmed, would be the walls of their home-).²⁷⁷

The work of art thus exists without meeting the fate of artistic objects as described by Roger Fry, in the passage about the furnishings of the railway waiting-room, as described earlier, of becoming a part of a debased 'system of objects,' to use Baudrillard's term, which is meant to signify the strength of bourgeois values through a system of 'display,' rather than make an aesthetic intervention. At the same time, it is different from the discerning modernist homemaker's attitude to art, as described by Corbusier in *Towards a New Architecture*. Corbusier recommended not having any art on the wall, and keeping any paintings stored away, until the home-owner wanted to look at them or show them, on which the art could be brought out-then-bringin-them-out to look at, one by one.²⁷⁷ If the perceiver of the art, and the artist are victimized by the substandard work they must perceive and co-exist with, in the High Victorianpre-WWI drawing room, Corbusier's modernist vision robs the work of art of any agentic qualities, being summoned as per the needs of the home-owner. In contrast, Woolf imagines Bell's painting creating an elusive emotional field, where the subject is in thrall to the canvas without being able to use language to legislate upon how they emote or exactly what emotions they experience, but is yet remains anan active agent experiencing emotions, and thus establishing an affective relationship with the work of art.

Indeed, it is possible to see the influence of a number of strands of Post-Impressionist discourse in Woolf's essay on Robinson Crusoe in *The Second Common Reader*. Significantly, Woolf describes the earthenware pot, which she uses as a synecdoche for the wealth of factual detail about the things Robinson produces, in painterly terms. The 'plain earthenware pot staring us full

²⁷⁷ Le Corbusier, 117.

in the face,' appears like the subject of a painting placed in the foreground, it's simple, solid form conveying an emotional situation:

‘Thus Defoe, by reiterating that nothing but a plain earthenware pot stands in the foreground, persuades us to see remote islands and the solitudes of the human soul. By believing fixedly in the solidity of the pot and its earthiness, he has subdued every other element to his design; he has roped the whole universe into harmony. And is there any reason we ask as we shut the book, why the perspective that a plain earthenware pot exacts should not satisfy us as completely, once we grasp it, as man himself in all his sublimity standing against a background of broken mountains and tumbling oceans with stars flaming in the sky?’²⁷⁸

Pottery was indeed one of the important crafts the Omega practitioners practiced, as well as a craft Fry theorized and discussed in his writing. For Fry, pottery is the craft that needs to meet both aesthetic and utilitarian standards. In a challenge to Clive Bell's idea of significant form, as the compelling factor according to which art ~~ought to~~ be judged, Fry cites pottery as having the potential to encompass other factors, through its artistic processes:

‘Why is the potter who is to make a supremely beautiful pot not to think only of its significant form, but to think first and most passionately about its functions as a pot?’²⁷⁹

Robinson Crusoe could thus be seen as the work of art which does in fact foreground the process of ‘think[ing] first and most passionately’ about the use value of an object being created, balancing it with the immediate sensuous nature of the pot shaping up under Robinson's hands, and in the process, creating a discourse which dignifies artisanal endeavours relegated to the much denigrated category of decorative or applied arts.

This may well have resonated with Woolf, as she observed the British Post-Impressionists negotiating their inheritance from William Morris, as they produced items for the domestic interior, in an artistic climate which denigrated artisanal labour as activity that had no place in

²⁷⁸ Woolf, ‘Robinson Crusoe,’ in *The Second Common Reader* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1986) first published in London in 1932 by the Hogarth Press, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/secondcommonread00virg_0/mode/1up 58.

²⁷⁹ Fry, ‘A New Theory of Art,’ in *The Roger Fry Reader*, reprinted from *The Nation*, 7th March 1914, 160.

the era of mass production. Moreover, Woolf would have found Defoe's text significant for its emphasis on a sensual interface between human agency and the agency exerted by non-human forces, such as the clay beneath the potter's hand, instead of imagining a transcendent consciousness triumphing over the world of matter (as exemplified in the scholarly traditions Woolf critiques).² It is significant to remember that for Woolf, Defoe was both a pioneer of the modern novel and a dissenter from an evolving standard of modern English prose. As Woolf's oblique critique of Addison in the context of *Orlando*, studied in a consequent chapter,³ would substantiate, Defoe's prose,⁴ as cited above, refuses to conform to the Enlightenment standards of a magisterial masculine voice pontificating on the material world, including the embodied presence of women.

5. Robinson and Roger Fry: Finding Commonalities in Praxis

5a. Trial and Error

In 1916, Fry had particularly lamented the processes of manufacture that 'remove completely the marks made upon a vessel by the potter's hands,' and reduce 'the surface to a dead mechanical evenness,' of a 'shop finish,' in the context of excoriating the art of the Royal Academician Lawrence Alma-Tadema (date,):

²He noticed that however ill-constructed a saleable item might be, it had one peculiar and saving grace- that of 'shop-finish.' The essence of this lies in the careful obliteration of all those marks which are left on an object by the process of manufacture. This grace is often a difficult one to obtain. It requires great ingenuity and inventive skill, for instance, to completely remove completely the marks made upon a vessel by the potter's hands.²⁸⁰

Fry pointed out that this very finish, which qualified the commodity as fit for circulation in the capitalist marketplace ruined the 'expressive quality' that the work might have, produced by

²⁸⁰ Fry, 'The Case of the Late Sir Alma Tadema, O.M,' in *The Roger Fry Reader*, reprinted from *The Nation*, 18th January, 1916, 148.

contact between the worker and the pot, and replaced them with the signifiers of economic value, 'the expensive quality of shop finish.'²⁸¹

Fry and Vanessa Bell took lessons and practiced pottery together and wrote letters to Duncan Grant about their exciting experiences at the potter's wheel. Moreover, as Woolf notes in the biography, Fry spent long hours at a pottery factory in the town of Poole working on the ceramics he was producing for the Omega. In Woolf's presentation of As Woolf presents Fry's experiences of making things for the Omega, his work in pottery is a part of a continuum of various experiments, as he tries to make things that are functional as well as aesthetic:

‘At Poole he had to work ‘13 hours one day’ and ‘didn't finish till it was dark on Saturday, working on alone in the empty factory. ... At the last moment I found I'd forgotten to put handles on [Madame Vandervelde's] dishes and there was no time to prepare them and let them get as stiff as one ought. So I had to invent a handle which could be made instantly out of a ribbon of clay. . . . Miss Sand's umbrella stand was a terrible job. It sagged and bulged and threatened utter collapse but I managed at last to punch and squeeze and cajole it into shape.’ And then he has to give his mind to a bedstead: "I'm afraid the varnish has rather a bad effect on the tempera red lead. It seemed to run and clot in places in a way I've never seen. But it isn't serious unless you look close."²⁸² (Woolf's parenthesis)

Fry's attempts are similar to Crusoe's projects for making things, which always run into trouble and have to be rectified. Although Robinson does not identify as an artist, he keeps trying to reconcile his desire to make his domestic things beautiful with the fact that his skills will only allow him to get so far, as this long passage demonstrates:

‘It would make the Reader pity me, or rather laugh at me, to tell how many awkward ways I took to raise this Paste; what odd misshapen ugly things I made; how many of them fell in, and how many fell out, the Clay not being stiff enough to bear its own Weight; how many crack'd by the over-violent Heat of the sun, being set out too hastily; and how many fell in pieces with only removing, as well before as after they were dry'd;

²⁸¹ Fry, 'Preface to the Omega Workshops Catalogue,' 1914, in *The Roger Fry Reader*, 201.

²⁸² Woolf, 'The War Years,' in *Roger Fry*, 204-205.

and, in a word, how, after having labour'd hard to find the Clay—to dig it, to temper it, to bring it home, and work it; I could not make above two large earthen ugly things (I cannot call them Jarrs) in about two months' Labour...

...After this Experiment, I need not say that I wanted no sort of Earthen Ware for my Use; but I must needs say as to the Shapes of them, they were very indifferent, as any one may suppose, when I had no way of making them but as the Children make Dirt Pies, or as a Woman would make Pies that never learn'd to raise Past.²⁸³

Both Fry and Crusoe, in their role as potters, repeatedly confront the fact that the objects that they create, display an agency of their own, and end up bulging, threatening collapse, clotting, cracking, and falling to pieces, making the potters sweat over the labours they have taken on. It is of course, apt that working with clay becomes a common theme in the labours of these two homemakers represented by Woolf, since indeed the very process of shaping pottery, whether ~~via~~ through the medium of the potter's wheel (which, once set in motion, moves of its own volition, shaping the pot of its own accord, which the potter at the wheel can never assert complete control over) or by shaping clay by hand, involves working with mud/ clay/ or soil, a material represented as utterly passive, lying inert under the feet of human civilization, waiting to be manipulated (indeed penetrated and sown with seed, in order to come into being as a fertile medium.) It is also significant that an earthenware jug, described as being shaped by the potter to create sides and a base that would hold an empty space, would become Heidegger's paradigmatic example of a 'thing,' ~~in his~~ as opposed ~~to~~ from the object which is merely distinguished for its qualities that make it useful to the human subject.²⁸⁴ Even though use and practicality are very much qualities that Fry and Crusoe actively seek in the earthenware they produce, these qualities do not automatically manifest themselves in the objects, rather Fry and Crusoe must wrestle with the irreducible physicality of the thing they are shaping.

²⁸³ Defoe, 87-89.

²⁸⁴ Heidegger, 'What is a Thing,' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 161- 184.

It is interesting to remember that one of Woolf's examples of how the Edwardians would fail to understand Mrs Brown in *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, is that of Galsworthy, who would be tempted to superimpose the living woman, with his exhaustive knowledge of living conditions in the Potteries, the ceramic-ware producing districts of England,

'Burning with indignation, stuffed with information, arraigning civilisation, Mr Galsworthy would only see in Mrs Brown a pot broken on the wheel and thrown into the corner.'²⁸⁵

While Woolf is arraigning Galsworthy here, it is important to note that Woolf's sentence also implicates mass produced pottery, as produced in England, as a means that turns women into broken humans/objects, a stark contrast to Crusoe and Fry patting out earthenware shapes, humorously likening ~~their~~his work to the pies of women 'that never learn'd to raise Past.'

Crusoe's trial-and-error attempts at making the things he needs in order to create a home-space where he can eat and take shelter might have rung a bell with Woolf, given that she would have witnessed such an accretive process of home-making, as an aesthetic practice. The home Fry built for himself in France in his old age, in particular, sounds much like Crusoe's homemaking: 'A great stone was hauled through the window to serve as hearth... and he made himself a bed from four sections of plane trees 'just sawn across.'²⁸⁶ The Omega required Fry and other artists to, like Crusoe, figure out how to make a thing useful for its deigned purpose, along with being aesthetic, through processes of trial and error:

... the original besides being original had to be practical. Chairs had to stand upon their legs; dyes must not fade, stuffs must not shrink. Sometimes there were failures. Cracks appeared. Legs came off. Varnish ran.'²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, 13.

²⁸⁶ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 283.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 196 .

Crusoe, the middle class man, not bred to any kind of craftsmanship, attempting to build a home without adequate tools or access to the working class labour he would surely have employed to do manual work for him if he were in England, could thus be an inspiring figure for ~~the~~ middle-class artists, like Fry, who came from prosperous upper-middle class families, and were attempting to learn a range of skills in order to produce home-furnishings, and thus breaking away (even while taking inspiration from) from the legacy of the Arts and Crafts movement of the nineteenth century. To return to Nancy Harstock's ideas, quoted in the introduction, about the home being the site where sensual use values are produced and dealt in, for both Crusoe and Fry, the home space involves a return to these sensual values, the work of working on things, and adjusting oneself to them in order to use them. Seen through this lens, the role of the masculine homemaker evolves as a creative alternative to the position of bourgeois men, for whom values are determined by the abstract calculations of the market. Bourgeois men, by contrast, see their womenfolk and the furnishings of their house as fungible objects over whom they have absolute mastery, and a right to demand that they function exactly as they are normatively supposed to, after having paid for the right to use them.

5b. Accretive Home-Making:

Woolf dwells upon how significant Robinson's 'simple objects,' and 'simple actions,' become in Defoe's narrative, although Defoe's Crusoe, while consistently attempting to make things 'as handsome about me as I could,' repeatedly denigrates his skills as a carpenter, tailor, and potter, pointing out how ugly he thinks these things are.²⁸⁸ As the sole practitioner of several applied arts on his island, Crusoe thus exemplifies the presence of an impulse to want to make the sphere of homemaking and domestic labour beautiful, in a man who is entirely beyond the pale of social

²⁸⁸ Defoe, 84, 87-89, 98

mores of domestic life. He too practices tentative and repetitive processes like Fry, the artistic pioneer, in order to come up with something that will satisfy the uses to which it will be put, as well as satisfy his aesthetic needs.

If, as cited before, one function of the decorative arts was to ‘give pleasure in the things [people] must perform use,’ and the other function to ‘give them pleasure in the things they must perform make,’ both Crusoe and Fry are participants in this field, discovering things that shape their perceptions of both pleasure and use.²⁸⁹

Moreover, Crusoe has an accumulative pattern of home building, in which he keeps on changing the structure of his home according to his requirements, building fences, hedges, room-like partitions, and enclosures for livestock, along with making shelves, pots, baskets, in response to external events like earthquakes or the threat of enemies, or his own periodic impulses to add comforts to his existence, and make the house ‘as handsome as I could.’ This would have resonated with Bloomsbury’s standards of living in houses which their owners freely altered and added to, over time. As Susan Fraiman points out, Crusoe’s pattern of home-building is distinguished for being something that keeps changing, demonstrating that

‘...homemaking, which appears teleological compared to housekeeping, may also actually be work that is never done, a kind of ritual necessarily repeated many times throughout a lifetime...’²⁹⁰

Homemaking emerges as a deeply creative, but elusive process in which the materiality of the objects that make up the home, do not always fit neatly into the project that the human subject had undertaken. This home-making does not take place under the aegis of Adorno’s flood of mass-produced commodities which mould a debased human subjectivity, nor does it fit Le

²⁸⁹ Morris, ‘The Lesser Arts.’

²⁹⁰ Susan Fraiman, *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) 42.

Corbusier's vision of a standardized house which will perfectly fit the needs of the standardized human beings who will come to live in it, its fittings working magically to answer every need that the subject might experience.

5c. Gendered Labour

However, Defoe's 'shelter writing,' to use Fraiman's term, does not merely dwell upon the one-time production of household goods, it also dwells upon how Robinson shores up his existence and his hard earned home, by performing the cyclical labour of participating in all aspects of producing food for human consumption.²⁹¹

~~Unlike the artisanal trades of carpentering or pottery in which the workforce was largely represented as male agricultural labour, labour related to cooking within doors were frequently performed by women, even if eighteenth century divisions of labour in a household did not correspond to the standards of the early twentieth century.~~²⁹² -As

Robinson ruminates, when he contemplates grinding his grain into flour and making it into bread:

~~It might be truly said, that now I work'd for my Bread; 'tis a little wonderful and I believe few People have thought much upon (viz,) the strange multitude of little Things necessary in the Providing, Producing, Curing, Dressing, Making and Finishing this one Article of Bread.~~²⁹³

As Ian Watts points out, this passage reflects upon the surely opening chasm between 'production and consumption in the London of Defoe's day,' a chasm which would only increase in the centuries to come, making the worker who worked for his bread ever less of a participant in the processes of making it.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Ibid, 25-44.

²⁹² ~~See, for example, Schwartz Cowan, 16-38.~~

²⁹³ Defoe, 86.

²⁹⁴ Ian Watts, 'Robinson Crusoe as a Myth,' in *Robinson Crusoe*, rev. ed, first published in *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Essays in Literary Criticism* (April 1951)293. At this point it is interesting to note that ~~while~~ Woolf may or may not have been aware, it is possible in this context to prove textual links between

The labour that Fry and Crusoe put into fashioning and re-fashioning their homes, is a mark of their willingness to dissent from the imperial standards of what the home should ideally be.

Imperial ~~These~~ standards valorize a home where the marks of any kind of labour are painstakingly removed. Instead, it is ensured that the 'shop finish' of objects are kept in place through regimes of cleanliness and polishing, undertaken by womenfolk, in order to prove that purchasing power is the only means of legitimately acquiring a house, which others labored to produce, and yet others labour to maintain. In contrast, Fry and Crusoe create homes in which every surface is inscribed by their labours, and in which the subject's subjectivity, as reflected Crusoe's narrative and Fry's letters, is shaped by the labour the objects have claimed from them.

Moreover, what Crusoe does not mention, is the fact that much of the work of 'providing, producing, curing, dressing, making, and finishing' bread was traditionally performed by women. As pointed out by Pat Rogers, despite Crusoe's self-appointed position as the pater familias and 'sovereign' colonizer of the island, he needs to put in work that would be performed by women, in order to survive ~~feel secure~~ in a hostile environment. He tweaks the established patterns of homemaking, in order to make things work, by hunting for substitutes for kitchen implements in order to cook food on a fire, or grind and sieve grain with, improvises his own oven, and makes his own utensils for baking and storing food stuffs, not in order to be able to

Defoe, Morris and Fry, with respect to the alienating conditions under which man began working for 'his bread,' from Defoe's time onwards. Morris begins his essay 'The Art of the People,' (see n 7) by quoting Defoe's words, 'And the men of labour spent their strength in daily struggling for bread to maintain the vital strength they labour with: so living in a daily circulation of sorrow, living but to work, and working but to live, as if daily bread were the only end of a wearisome life, and a wearisome life the only occasion of daily bread.' Morris applies these words to the alienating conditions under which art is produced and received in industrialized England, a critique which, as we have seen Fry too elaborated upon.

assist a wife, but in order to do a woman's work by himself. He equates his own work in pottery to unskilled feminine labour, 'as a Woman would make Pies that never learn'd to raise Past.'²⁹⁵

Thus, Crusoe becomes a subject who is not ashamed to associate himself with a feminine praxis, of labour, and is even able to take humourous cognizance of the fact that he is a rather slatternly, unskilled housewife. This likens him to Roger Fry and the artists at the Omega, who were willing to find alternative methods to the hyper-masculine aesthetics of Le Corbusier and other high modernists, and celebrate accretive households, as the sites of piecemeal, mistake-prone, humourous sites of labour. Such a man would have been of interest to Woolf, given Woolf's awareness of gendered hierarchies pertaining to domestic labour. If, as pointed out by Pat Rogers, Crusoe performs the role of a good eighteenth century mistress in the way in which he consistently maintains his journal as a sort of housekeeping account book, containing the details of all that he has to provision his household with, he performs domestic labour by himself, rather than using his account book as a means to coerce women and servants in his household to conform to a domestic economy of his devising, as Leslie Stephen was fond of doing.²⁹⁶

6. Defoe and Fry: Race and Aesthetics

For Fry, Post Impressionism was intrinsically connected to Primitivism, to recuperating art produced by subaltern subjects, i.e. non-European subjects, the working-classes, and children, and to the need to break away from the production of art under the conditions of the capitalist marketplace:

'If you look at a pot or a woven cloth made by a negro savage (sic) of the Congo with the crude instruments at his disposal, you may begin by despising it for its want of finish...

²⁹⁵ Pat Rogers, "Crusoe's Home," *Essays in Criticism* 24, no. 4 (1974): 375–90, academicoup.com, <https://doi.org/10.1093/eic/XXIV.4.375>.

²⁹⁶Rogers, 377.

... [But i]t will become apparent that the negro (sic) enjoyed making his pot or cloth, that he pondered delightedly over the possibilities of this craft and that his enjoyment finds expression in many ways; and as these become increasingly apparent to you, you share in his joy of creation, and in that forget the roughness of the result. On the other hand the modern factory products were made entirely for gain, no other joy than that of money making entered into their creation. You may admire the skill which has been revealed in this, but it can communicate no disinterested delight.²⁹⁷

Defoe's narrative which lovingly details Crusoe's labour, which takes place outside the world of industrial production, with the intent of giving satisfaction to the worker, could thus be seen as a precursor to the work that the Omega workshop incorporated and showcased. African art is thus the anti-thesis of the art of the British railway dining room, which gave no pleasure either to the maker or the beholder. Post Impressionism curated artistic values from subaltern sources, encouraging buyers to purchase products which would bring non-European art into their everyday domestic spaces. As Reed writes:

‘This amalgamation of diverse aesthetics into the category of the primitive was asserted visually for visitors to the Omega, where the modernist objects created by contributing artists [themselves enormously influenced by French Post Impressionists like Matisse and Gauguin who were in turn influenced by various strands of non-European art] were marketed with, at various times, Asian and North African textiles and ceramics, displays of children's drawings, reproductions of Byzantine mosaics at Ravenna, and contemporary Italian folk art.’²⁹⁸

Post Impressionism thus creates a space in which to recuperate the ‘roughness of the result’ of artistic labour that takes place on Crusoe's island.

The politics of Post Impressionism, however, (which could be seen as adding an ironic twist to Crusoe's pious belief that the grace of God provided him with the capability to survive despite his not being brought up with a knowledge of any productive labour) furthers the logic of valuing amateur approaches to the visual arts, perhaps inspired by a late nineteenth and early twentieth century socialist tradition of cross class collaborations in the production of art. British Post

²⁹⁷ Fry, ‘Preface to the Omega Workshops Catalogue,’ 201.

²⁹⁸ Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 125.

Impressionism as propagated by Fry upholds the ideal that understanding art is not the prerogative of the educated classes, and that a ‘sensitivity’ for art might be inherently present in individuals unable to easily access ‘high’ visual culture.²⁹⁹ As Reed writes,

‘In contrast to knowledge premised on class status, Fry argued, sensibility to abstract form was innate and therefore, created its own meritocracy: ‘though it can be cultivated [it] is a grace - a grace that one’s scullery [slang for scullery maid] may have it in greater degree than oneself.’³⁰⁰ (parentheses as placed by Reed)

As Woolf writes in the biography, ‘Anyone’s sensation - his cook’s, his housemaid’s, was worth having.’³⁰¹ Indeed, the privileged and affluent British subject was at a disadvantage in coming to grips with a Post-Impressionist aesthetic which did not depend on a system of historicizing artistic technique. Unlike Fry’s housemaid ‘who had seen the point of Cezanne instantly,’ the formally educated British subject’s ‘taste had been perverted by public schools and universities,’ which had inculcated aesthetic hegemonies (especially about the aesthetics of the domestic interior) along with other cultural hegemonies in their minds.³⁰²

7. Lone Crusaders and Invisibilized Peoples

Having established this correlation, perhaps we can now consider how juxtaposing the two texts throws up a pattern in the blind spots of both the texts.

To begin with, as Ian Watts points out, readings that interpret *Robinson Crusoe* as a text about a protagonist who starts ‘from scratch,’ miss out the point that Crusoe salvages large quantities of

²⁹⁹ Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, *Ibid*, 68-80,

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 11; in-text quotation from Roger Fry, notes for lecture, ‘Applied Art and the New Movement.’

³⁰¹ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 153.

³⁰² Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 164.

household goods from two shipwrecks, and begins life on the island equipped with ‘the biggest Maggazin of all kinds that were ever laid up, I believe, for one Man...’³⁰³ As Watts writes:

‘He is not actually a primitive or a proletarian or even a professional man, but a capitalist. He owns, freehold, an estate which is rich, though unimproved. It is not a desert island in the geographical sense - it is merely barren of owners or competitors; and above all, the very event which brings him there, the shipwreck, which is supposed to be a retributive disaster, is in fact a miraculous gift of the means of production, and one rendered felicitous by the death of all the other passengers.’³⁰⁴

It is only through Defoe’s imperial narrative that Crusoe arrives as an individual man making ingenious inventions. After all, Crusoe refuses to respect anyone’s claim to the island until he has settled a colony of white men on the island, ~~and~~ one of the wrecked ships he takes provisions from was a slave ship. The two ship-wrecks he ~~takes~~ consequently plunders, contain wealth that can be identified as coming from circuits of colonial trade, containing ‘tobacco, rum, sugar, solid gold, and ‘some European coin, and some Brasil.’³⁰⁵ His survival strategies are also sometimes based on knowledge he has gained from non-European subjects, like the lessons in boat-building he takes from Friday, or the inklings he has about the medicinal values of tobacco, indigenous knowledge he has gleaned in the New World.³⁰⁶

Woolf, however, despite claiming that she does not read *Robinson Crusoe* as a romantic reflection on solitude, refuses to acknowledge the presence of any human being other than Robinson. She does not mention Friday, or the indigenous tribes who periodically visit the island, even once. Her methods of attempting to trace Defoe’s methods of conveying the

³⁰³ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 42.

³⁰⁴ Watts, 297-29

³⁰⁵ Defoe, 43.

³⁰⁶ In this context, it is interesting to note that Defoe’s narrative about Robinson’s pottery might have been informed by eighteenth century trade with China. According to Lydia Liu, Robinson’s indigenous pottery could be read as Defoe’s anxieties about the high demand for Chinese porcelain and other ‘fine’ imports in Britain in the early eighteenth century. Lydia Liu, ‘Robinson Crusoe’s Earthenware Pot,’ *Critical Enquiry*, Vol 25: 4 (Summer 1999), 728-757, jstor.org, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344101>.

intensity of Robinson's relationship with various entities in the non-human world, thus become complicit in the project of refusing to see other people on the island as human beings.

Woolf certainly knew that what the English subject construed as a part of his everyday life, and as a part of modernity, was mediated by the extensive presence of foreign commodities procured for the British consumer by ships docking at London, as is borne out by her essays 'The Docks of London' and 'Oxford Street Tide,' as will be studied in the next chapter. She also knew that the decorative arts were caught up in networks of trade, as reflected in her very first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915), where the novel's pivotal episode, the journey to a 'native' settlement is brought about by Mr. Flushing who buys textiles and ornaments from indigenous women, whose lives appear to be embedded in the performance of household chores in a village, which the English feel will 'go on forever and ever,' with the women only briefly looking from their work to look at the foreigners.³⁰⁷ According to his wife, 'they don't know what they're worth, so we get 'em cheap. And we shall sell 'em to smart women in London.'³⁰⁸ In writing *Roger Fry*, Woolf points out, in a less cynical vein, that Fry performed a somewhat similar role, hunting out pots used by local women to fetch water in 'the native quarter' on holiday in Broussa, which he then transported back to England as artefacts.³⁰⁹ She also leaves on record his hunting out of the reverse flow of commodities made in the mills of Manchester into Africa:

“He never seemed to come into the room that autumn without carrying some new trophy in his hands. There were cotton goods from Manchester, made to suit the taste of the negroes (sic)... and what magnificent taste the untutored negress (sic) had!”³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, first published in 1915, New York: George H. Doran, 1920, 285, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/voyageout01woolgoog/mode/1up>.

³⁰⁸ Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 235.

³⁰⁹ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 171.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, 152.

Yet, despite being situated at a confluence of various aesthetics, created by various subaltern subjects, and brought into the imperial capital of London through the networks of empire, Woolf takes pains to establish Fry's position as the innovator whose vision gives birth to a unique aesthetic. This is strikingly similar to her reading of Crusoe as an innovator engaged in re-discovering 'simple actions,' without reference at all to any human interaction he has on his island. It is Fry whose discoveries of patterns of demand caused by African women, of children's art curated by the schoolteacher, Marian Richardson in the 'Black Country' within Britain, (i.e. the coal mining regions) or of peasant pottery in various parts of Europe, or the craftsmanship of artisans, 'little men in backstreets,' who execute Omega designs, that confers recognition on these subjects and their understanding of form.³¹¹ Woolf's biography creates a Crusoe-like cultural landscape, where vast spaces are seen as aesthetic *terra nullius* until Roger Fry brings artistic spoils into view for the European subject. Fry was, after all, the scion of a family who had made their generational wealth through chocolate manufacture and hence, an inheritor of British eighteenth century venture capitalism, as practiced by Robinson Crusoe, who practiced slave trading and plantation agriculture, before being shipwrecked.³¹² Fry himself would write, in the context of 'appreciating' African art produced around Benin and the Congo region:

‘... one feels that somehow the unconscious processes of the Negro (sic) mind have penetrated more deeply into the principles which underlie appearance than those of any other people... To the African mind, which has never attained the intellectual detachment necessary to conceive a materialistic universe, the only possible means of controlling his destiny lies in such propitiatory rites [i.e. for which sculptures in metal are produced.].. A strangely disquieting art this of the Negroes (sic) and yet touching heights that few have reached and hinting at much more than has ever been accomplished- *for what might not such an acute and rarefied plastic sensibility accomplish if it could be utilized by the*

³¹¹ Woolf, *Roger Fry* *Ibid.*, 206, 92 .

³¹² Craufurd D. Goodwin, 'An Interpretation: Roger Fry and the Market for Art,' in Roger Fry, *Art and the Market: Roger Fry on Commerce in Art*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/artmarketrogerfr0000fryr/page/n6/mode/1up>.

*wide range of experience, the awareness and intellectual power of a great European artist?*³¹³(my emphasis)

For Woolf and Fry, therefore, the apparently novel and subversive concept of an aesthetic/domestic space, remains a space that displays Said's classic schematization of how Orientalism works, by sticking to the template of avoiding any real dialogue with the non-Western world and instead depending on Western techniques of representation that seem to render the Orient a clearly defined and contained entity, with Fry occupying the position of the pioneering representer of undiscovered realms.³¹⁴ As Rasheed Araeen writes about the dialectic between 'the Oriental' and 'the modern':

...the former being a category of primitivism which can enter the latter, but only if it is transformed through the consciousness which, according to Hegelian philosophy, is an attribute of European people only.³¹⁵

Moreover, not only does Fry's aesthetic place the British middle class artist as the true Post-Impressionist, displacing non-European producers, it is also important to notice how Woolf's biography delineates the place of agents of reproductive labour in Fry's innovative domesticity. If, in Woolf's narrative, he metaphorically sits at the feet of the charwomen who teach him various nostrums, Woolf also gives details about the failings of Fry's servants in this period and the uncomplimentary things he had to say about them. Fry nicknames the people who come to work for him, 'the old Scotch witch,' who cannot cook, or a husband and wife couple, 'the Shepherd and Shepherdess.'³¹⁶ Woolf also quotes Fry's disapproval of a 'slavey', who comes to work for him, for being 'bred in genteel houses and with only one conception of housework -

³¹³Fry, 'Negro (sic) Art,' in *Last Lectures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939, 80- 83, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.532364/page/n106/mode/1up>.

³¹⁴Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

³¹⁵Rasheed Araeen, 'From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts,' in *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, ed. Susan Hiller; (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 2nd ed, first published in 1991, 146; Araeen cites Partha Mitter's analysis of how Hegel's *Vorlesungen Uber die Aesthetick* (1835) establishes Indian art as static and located 'outside history' while formulating a dynamic view of history, propelled by a dialectics of change (Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 2nd ed, first published in 1977, 202-220.)

³¹⁶Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 205, 212.

that there must be a tray under everything'.³¹⁷ Between themselves, Fry and Woolf thus manage to push the burden of the mores of British middle class domesticity onto the shoulders of the working class woman in domestic service. This is of course the replication of a common discourse in the inter-war years discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, i.e. that the middle class household could be rationalized if middle class owners took charge, adopted new technologies, minimized the role of servants, cut down on extraneous domestic tasks, and thus 'emancipated' themselves.

This brings us back to the point of whether Post-Impressionist Modernism does indeed make room for 'the scullery,' or the Georgian cook, any more than it makes room for non-European subjects, to formulate differing ways on inhabiting domestic spaces. To begin with, how does the praxis of reproductive labour differ from the productive labour of creating things for domestic interiors, that Fry and the British Post-Impressionists at the Omega were trying to undertake?

When Mrs Filmer comes to clean for Roger Fry, as cited earlier, she does not produce anything, rather, an efficient performance of the work of cleaning his studio would involve getting rid of the material signs of his production of painting, an art form much associated with creating messes and leaving unintended marks on nearby surfaces. Her work thus fits de Beauvoir's paradigm outlined in the ~~fourth~~ chapter of this thesis, about the housewife's work being negative labour, achieving no 'positive good,' as she tidies the room, and things have to be protected from her 'touch,' in order to produce art. But perhaps an added reason for Fry's bile towards the domestic staff he employed was also because of the praxis of cleaning work in the household, as formulated in the nineteenth century in middle class houses, where prosperity was

³¹⁷Ibid, 205.

reflected in an increase in furniture and exposed surfaces in domestic interiors. As Anne McClintock writes:

“In Victorian middle-class households, servants scoured and polished every metal and wooden surface until it shone like a mirror... The mirror became the epitome of commodity fetishism: erasing both the signs of domestic labor and the industrial origins of domestic commodities.”³¹⁸

The conventions of the routines that Victorian paid domestic workers were trained to produce ~~as were~~ thus the counterpart of industrial production, making sure that the ‘shop finish,’ Fry so hated, was maintained in the domestic interior.

Mrs Filmer’s very presence in Fry’s studio testifies to the fact that her labour is an indispensable part of the middle class, professional, single man’s domestic life, the exceptional feature being the fact that Fry tries to protest against normative routine, by saving the objects he reserves for the production of his art from her ‘touch,’ reinforcing her position as a contaminating source of abject labour, mired in immanence, as if her touch is what will render the apples and eggs, signs of life and vitality, rendered immortal in Fry’s painting and Woolf’s prose, into nothing, if she cooks them for Fry to eat, or throws them away to ensure that Fry lives in hygienic surroundings. The charwoman is given the burden of upholding the role of the de-sensitized human subject who only recognizes eggs and apples for their use-value, rather than as entities with qualities that evade categorization by human beings. Only Fry, the middle-class visual artist is sensitive to their elusive nature, and rises to the challenge of attempting to capture what he can of their presence, through his labour of painting. Even if the ‘sculley’ has an innate sensibility to abstract form in greater degree than ‘oneself,’ i.e. the middle class art critic, she is not invited to participate in the processes of creating domestic decorative art, ~~on~~ the terms on which Vanessa

³¹⁸ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995, 218.

Bell, the middle class woman artist, would be asked to collaborate. Nor is the labour she spends in maintaining the artistically revolutionary home, valued.³¹⁹

Thus, if we return to the starting point of our critique of patriarchal philosophies about domestic space, it appears that Roger Fry reforms the masculinity of Mr Ramsay by formulating an aesthetic and a praxis of being very much ‘there’ at ‘the kitchen table.’ However, his ability to assert himself as a reformer of domesticity is premised upon invisibilizing the presence of Mrs Filmer at the very same kitchen table.

Thus, we encounter a crucial limit to the relationships developing between these two masculine homemakers and the entities they build and cherish in order to carry out projects of home making. In a sense, then, both Crusoe and Roger Fry bear out the Marxist critique of the use of Robinson Crusoe-like situations or ‘Robinsonades,’ to exemplify the values upheld by capitalism.³²⁰ Marx points out that while Defoe’s protagonist shows an accurate understanding of the value of labour as the human subject’s time and effort, rather than the abstract evaluation of the socially determined exchange value for his labour, Defoe’s novel ultimately shows up a vision of ‘natural’ conditions which are actually merely the conditions which bourgeois society constructs as ‘natural.’ Only in a capitalist and imperial world-view can it be presumed that the work of surviving and building a livable home, isare performed in isolation without the need to

³¹⁹ Fry’s maid-of-all-work, Harris, for instance, can only be a ‘woman of sensibility’ in a satirical register, playing on stereotypes about working class incontinence, her ‘sensibility’ referring to the fact that reproaches about her drinking too much, affect her ability to cook Fry’s dinner. Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 85-86.

³²⁰ Michael Lazarus, ‘From Shipwreck to Commodity Exchange: Robinson Crusoe, Hegel, and Marx,’ *Philosophy and Social Criticism*; (2022); 1-27, academia.edu https://www.academia.edu/69445593/From_shipwreck_to_commodity_exchange_Robinson_Crusoe_Hegel_and_Marx.

negotiate the relationships of interdependence that always exist around us, or the subjectivity and agency of subaltern human beings.³²¹

As Engels points out, this rumination on how a man would apportion out his labour, in this so-called natural state, when aspiring to the standard of living which is sanctioned by a bourgeois-led Protestant state, is only possible because Robinson Crusoe is able to appropriate the surplus produced by his slave Friday, and make him work in a manner which enables Robinson Crusoe to remain the ‘solitary,’ pioneering protagonist, who moves through the narrative of two volumes establishing unique relationships with unique entities in the object world, like Fry appropriating African aesthetics in order to establish himself as a pioneer.³²² Despite the repeated presence of a motif of relating to the world of objects without establishing a hierarchy between subject and object in Woolf’s narratives about Roger Fry and Robinson Crusoe, the myth of heroic home-making she claims for Fry, ultimately requires the myth of ‘social atomism,’ of the bourgeois protagonist recognizing nobody’s subjectivity except his own, that underpins the bourgeois adulation for Crusoe as a romantic survivor, which Woolf had claimed to speak against.³²³

8. Masculine Home-Making and Writing a Heroic Narrative:

³²¹ Marx, *Capital*, Vol I, 50-51; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, -first published in German 1939-41; (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); [Marxists.org](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/grundrisse.pdf), 17 [Marxists.org](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/grundrisse.pdf), (re-paginated in Marxists.org ebook version) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/grundrisse.pdf>.

³²² Friedrich Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science*, 1878, first English translation by Progress Publishers in 1947, transcribed in 1996, Marxists.org, 94-95 (of pdf version) https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/anti_duhring.pdf.

³²³ Lazarus, ‘From Shipwreck to Commodity Exchange,’ [1-27](#).

Although, as this thesis has previously cited, Woolf's relationship to the working class agents of reproductive labour is often one of ambivalence or even distaste, I would argue that it is not usual in Woolf's published writing to create a narrative in which working class female labour can be thus easily contained and written over, as it is in *Roger Fry*.³²⁴ The contrast becomes especially striking if we compare *Roger Fry* with the text that is often seen as the paradigmatic example of Woolf's unique contribution to literary modernism. In *To the Lighthouse*, written thirteen years before *Roger Fry*, a work which Woolf felt was so indebted Fry, that it should have been dedicated to him, Woolf deliberately represents the act of cleaning performed by Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast, as labour which is as crucial, if not more so, than Mrs Ramsay's work of hospitality, or Mr Ramsay's and Lily Briscoe's labourswork of philosophy or painting.³²⁵ Yet, *Roger Fry* seems ultimately unaware of the exclusive nature of Fry's attempts to paint the immortal and eternal apples and eggs, unlike Woolf's subtle but sharp critique of the limits of Mr Ramsay's aspiration to 'think of a kitchen table when you're not there.' It is as if Woolf suddenly uncritically adopts the very values she critiques or treats with irony in *The Voyage Out*, 'Thunder at Wembley' (1924) and *The London Scene*.

Perhaps this would allow us to trace out two separate strands in Woolf's approach to domesticity and domestic labour. On one hand, it is possible to see Woolf's repeated impulse to come to terms, in her writing, with her own lived experiences of domestic labour as conducted through a network of paid and unpaid domestic labour. This can be witnessed in her autobiographical writing, in writing drawing on autobiographical experience like *To the Lighthouse*, or in writing that attempts to trace a history of women's orientation to domestic spaces. Thus, when writing

³²⁴ Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, Penguin, 2007, kindle edition.

³²⁵ Woolf, Letter to Roger Fry, May 27th 1927, Letter 1764 in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol III (New York and London: [Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch](#) 1977) 385, archive.org <https://archive.org/details/lettersofvirgini00nico/mode/1up>.

about Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs Ramsay, or Orlando, Woolf painstakingly shows how women's lives are interwoven with the labour of other women. This in turn gives us moments of narrative rupture which raise the question of what it might mean to empathize with Crosby, Mrs McNab, or 'Mrs Giles of Durham.'³²⁶

On the other hand, when Woolf writes as the memorialist of Bloomsbury's revolution in domestic living, or as a critic trying to read *Robinson Crusoe* through a materialist lens in order to detect a break in gendered and market driven domestic roles, she crafts a narrative in which she plays up the new freedoms enjoyed by masculine homemakers who dared to do women's work. Simultaneously, she reduces the agency of subaltern subjects like Mrs Filmer or Friday.

Adrienne Rich famously interpreted Woolf's style in *A Room of One's Own* as Woolf having to write so that she would be taken seriously in 'a roomful of men,' trying to sound 'as cool as Jane Austen, as Olympian as Shakespeare, because that is the way men thought a writer of culture should sound.'³²⁷ It appears that Woolf's rhetoric bears the marks of her need to write by masculine literary standards, not only when she is writing about patriarchal oppression as in *A Room of One's Own*, but also when she is trying to create a picture of/about the freedoms that male subjects might enjoy, if they would interpret and participate in domesticity by breaking away from patriarchal roles. After all, as mentioned in passing in the Introduction, in *Three Guineas*, Woolf makes a case for paid housework, by putting forth the argument to her imaginary interlocutor, the middle class lawyer, that his wife earning money for her domestic labour, would reduce the pressure on him to earn money. The would allow him to enjoy home

³²⁷ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,' *College English*, 'Women, Writing, and Teaching,' Vol 34, (no 1) (Oct 1972), 20, ~~accessed from~~ Jstor.org, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/375215>.

life by ‘spend[ing] the prime of [his] life with [his] children,’ and escape the fate of becoming a lonely pensioner ‘parad[ing] the environs of Bath or Cheltenham in the care of some unfortunate slave.’ Woolf’s narrative thus slips briefly into a register that foregrounds the benefits of a re-invented masculinity for the middle class man, passing over the lives and working conditions of subjects performing paid or unpaid care work.³²⁸

Thus, looking at the texts studied in this chapter, it appears that Woolf falls into the trap of creating a sweeping, heroic narrative when she tries to write about a man’s domestic life and labour, as opposed to Woolf’s narratives about women’s lives.

Perhaps Woolf’s refusal to acknowledge equal participation by other subjects, in a space which has been demarcated as the protagonist’s, also reflects on Woolf’s anxieties about sharing a personal space dedicated to artistic production. When Woolf writes about Robinson Crusoe without once referring to the presence of Friday or anyone else on the island, her writing reflects Crusoe’s unwillingness to establish any sort of emotional sharing with Friday in his daily domestic life. As Ian Watts writes:

‘A functional silence, apparently, adds to the charms of the idyll, broken only by an occasional ‘No, Friday,’ or an abject ‘Yes, Master.’ Man’s social nature is wholly satisfied by the righteous bestowal, or grateful receipt of, benevolent but not undemanding patronage.’³²⁹

This lack of emotional bonding is also reflected in Crusoe’s inability to share home space with Friday. As Pat Rogers writes,

‘... but to share his island with other castaways, this is something else. The Crusoe who had proclaimed himself “my Majesty the Prince and Lord of the whole Island”... could never stand such a thing. Friday is acceptable because, for obvious racial reasons, he represents no threat of equality. Friday is given a special little tent between the two lines

³²⁸ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 169- 170

³²⁹ Watts, 302

of the stockade, with a device so that he “could no way come at me in the inside of my innermost Wall”... Crusoe spends a paragraph describing the new fittings, including an ingenious trap-door; his ideas of embellishing the home survive, but now they are designed to ensure his own inviolacy.³³⁰

Woolf’s idea of a personal space for the woman writer, of course, swings between the vision of an inviolate space, designed to shut out the powerful forces of patriarchy, operating at the household level, as the Angel in the House, and on the other hand, the impetus to ‘share’ this room. As explored in the previous chapter, in ‘Professions for Women,’ Woolf asks her audience of professional women, ‘with whom are you going to share [the room]?’³³¹

But writing *Roger Fry* in the late 1930s, hoping that her book would be appreciated by her Bloomsbury friends and others who shared her admiration for Fry, Woolf appears to stick with a vision of the room of one’s own where artistic labour is produced in a space which ultimately reinforces an imperial vision of space which the British subject views as under his sovereign swayprerogative.³³² In spite of the fact that Woolf repeatedly quotes Fry’s views about how Italy and the near-East have inspiring models of ‘complete social equality,’ where ‘a sheik talks on terms of absolute social equality with the man who serves his coffee at a few pence a day,’ or describes him ‘sitting at the feet,’ of his charwoman, the narrative of Fry’s life does not really show him giving up hierarchies of domestic life, only re-interpreting them according to his convenience. Like Leslie Stephen working alone, free from disturbance at the top of his house, Fry orders his house so that he does not have to deal with interruptions caused by children, servants, or a wife, with Helen Fry being removed from the narrative and Fry’s house, as soon as she is declared permanently insane. Even if Fry, like Crusoe, takes on the duties of the

³³⁰ Rogers, 387-389.

³³¹ Woolf, ‘Professions for Women,’ in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, 1940 (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1970) 242, [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/deathofmothand00wool/mode/1up), <https://archive.org/details/deathofmothand00wool/mode/1up>.

³³² See Woolf’s diaries for 1938 and 1939, and correspondence in 1940 for letters of thanks after the publication of *Roger Fry*.

homemaker, both men retain the prerogatives of the patriarch, the ‘righteous bestowal’ of patronage being the best that Fry’s servants can hope for, when he chooses to ask for their opinion of Post-Impressionist art, or home remedies.

Even more importantly, does Woolf come close to assuming for herself, as a member of the group that ushered in British Post-Impressionism under the leadership of Roger Fry, the prerogatives that male middle class homemakers could assume for themselves in the early twentieth century? As mentioned earlier, the advertisements selling new domestic technologies to affluent members of British society, targeted a female audience, addressing them as the subjects who were in charge of their homes, and who could easily enter a freer, more modern world, by spending upon modern domestic appliances.

Referring to Woolf’s much quoted diary entry about haddock and sausage, written on 8th March, 1940³³³, Alison Light writes:

‘When Virginia Woolf writes in her diary that ‘one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down,’... We can also read a social history and a history of class into that sentence. Woolf cooking dinner in the half-darkness of Rodmell, without a resident servant, is a prototype of a new kind of middle-class woman who is not above knocking herself up an omelette or even - in years to come - cooking a Sunday lunch.’³³⁴

The new kind of woman that Woolf is here seen as a forerunner of, approximately two years after finishing *Roger Fry*, is thus a figure who enacts what Light says might be ‘a utopian vision in which cooking and writing could enhance each other as human activities.’ However, the same Woolf (despite her awareness that a woman has no country, and that the daughters of educated men have little hold on their class privileges,) participates in a project that attempts to demonstrate the imperial bourgeois subjects’ ability to have sole control over the space they call

³³³ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol V, ~~first published by Chatto and Windus in 1985~~ (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985) 358, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/diaryofvirginiaw0000wool_t3j2/mode/1up.

³³⁴ Light, *Forever England*, 143.

their own and the objects that come to constitute that space. The end goal of this project is to do away with the need to acknowledge the presence and labour of a Friday or Mrs Filmer.³³⁵ The following chapters, beginning with the next chapter on the socio-economic contexts of *To the Lighthouse*, will explore other aspects of Woolf's multi-faceted responses to socio-economic elements that shaped the aesthetics of inter-war modernism. These responses, in stark contrast to Woolf's blindnesses in this chapter, critique and resist a bourgeois understanding of modernity and/or modernism in the domestic interior.

³³⁵ Light, *Forever England*, 143.

Chapter 3: The Ini(e)quity of the English Dairy System: ‘Domestic’ Economies in the Inter-War Years in Woolf’s Britain

This chapter looks at how Woolf explores networks of distribution linking together households and marketplaces in the context of inter-war Britain, a society held together by gaping inequalities of access to resources required for day-to-day survival and good health. It studies how domestic labour functions under conditions of systematic scarcity. Using Barad’s methodology, it reads the interplay between scarcity and plenitude in *To the Lighthouse* ‘through’ the chequered spatiality of scarcity and plenitude in inter-war Britain, and the structural inequalities of the Ramsay household ‘through’ the inequalities of resource distribution in Woolf’s England.³³⁶ As has been pointed out on the first few pages of this thesis, Woolf consciously rejects a school of modernist writing in which women are simply the products, and passive consumers of ~~the~~ economic order of High Capitalism. As the previous chapter has pointed out, Woolf was also a participant in a school of thought which resisted the modes of consuming domestic space advocated by the architecture of High Modernism. This chapter explores how Woolf’s oeuvre, creates a different paradigm of feminine modernism in which female subjects are indeed ‘furnished’ by the scarcity of household provisions, but are also invested in imagining alternatives to systems of distribution under capitalism.³³⁷

The word ‘domestic’ in itself, links together the familial with the national. It can refer to matters pertaining to the home and the family, and to matters that take place within a country. And for Britain in the inter-war years, both the British bourgeois home and the British nation were

³³⁶ Barad, 30.

³³⁷ Boscagli, 5 (see page 50 of this thesis); Woolf ‘Professions for Women,’ 241 (see page 75 of this thesis).

intrinsically linked to the resources they could gather from what they saw as the periphery they had annexed to themselves- the working class district and the Empire.

There exists a fairly well-established tradition of reading Woolf's memorable female characters as presences that bring plenitude, fertility, and pleasure in their wake, i.e. Mrs Ramsay, Sally Seton, or the patient's circle of female friends in *On Being Ill*.³³⁸ These maternal presences are the sites of a 'female pastoral,' the memory or dream of a space illuminated by close, nurturing bonds between women, like Mrs Dalloway's Bourton, or Rezia Warren Smith's home in Milan.³³⁹ These spaces are often refuges from the patriarchal world of commerce, war, institutionalized religion, education, and medicine. Yet these maternal women and nurturing spaces are not *topoi* which manage to securely shut out the threats of the patriarchal world. The subjects themselves remain ambivalent about the values they espouse in a patriarchal landscape. In *The Voyage Out* Helen Ambrose remains Rachel Vinrace's strongest support, but breaks up an idyllic pastoral shared by women, meets the claims that her husband and the young men she meets lay upon her, and tries to mould Rachel into one who understands patriarchal standards.³⁴⁰

Mrs Ramsay is glad to shelter Lily Briscoe and share her life with her, while being a phallic mother, who nourishes her husband and sons and demands conformity to standards of gendered labour from all the daughter figures in her life. The fruit of her insistence on traditional gender roles are the death of a son in the First World War, and the death of a daughter in childbirth, after less than a year of marriage. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Sally Seton and Clarissa choose to make

³³⁸ See for example Ellen Hawkes, 'Woolf's Magical Garden of Women,' and Jane Lilienfeld 'Where the Spear Plants Grew: The Ramsay's Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*,' in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus, (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillian Press, 1981), 31-60, 148- 169; *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, ed Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997).

³³⁹ Elizabeth Abel, 'Narrative Structure and Female Development: The Case of *Mrs Dalloway*,' in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, (London and Hanover: University of New England Press, 1983), 103- 125.

³⁴⁰ Madeleine Moore, 'Some Female Versions of Pastoral: *The Voyage Out* and Matriarchal Mythologies,' in *New Feminist Essays*, 82-104.

advantageous marriages with suitable men. As Kathryn Simpson points out, women in Woolf's oeuvre hold out the promise that there might be 'gifts' and exchanges among women that short-circuit and subvert patriarchal networks of exchange, but they remain intrinsically linked to the larger economic networks of the capitalist society in which they live.³⁴¹

Building on this context, this chapter will argue that Woolf's households are characterized by household economies in which scarcity and abundance, want and plenitude, co-exist, and then try to find glimpses of alternatives present in these texts.

1. Plenitude and Scarcity in *To the Lighthouse*

The Ramsay household is characterized in *To the Lighthouse*, as a space in which the Ramsay children, despite their deep seated unease with the values of their parents' world, dwell within an abundance of resources, which they need in order to develop varied interests:

Disappearing as stealthily as stags from the dinner-table directly the meal was over, the eight sons and daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay sought their bedrooms, their fastness in a house where there was no other privacy to debate anything, everything; Tansley's tie; the passing of the Reform Bill; sea birds and butterflies; people; while the sun poured into those attics, which a plank alone separated from each other so that every footstep could be plainly heard and the Swiss girl sobbing for her father who was dying of cancer in a valley of the Grisons, and lit up bats, flannels, straw hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, beetles, and the skulls of small birds, while it drew from the long frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a smell of salt and weeds, which was in the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing...³⁴²

This description appears to function as a catalogue of objects which the children leave lying around, creating visual and tactile scenes of disorder, leaving traces of dirt (the gritty towels) and strong smells (the sea weed²), in order to stake a claim to these rooms. The variety of material resources they have access to seem to be contiguous with the variety of ideas they energetically

³⁴¹ Kathryn Simpson, *Gifts, Markets, and Economies of Desire in Virginia Woolf*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008)

³⁴² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 19.

discuss amongst themselves. Thus, while following the Victorian convention of giving the children personal space at the top of the house, near attics and servants quarters, the Ramsays also ensure that they are in healthy spaces with plenty of natural light and fresh air.³⁴³ Like Leslie and Julia Stephen, they also appear to endorse liberal late nineteenth century principles of child rearing, allowing children of both sexes, to have the run of the house as well as engage in physical activities outside, rather than follow the alternate Victorian and Edwardian tradition of making sure infants and schoolchildren were confined to defined rooms in the household and kept in good order (leaving the house to be classified, by default, as an adult space).³⁴⁴ When Cam and James fight over hanging the skull of a pig (reminiscent of the sheep's skull cherished by young Jacob Flanders,) their mother respects their wishes and tries to effect a compromise between their varying demands, instead of scolding them and getting rid of the skull, as a disgusting object.³⁴⁵

Moreover, like little Virginia Stephen's parents' encouragement of their children's interest in the collecting and study of moths, they permit their children to participate in a wider Victorian culture of collecting specimens and curiosities gleaned from the natural world, maintaining a secular, scientific household, by the standards of their time, rather than participating in nineteenth century methods of plying children with moral strictures about their conduct.³⁴⁶

³⁴³ Judith Flanders, 'The Nursery,' in *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*; (London: William Collins, 2004); 2003, epub.

³⁴⁴ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past,' in *Moments of Being*, 61-160; Hemione Lee, 1-200; Jane Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle Class Families in England, 1850-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) 111-142.

³⁴⁵ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 176-178.

³⁴⁶ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past,'; Lee, 31-32; Hamlett, Matthew W. Hancock, *Boffin's Books and Darwin's Finches: Victorian Cultures of Collecting*, PhD Dissertation from *Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy*, 2006, accessed from

http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/eng_pr?utm_source=digitalcommons.imsa.edu%2Feng_pr%2F5&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages, 3rd January, 2023.

Indeed, Mrs Ramsay accommodates a whole range of things, brought in from the coasts of the Isle of Skye, into her house, in order to nurture her children:

‘Crabs, she had to allow, if Andrew really wished to dissect them, or if Jasper believed that one could make soup from seaweed, one could not prevent it; or Rose's objects-- shells, reeds, stones; for they were gifted, her children, but all in quite different ways.’³⁴⁷

This modern, wholesome childhood is, however, sustained by the creation of scarcity in pockets throughout the house. William Bankes wonders where the Ramsays find the means to raise eight children, calculating that Mr Ramsay's income is not adequate, but the rest of the family seems unbothered about economic difficulties, except Mrs Ramsay upon whose mind the greenhouse bill not shared with Mr Ramsay, preys and casts a blight.³⁴⁸ Unlike the Ramsay children who manage to escape to their bedrooms, the maids' bedrooms are not private spaces, but rooms into which Mrs Ramsay can barge, and come face to face with the fact that ~~that~~ the healthy Ramsay family is being serviced by the labour of working-class women, including an immigrant, the Swiss maid, whose family is marred by disease.

Indeed, the lighthouse, the ‘central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together,’ functions as an antithesis to the Ramsay household.³⁴⁹ Juxtaposed with Mrs Ramsay and James, are the lighthouse keeper and his son, who is ‘threatened with a tuberculous hip,’ and ‘less-well grown than James.’³⁵⁰ As opposed to the middle-class heterosexual family with access to power and education, at least for the sons and fathers, the Lighthouse is a community of working class men, cut off from the world outside, seen by Mrs Ramsay as a people to be pitied for their lack of access to the standards of bourgeoisie family life:

³⁴⁷Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 47.

³⁴⁸Ibid, 65.

³⁴⁹ Woolf to Roger Fry, May 27th 1927, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol III, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1978) first published in England as *A Change of Perspective* in 1977, 385, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/lettersofvirgini00nico/mode/lup>.

³⁵⁰Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 13, 49.

‘those poor fellows who must be bored to death all day with nothing to do but polish the lamp and trim the wick and rake about on their scrap of garden... For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn? she would ask; and have no letters or newspapers, and to see nobody; if you were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were,- if they were ill, if they had fallen down and broken their legs and arms...’³⁵¹

The expedition to the lighthouse, as conceived of in Mrs Ramsay’s time, and fulfilled after her death, is thus a trip to take the leavings of what the Ramsay family consumes to the lighthouse. The family distributes their bounty, ‘a pile of magazines, and some tobacco, indeed whatever she could find lying about,’ with James having the first right to go through magazines, cut out, and colour the pictures he likes (to leave them behind for his mother to pick up afterwards).³⁵² The stocking Mrs Ramsay is knitting especially for the lighthouse keeper’s son is left incomplete, perhaps due to the repeated distractions of fulfilling the demands of her husband and son,³⁵³ and keeping tabs on the preparations for dinner.

The Ramsay household would thus appear to have two faces - one, the abundant household where every need that visitors might have is lovingly accommodated, and family and guests eat meals enough of delicious food for all at the table, which is beautifully arranged with a bowl of fruit and candles, and where the children are robust and healthy, ‘great fellows,’ ‘all well grown, angular, ruthless,’ running wild in a garden full of flowers. Much of this beauty and abundance seems to flow from Mrs Ramsay herself.³⁵³ Her presence, while being busy with her knitting and her son, creates a reassuring domestic space for Mr Ramsay to take shelter from his chronic self-

³⁵¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 13.

³⁵² Ibid, 11, 29, 31, 51, 98.

³⁵³ Ibid, 39.

doubt, 'Flashing her needles, confident, upright, she created drawing room and kitchen, set them all aglow, bade him take his ease there, go in and out, enjoy himself.'³⁵⁴

The other side, is the community of subaltern subjects whose lives are marred by disease and want, from the Swiss servant exiled from her home, suffering from the grief of losing a loved one to cancer, to the villagers whose lives are routinely marked by the prevalence of communicable diseases, malnutrition, serious agricultural accidents and cancer, and finally, to Mrs Ramsay who goes to an early grave for unexplained reasons.

'2. Notable Housewives' and the Knowledge of Scarcity:

In Woolf's households, scarcity is not just placed on the shoulders of working class subjects, but it is distributed among women, across class backgrounds. A telling example of this is Woolf's reference to a text written by her mother in *The Years. Notes from Sickrooms*, a small pamphlet on nursing written by Julia Stephen contains the following lines in the context of the importance of changing bedclothes:

‘Economy is a great virtue in a nurse, for all illness, however slight, involves expense; but the virtue may be carried to excess.

There are I believe *many people who would suffer a great deal of discomfort than swell their washing bill*; and if the nurse should find this to be the case, she must do all she can, while keeping the patient sweet and fresh, to save expense. Nothing can do a sick person more harm than to worry over accounts and expenses, *and if the patient should be one of those notable housewives to whom any exceeding of a certain sum is absolute misery, her*

³⁵⁴Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 62. For Lily Briscoe, the artist who seeks to 'be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, it's a miracle, it's an ecstasy,' Mrs Ramsay thus becomes the muse of an aesthetic in which '[t]he great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark... Mrs Ramsay saying "life stand still here;" Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily tried to make something permanent)...

*peculiarity in this as in all other respects during illness should be respected.*³⁵⁵ (my italics)

In *The Years*, ‘swollen’ washing bills circulate through the first chapter set in 1880, tracing out a network of invisibilized or misunderstood labour. Like Julia Stephen’s hypothetical housewife-patient, the dying Mrs Pargiter worries about the cost of extra washing occasioned by her illness:

“But her mother was staring at the dressing-table. Some gleam from the lamp outside made the white cloth look extremely white.

“Another clean table-cloth!” Mrs Pargiter murmured peevishly. “The expense, Delia, the expense—that’s what worries me—”
“That’s all right, Mama,” said Delia dully...³⁵⁶

Like Julia’s patient, Mrs Pargiter feels the need to deprive herself of clean linen, being after all, hidden away in a bedroom, away from the drawing room where signs of the family’s prosperity are displayed, with expensive furniture, china, pictures, ~~and~~ a good fire, ~~and~~ with an ornate kettle, set to boil on a fire liberally plied with coal. Having lost her role as an ornament to her husband’s household, (or represented only by her portrait taken in her youth, hanging over the drawing room fireplace); Mrs Pargiter’s guilt about the increased standards of hygiene demanded by the illness, is distinguished by her years of experience as a homemaker making her aware of exactly what causes increases in household expenditure, like the ‘notable housewives’ in Julia Stephen’s book.³⁵⁷ As a contrast there is her son Martin Pargiter, who is happy to spend ~~both~~ money in order to buy silk pajamas for wearing in bed, as well as to use retired Crosby’s

³⁵⁵ Mrs Leslie Stephen (Julia Stephen), *Notes from Sickrooms*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1883), 11-12, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/notesfromsickro00stepgoog/page/n4/mode/2up>.

³⁵⁶ Woolf, *The Years*, 24.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, 10-25.

labour in mending them, expecting Crosby to negotiate with his laundry when the pajamas are not laundered to his satisfaction.³⁵⁸

Interestingly, Mrs Pargiter's worries about her household are mirrored in the household cares laid upon Mira, the mistress of Abel Pargiter, the father of the family. Mira's home is distinguished by the Colonel as a dingy place, '[t]here was always a smell in the house; there were always dirty clothes hanging on a line in the back garden.'³⁵⁹ It is interesting to see how the Colonel fails to read the effort taken to keep things clean, by correlating dirt with a visible sign of labour meant to bring about a state of cleanliness, the clothes hanging on the line to dry. Like Mrs Pargiter, the washing bill is also a source of worry to Mira, except that Mira needs to ask the Colonel for ready money without which she will not be able to meet the bill, in contrast to Mrs Pargiter's imagined scarcity of funds for the washing bill.³⁶⁰ Indeed, the Colonel suspects that the washing bill is too extravagant, so perhaps Mira inflates the washing bill in order to get a little more money out of him. Washing is thus simultaneously an extravagance, a domestic process

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 220-221; Indeed, washing was a fraught subject for the Victorian housewife. It was necessary in order for the family to live in the clean conditions thought ideal for a happy family, but the work of washing created a great deal of disorder, and hence domestic strife. Isabella Beeton thus advised women to send out laundry if they could afford it: 'We will conclude our remarks with an extract from an admirably-written book, called "Home Truths for Home Peace." The authoress says, with respect to the great wash—"Amongst all the occasions in which it is most difficult and glorious to keep muddle out of a family, 'the great wash' stands pre-eminent; and as very little money is now saved by having *everything* done at home, many ladies, with the option of taking another servant or putting out the chief part of the washing, have thankfully adopted the latter course." She goes on to say—"When a gentleman who dines at home can't bear washing in the house, but gladly pays for its being done elsewhere, the lady should gratefully submit to his wishes, and put out anything in her whole establishment rather than put out a good and generous husband." (Isabella Beeton, *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*, accessed from Gutenberg.org <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10136/pg10136.html>.) Yet, as Laura Humphries' scholarship has demonstrated, personal clothes and home-linens, as personal items, were the locus of intense bourgeois anxieties about the racial and class identities of the people doing the washing. (Laura Humphries, *Globalising Housework: Domestic Labour in Middle Class London Homes 1850-1914*, London and New York: Routledge, 2021, kindle epub.) As Crosby's role as an intercessor between Martin and his laundry service in *The Years*, and Mrs Chailey's attempt to complain about the state of the bed linen to Rachel in *The Voyage Out* demonstrate, the position of being responsible for laundry is frequently an abject position in Woolf's writing.

³⁵⁹ Woolf, *The Years*, 7.

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 8-9.

that ought to be invisibilized, and a legitimate household expense, which can be used as a cover by Mira to get some more money, to support her impoverished circumstances.

When Eleanor Pargiter, the eldest daughter of the family, visits old Mrs Levy, she finds out that washing is work which takes a permanent toll on human bodies. Mrs Levy's arm bears the marks of this labour, 'wrung and white like the roots of a tree.'³⁶¹ The rooms at Abercorn Terrace, which feel 'roomy... and airy,' after Mrs Levy's bedroom, are serviced by women like her, who receive as the fruits of their labour, a lifetime of poverty and condescension, from those who depend on them.³⁶²

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay is acutely aware of everything that she, as the mistress of the house needs to compensate for. She knows about the 'entrails' of old chairs spilling out, the house being damp throughout the winter, the wall paper fading till the pattern is invisible, and the colours of textiles being spoiled because the family cannot be trained to keep the doors shut, and hence keep out the salt laden air of the Hebrides.³⁶³

3. Subsidizing Scarcity

Mrs Ramsay occupies a doubly treacherous position. Given that she takes her role as a mother very seriously, both in her family and in society, (see Introduction) she finds herself an agent of discipline, constantly re-iterating the rules of proper ventilation for instanceexample, ('windows should be open and doors shut') to her own children, and the working class bodies under her supervision, like the maidservants in her house and the families she visits in the village.³⁶⁴ This injunction is flagrantly disobeyed, in her home, and this, in turn, will ruin the house in time, and

³⁶¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 30.

³⁶² As Humphries points out, laundry work in London was frequently undertaken by proletarian women from marginalized ethnicities.

³⁶³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 46.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 27, 47.

render it unlivable, hence destroying her work of providing an adequate living space to all the people living in her house.

On the other hand, if she were to rigidly enforce standards of keeping things clean, berating people into shutting doors and opening windows, and not bringing in the sand from the sea, or insist that the family take a house in a locale less ravaged by damp and wind, it would presumably destroy the carefree holiday world that she feels her husband and children profit by.

And of course, this would compromise the project of producing a hardy, rational generation of upper middle class youth^{thg}, of whom, she believes, the boys will grow up to inherit the British Empire, ‘negotiate[] treaties, rule[] India, [and] control [] finance.’³⁶⁵ As Lise Weil points out:

‘The secret revealed in “Time Passes” is that the world of family bliss depicted in “The Window” required the enormous expenditure of a resource that is as non-renewable as it has been unacknowledged: the resource of female energy... Just so, the family romance of “The Window” clearly hung together thanks to Mrs. Ramsay’s tireless efforts to keep the barren rooms of the house filled with life, to oil the wheels of social intercourse, to perform the constant work of “merging and flowing and creating” ...it also depended for its continued existence on the invisibility of her labors. In fact, a substantial portion of her labors consisted in rendering invisible—to children and to men—what foreground reality needs to exclude from its field of vision: the facts of life and death, of change, aging, growth, and decay. Charles Tansley waits discreetly outside while she pays her visit to a sick woman in town; Mr. Ramsay must be shielded from the knowledge that the bill to repair the greenhouse has come to 50 pounds.’³⁶⁶

Female energy is thus used as a subsidy to the costs of living for the Ramsay family, the energy of working class women and that of bourgeois women. If Colonel Pargiter in *The Years* could interpret the lines of dirty washing as a sign of dingy housekeeping, instead of seeing it as a symptom of the poverty, which he, as Mira’s provider is responsible for, ^{similarly}, Mrs Ramsay’s family and guests do not need to see ^{any} the signs of labour at all, ^{as This} is reflected

³⁶⁵Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 15

³⁶⁶Lise Weil, ‘Entering a Lesbian Field of Vision in *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, 243-244.

in the ideas they pursue. Instead, the emotional burden of scarcity will be borne by Mrs Ramsay, and the burden of a system of domestic labour where all resources have to be stretched as far as they can go, will be borne by Mrs Bast and Mrs McNab.

When Lily Briscoe enquires about the subject of Mr Ramsay's researches, and finds out that it is 'subject and object and the nature of reality,' as illustrated by the idea of a 'kitchen table when you're [i.e. the human subject] not there,' she has a vision of the table standing isolated against the background of what she sees actually sees when having this conversation:

‘So now she always saw, when she thought of Mr. Ramsay's work, a scrubbed kitchen table. It lodged now in the fork of a pear tree, for they had reached the orchard. And with a painful effort of concentration, she focused her mind, not upon the silver-bossed bark of the tree, or upon its fish-shaped leaves, but upon a phantom kitchen table, one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which stuck there, its four legs in air.’³⁶⁷

If Lily departs from a tradition of abstract thought (Mr Ramsay when thinking about his philosophical career, imagines it in terms of alphabets, not chairs and tables) by imagining a table with distinct physical attributes, the narrative points out the gaps in her imagination.³⁶⁸ As the middle section of the novel 'Time Passes,' illustrates, tables and other furniture do not interact with nature (as represented by the beautiful pear tree) in a state of stark and perfect cleanliness.³⁶⁹ If a kitchen table is scrubbed till the grain of the wood shows, it is not an attribute derived from the 'muscular integrity' of Mr Ramsay's rigour as an academic, but from the labour of the women's bodies who are paid a pittance for scrubbing furniture and working in the Ramsay's kitchen.

³⁶⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 40-41.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 56-57.

³⁶⁹ For a detailed exploration of the household without a human subject in *To the Lighthouse* please see Boscagli's analysis in Chapter 4 of *Stuff Theory*, 185- 226.

In 'Time Passes,' the narrative describes in poignant detail the manner in which the house slowly morphs into an assemblage that barely resembles a human habitation, and is re-assembled into a house which middle-class intellectuals like the Ramsays could inhabit, by Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast, cleaning rooms, cupboards, basins, tea sets, the Waverly novels, fenders, fire-irons, taps, baths, and all the books that belonged to the Ramsays:

“Flopped on chairs they contemplated now the magnificent conquest over taps and bath; now the more arduous, more partial triumph over long rows of books, black as ravens once, now white-stained, breeding pale mushrooms and secreting furtive spiders.”³⁷⁰

This work is thus not just the work of making sure the bodies of the people in the household are well-fed and cared for, but also the work of bolstering the cultural capital possessed by Mr Ramsay and his family by making sure that the books they read are in a state fit for reading.

Thus, the prosperous living standards of the Ramsays, and by implication the status quo of British economic and cultural imperialism are upheld only because the labour that it takes to keep a household, and a library full of literary works in a condition of plentitude, can be procured dirt-cheap or free.

When domestic labour fails to effect miracles, and causes a state of want in the life of the patriarch of the family, all hell breaks loose, as a spate of Mr Ramsay's anger destabilizes the atmosphere of the entire household:

“Mr. Ramsay, finding an earwig in his milk at breakfast had sent the whole thing flying through the air on to the terrace outside. 'An earwig,' Prue murmured, awestruck, 'in his milk.' Other people might find centipedes. But he had built round him such a fence of sanctity, and occupied the space with such a demeanour of majesty that an earwig in his milk was a monster.

But it tired Mrs. Ramsay, it cowed her a little--the plates whizzing and the doors slamming.”³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 215.

³⁷¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 305-306.

The lack of clean milk thus causes a momentous tear in the fabric of abundant and harmonious domesticity that Mrs Ramsay weaves with all her energy, ‘cowering’ her for her failure in her endeavour to protect the husband, whose position as the head of the house and a man of genius is distinguished by his prerogative to claim maternal sustenance (i.e. ‘milk’) and protection from all trouble, from his wife.³⁷² Moreover, it becomes, like the account books passing from Mrs Pargiter to Eleanor in *The Years*, a legacy of domestic anxiety passed from mother to daughter, since Mrs Ramsay’s eldest daughter Prue, soon to die in childbirth, internalizes the blame for this mishap, according to Lily:

‘How Prue must have blamed herself for that earwig in the milk! How white she had gone when Mr. Ramsay threw his plate through the window! How she drooped under those long silences between them!’³⁷³

4. Refrigerators and Mowing Machines: Significant Through Their Absence

It is interesting to note that we are introduced to a device that would go a long way towards keeping milk free of earwigs and other unwanted entities, on the very first page of the novel. Little James Ramsay is engaged in cutting out a picture of a refrigerator from the Army and Navy Catalogue.³⁷⁴ But, of course, no such device materializes in his mother’s household. The images of the refrigerator, and the mowing machine inhabit a closed circuit, between the Army and Navy Stores catalogue, a shopping catalogue that extensively displayed all that might be purchased in the home country, and the imagination of James, the son who will grow up to inherit the legacy of **i**mperial power.³⁷⁵ As D.J. Oddy writes, refrigeration techniques were

³⁷²Lilienfeld, 156.

³⁷³Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 308

³⁷⁴ Ibid, 11

³⁷⁵As Alison Adburgham and Reginald Abbott write, the Army and Navy Stores were the site of a polyvalent discourse. With branches in the various cities of the Empire, they were intimately caught up with the lives of members of the British Army. According to Adburgham, [s]erving officers and their wives in far-flung places spoke of the Army and Navy with the same sentimental attachment as they spoke of ‘home.’² Moreover, the Army and Navy Stores in London, changed its marketing strategy, beginning as a subscription club which gave preference

sufficiently advanced to permit the shipping of dairy products into Britain from the colonies, at the end of the nineteenth century, but this technology was used in the interests of imperial trade.³⁷⁶ Even until after the Second World War, refrigerators were a luxury item for the majority of British households.³⁷⁷ After a war, fought on a genocidal scale with the highest military technology of the time, the grass on the Ramsay's lawn is cut, not with a lawnmower, but by Mrs Bast's son with a scythe, and the house is cleaned through the bodily labour of Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast.³⁷⁸ The labour-saving devices which have may been invented at the turn of the century do not make their way from the advertising literature produced on the capitalist market, where they create an image of the 'progress' and 'prosperity' made in the era of commodity capitalism, into homes.³⁷⁹

5. Scarcity and Abundance in the Inter-War Years:

to the families of members of the British armed forces, and becoming in 1920 a retail store like other departmental stores, so that Woolf would have seen it in both its avatars, as a space that resembled a genteel club in the West End, and as a site that embraced the plate-glass displays of high capitalism. Alison Adburgham, *Shops and Shopping 1800-1914: Where and in What Manner the Well-Dressed Englishwoman Bought her Clothes*, 1964 (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1981) 216-218, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/shopsshopping180000adbu/page/n6/mode/1up>; Reginald Abbott, 'What Miss Kilman's Petticoat Means: Virginia Woolf, Shopping, and Spectacle,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol 38, No 1 (Spring 1992), 205, accessed from jstor.org <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26284323>.

³⁷⁶D. Oddy, 'Food in nineteenth century England: Nutrition in the first urban society. Proceedings of the Nutrition Society, 29(1), 1970, 154, Cambridge.org <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-nutrition-society/article/food-in-nineteenth-century-england-nutrition-in-the-first-urban-society/13A91C8807F9187A102953F126EF5472>.

³⁷⁷Kay Smallshaw; Woolf however did buy a 'Frigidaire,' about the time, as she began to make money from her novels, in April-May 1931, and purchased another as a present for Vanessa Bell in May 1932, Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol IV, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975) <https://archive.org/details/lettersofvirgini0004wool>, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol V (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1979) archive.org <https://archive.org/details/lettersofvirgini05wool/mode/2up>, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol IV, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982) archive.org <https://archive.org/details/diaryofvirginiaw0004wool/mode/1up>.

³⁷⁸Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, esp 217-219.

³⁷⁹As Humphries points out, there was a steady increase in the presence of various advertisements for 'consumer durables' from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, beginning with the carpet sweeper in 1870 (Humphries, esp113-122.)

To the Lighthouse was published in 1927, nine years after Britain emerged as one of the victors of the First World War. I would argue that the economic conditions of inter-war Britain are a fundamental part of Woolf's schematization of skewed networks of distribution in her writing.

It is important to remember that Great Britain faced a slump in the beginning of the twenties, after a boom characterized by soaring inflation, (Mrs McNab complains that 'prices had gone up shamefully and didn't come down again'), in which unemployment reached levels not seen for a hundred years, which in turn gave rise to concerted trade union action on a scale not seen before in industrial disputes in the coal mines, railways, and shipping docks, culminating in the General Strike of 1926.³⁸⁰ The strike of 1926 was characterized by the eagerness of ordinary workers to strike for their comrades in the mining industry, despite ultimate willingness of trade unionists at the top to call off the strike, without demands being met.³⁸¹ The British Parliament also witnessed the rise of a politics which openly professed its allegiance to vested capitalist interests, (most noticeably in the Tory benches but also in other parties) in an age when the demand for Britain's core industrial exports, i.e. coal, steel, and iron declined, causing corresponding hardship in the regions of England where they were concentrated.³⁸² Stanley Baldwin, the leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister between 1923- 1929 and 1935-37, for example, was the scion of Richard Thomas and Baldwins, a steel company.³⁸³ Tory governments as well as the coalition governments led by Lloyd George and Ramsay MacDonald repeatedly preferred to deal with existing economic hardship, which was soon compounded by the Great Depression, by cuts in public spending. The Tory government also favoured tariffs which, it was argued,

³⁸⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 211.

³⁸¹ ~~Noreen-See~~ Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties*.

³⁸² C L Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars*; (London: Methuen, 1955); 259-283, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/britainbetweenwa00mowa>.

³⁸³ Branson, 9.

would protect the British market from overseas competition. Whigs and Labour on the other hand, tried to protect free trade, following their party line, with an eye to the fact that cheaper foreign goods were more accessible to larger parts of the population. As the writer of ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street,’ may well have been aware, a vote upon an order imposing a duty on imported fabric gloves in June 1922, had shown fissures in Lloyd George’s coalition government with over half the coalition Liberals abstaining or voting against the order.³⁸⁴ In spite of these measures, by 1929, Britain’s exports had fallen by 20 percent, and imports risen by a corresponding 20 percent.

In fact, Britain had long since been intrinsically dependent on exports from her colonies. As both Oddy and Humphries point out, food imports into Britain, from her colonies, had been increasing steadily from 1860 onwards, along with other raw materials.³⁸⁵ Britain had long prided herself on being a centre of manufacture, the place which turned-out the wealth of the colonies into a form fit for the civilized world.³⁸⁶ According to Mowat, arable land had been steadily declining across Britain since 1870, while permanent grassland, and the number of cattle had increased, though slowly. Moreover,

‘... by the time the war came, Britain was raising only one fifth of its wheat; the proportion of its food needs raised at home were by value, 45.4 percent in the case of

³⁸⁴ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway’s Party: A Short Story Sequence*, 1973; (Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Harcourt, Inc; 2001); first published *The Dial* July 1923, 11-24, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/mrsdallowayspart00wool/mode/1up>; Mowat, 132.

³⁸⁵ Oddy, 154, Humphries, ~~Lee 375.~~

³⁸⁶ As North Pargiter in *The Years* notes upon returning to London after living as a sheep breeder in a ranch in Africa, ‘[a]ll these years, he thought to himself... he had been used to raw goods; hides and fleeces; here was the finished article. A dressing case of yellow leather, fitted with silver bottles caught his eye.’ (*The Years*, 308-309) ‘The Docks of London,’ and ‘Oxford Street Tide,’ two of Woolf’s essays published in back-to-back issues of *Good Housekeeping* (December 1931 and January 1932) are structured similarly, the narrative of the first essay dwelling on enormous shipments of raw material being unloaded from ships, and the second essay dwelling upon how this material has been turned into carefully packaged cigarettes, clothes, and cosmetics. (Woolf, *The London Scene*, New York: Harper Collins, 1975, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/londonscenexixes00wool/mode/1up>.)

grains, fruit and vegetables, 55.7 percent of meat, butter, cheese, poultry and eggs and 43.6 per cent of all food stuffs.³⁸⁷

What the twenties and thirties made amply clear was that Britain's existence was subsidized by the cheapness of agricultural produce, produced in the colonies, which contributed to stabilizing Britain's import-export balance on paper, and by the fact that the upper echelons of the British population had access to overseas investments, and income from dividends linked to capital invested in colonial ventures, which made sure Britain did not need to rely solely on the export of goods to pay for her imports.³⁸⁸ If the war caused agricultural production to pick up, it was dealt a sharp blow in the slump post 1920, and failed to pick up until the Second World War. As Branson and Heinemann write,

'Britain's relationship with the Empire enabled her to import food and raw materials cheaply; and during the slump the rapid fall in the price of imported food, which traditionally formed an exceptionally large part of the British working-class diet, was one of the factors which helped ruling circles to avoid a decisive conflict with working people at home.'³⁸⁹

In the inter-war years, Britain adjusted to her new position as a subordinate to America, i.e. the 'sea-green brooches,' seen by Mrs Dalloway on her shopping expedition are set out 'to tempt Americans.'³⁹⁰ These years witnessed the production of a substantial quantity of literature (including much of V. Sackville-West's oeuvre) which imagined England a green and pleasant land tilled by a peace-loving and home-loving people. The English people, this discourse went, a nation of home-gardeners, and housewives, were satisfied with the home-grown bounty yielded by the fertile island.³⁹¹ The Baldwin government, in turn, was fond of promoting this peaceful

³⁸⁷ Mowat, 251.

³⁸⁸ Ibid, 264.

³⁸⁹ Branson and Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties*, 3.

³⁹⁰ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, (New York: Modern Library, 1922) first American edition, 6, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.93420/mode/2up>.

³⁹¹ See especially Alison Light, *Forever England*.

and plentiful rural landscape as the quintessence of England.³⁹² As the economic history quoted above shows, Britain's economy did not correspond to this picture.

If on the one hand, the British Empire was attempting to create a strong supply of resources to Britain, by extracting them from the colonies abroad, the state-capital nexus was also governed by a ruthless seeking of profit, and a willingness to sacrifice the welfare of the British people. In the interwar decades Britain's economic situation was characterized by severe underconsumption in various parts of the British Isles. This was a direct result of massive working-class unemployment ~~which~~ characterized most of the industrial belts in the northern parts of England, especially in the mining districts. (Real wages also declined periodically for various other sectors of the economy, including white collar workers, and declined very drastically for agricultural labourers through the twenties. For some periods in the Thirties, however, people in salaried incomes could take advantage of falling prices while wages remained constant.³⁹³) This unemployment was directly caused by Britain's declining exports, while the state-capitalist nexus continued to take supply side measures rather than increase public spending. Mowat explains the continued unemployment by postulating, that it was precisely because Britain's empire allowed her to continue to supply her markets with cheap imports, even after the Great Depression, the low cost of these agricultural goods being ensured by the low living standards of labour in the colonies, that demand for British exports from these countries, acting as the buffer between the Great Depression and Britain, never picked up, which in turn ensured that production did not increase in Britain. As Mowat writes:

³⁹² Patrick Wright, *Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 78.

³⁹³ Branson, 91-102, Branson and Heinemann 133-147.

‘Not over-production [usually cited as the cause for the Great Depression in the USA] but under consumption was the real trouble. *The result was, however, that Britain was able to exist after a fashion; the middle and upper classes fairly comfortably, many of the poor poorly. The general well-being of Britain depended, not only on low prices for farmers overseas, but on the poverty of the ‘depressed areas’ at home.*’ (my italics)³⁹⁴

The internal dynamics of households in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Years*, could thus be said to mirror the landscape of Britain, where working class districts in the industrial North lived under conditions of severe under-consumption vis-a-vis their basic needs for food and housing, so that prices would stay low, enabling the upper classes and salaried workers in the service industries concentrated in the South to keep up a comfortable standard of living.

6. Woolf and the Inter-War Economy:

As Hermione Lee writes, before the war, in 1913, Woolf attended the Fabian Conference in Keswick, in July 1913 and took ‘conscientious notes’ of the proceedings: ‘She scribbled onto hotel notepaper: ‘Nothing ignoble in being a consumer... Man wage-earner can make his power felt, woman consumer very little power. Wage-earner’s view predominates.’³⁹⁵

If Woolf seems to be sticking with the traditional schematization of the woman as consumer and the man as bread winner (as found in a lot of literature produced Co-operative movement between the wars) she takes note of the fact that decisions about what to consume are not really in the hands of the ‘woman consumer.’ They may well be in the hands of the male wage-earner instead. In this context, it is interesting to look at dietary preferences as they emerge in *To the Lighthouse*, at the Ramsay’s dinner table. Mrs Ramsay begins a conversation with William Banks about how English bourgeois dining valorizes waste and overconsumption:

³⁹⁴ Mowat 250-258.

³⁹⁵ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf, 1996, London: Vintage, 1996*, 329.

‘What passes for cookery in England is an abomination (they agreed.) It is putting cabbages in water. It is roasting meat till it is like leather. It is cutting off the delicious skins of vegetables. ‘In which,’ said Mr Bankes, ‘all the virtue of the vegetable is contained.’ And the waste, said Mrs Ramsay. A whole French family could live on what an English cook throws away...

‘Then,’ said Mr Bankes, ‘there is that liquid the English call coffee.

‘Oh coffee!’ said Mrs Ramsay. But it was much rather a question (she was thoroughly roused, Lily could see, and talked very emphatically) of real butter and clean milk. Speaking with warmth and eloquence she described the iniquity of the English dairy system, and in what state the milk was delivered at the door, and was about to prove her charges for she had gone into the matter, when all around the table, beginning with Andrew in the middle, like a fire leaping from tuft to tuft of furze, her children laughed; her husband laughed; she was laughed at, fire-encircled and forced to veil her crest, dismount her batteries, and only retaliate by displaying the raillery and ridicule of the table to Mr Bankes as an example of what one suffered if one attacked the prejudices of the British Public.³⁹⁶

The prosperous bourgeoisie, like the Ramsays, father and sons, who occupy the position of a vocal and articulate ‘British Public,’ are able to confidently assert their national pride as a nation which has more than enough to glut its appetite upon, and can waste nutritious food, asking that the food be prepared by domestic labourers in the wasteful way they prefer.³⁹⁷

Indeed, as I will explore over the course of the remainder of this chapter, the dairy produce Mrs Ramsay talks about, crops up in the rest of Woolf’s oeuvre. Woolf was aware that butter produced by cattle in settler colonies was a significant part of the tribute the empire paid Britain. In ‘Thunder at Wembley,’ Woolf’s essay about the British Empire Exhibition in 1924, there is a statue of the Prince of Wales done in butter, signifying the links between the subjugation of colonies and those who, quite literally, lived off the fat of colonial lands.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁶ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 156-157, 160-161.

³⁹⁷ As Urmila Seshagiri points out, the Ramsays are also confident consumers of the resources of Empire, whether material goods like tea and china tea sets, or cultural capital like a knowledge of Persian and ‘Hindustanee.’ (Seshagiri, *Race and the Modernist Imagination*, [find pages](#))

³⁹⁸ Woolf, *The Captain’s Death Bed and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950) 209, [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/captainsdeathbed0000wool/mode/1up)

Working class claims to resources from the colonies on the other hand, while being a quotidian part of life in Britain, are less secure. In Woolf's 'Kew Gardens,' (a text Woolf felt embarrassed about showing her local Working Women's Guild, when ~~theirs~~ members asked for a copy,³⁹⁹) women with cockney accents re-iterate their need for:

'Sugar, butter, kippers, greens,
Sugar, sugar, sugar.'⁴⁰⁰

The litany of things on their minds reflects the preponderance of their dependence on a commodity, sugar, which is intimately tied to Britain's role in the transatlantic trade in agricultural produce and human bodies. Their need for this commodity which, along with butter, was drastically rationed during the First World War, and would be rationed again in the Second World War. The very need to harp on these food items, betrays a sense of precarity.

It is significant that Woolf's depiction of international trade in 'The Docks of London,' and 'Oxford Street Tide', published as a parts of a series of essays on London written for *Good Housekeeping*, in 1931-32, (after a run on the British pound the previous summer,) does not have a single example of goods being loaded onto an outward bound ship, but consists entirely of various raw goods being unloaded from enormous ships, so that they can be processed into finished articles for sale and sold in London's shopping district. The ships, Woolf observes,

³⁹⁹ Lee, (page no) As Lee points out, Woolf's notes in her diary entry that it was precisely this part of the book she did not want them to read, Woolf wrote in her diary, 'I don't want them to read the scene of the two women. Is that to the discredit of Kew Gardens. Perhaps a little.' (Entry for 18th June 1919, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol I 1915-1918, San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1977, 284, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/diaryofvirginiaw0001wool/mode/1up>.)

⁴⁰⁰ Woolf, 'Kew Gardens,' in *A Haunted House and Other Stories*, (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2012) first published as *Kew Gardens* in 1919 in London by the Hogarth Press, 32, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/hauntedhouse0000wool_k113/mode/1up.

present a vision of extractive capitalism, financed by the investments, as well as the appetites, of the upper and middle classes in a deeply unequal society.⁴⁰¹

In 1928, the year before the crash on Wall Street, Woolf had noted the difference in purchasing power between herself and an inhabitant of her village Rodmell: ‘Annie Thompsett & her baby live on 15/ a week. I throw away 13/- on cigarettes, chocolates and bus fares.’⁴⁰² Woolf would have known well enough that it was consumers like Woolf herself who had the power to decide what the ships carried onto Britain’s shores, when she wrote that:

‘Suppose, for instance, that we gave up drinking claret, or took to using rubber instead of wool for our blankets, the whole machinery of production and distribution would rock and reel and seek about to adapt itself afresh. It is we - our tastes, our fashions, our needs - that make the cranes dip and swing, that call the ships from the sea. Our body is their master. We demand shoes, furs, bags, stoves, oil, rice puddings, candles; and they are brought to us. Trade watches us anxiously to see what new desires are beginning to grow in us, what new dislikes. One feels an important, a complex, a necessary animal as one stands on the quayside watching the cranes hoist this barrel, that crate, that other bale from the holds of the ships that have come to anchor. Because one chooses to light a cigarette, all those barrels of Virginian tobacco are swung on shore. Flocks upon flocks of Australian sheep have submitted to the shears because we demand woollen overcoats in winter. As for the umbrella that we swing idly to and fro, a mammoth who roared through the swamps fifty thousand years ago has yielded up its tusk to the handle.’⁴⁰³

The words ‘Virginian tobacco’ involve a pun on the author’s name, displaying the interdependence between the author who is named after Queen Elizabeth, the North American ex-colony, ~~and~~ the creeper that grows in the same colony; and the crop that is brought to the shops of England because of her role as a consumer of tobacco.

As Jane Marcus and Rachel Bowlby point out, Woolf’s use of the universal pronoun is always qualified. For instance, the ‘one’ in ‘a room of one’s own’ is startling for its deliberate

⁴⁰¹ Woolf, ‘The Docks of London,’ in *The London Scene*, first published as the first of a series of six essays in *Good Housekeeping*, December 1931 (New York: Harper Collins, 1975) 3-16, archive.org <https://archive.org/details/londonscenesixes00wool/mode/1up>.

⁴⁰² Woolf, 23rd June, 1928, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol III, 236.

⁴⁰³ Woolf, ‘The Docks of London,’ 14-15.

assumption of the universal pronoun for a feminine subject or androgynous woman writer (albeit with the assumption that the subject is not a 'negress') (sic).⁴⁰⁴ On the other hand 'one's cook,' in *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, assumes that the 'one' who is addressed as the universal subject has the class background of a person who employs paid female labour to cook for them.⁴⁰⁵ Woolf would have known, with Leonard Woolf having invested capital in colonial enterprises like Burma Shell, and with the socialist Co-Operative Movement (with which her own politics were tied up) having a tea plantation in India, that the 'one' for whom these goods were being delivered were members of her own social strata, or the middle class readers of *Good Housekeeping*. 'One' does not articulate the voices of the cockney women walking in Kew Gardens, cited earlier, preoccupied with sugar, flour, butter, kippers, and greens, the supplies of which, ~~in Londonas Londoners, they~~ depend on networks of international trade and state regulation ~~to acquire~~. Two years after the publication of Woolf's essays, in the summer of 1933, ~~by contrast~~, when extensive malnutrition had been reported in regions of London, it was reported that thousands of crates of oranges had been dumped at sea off Liverpool, as it would have been a 'loss to land them.'⁴⁰⁶ At the same time, the boom in advertising in 'Oxford Street Tide,' a companion essay to 'The Docks of London,' is also the product of a society, which was aggressively marketing its goods, as people's spending power fell.⁴⁰⁷

7. A Model Dairy and Hospital:

Returning to Mrs Ramsay, it is significant that Mrs Ramsay wants to set up a dairy and a hospital in the island in the Hebrides, ~~where-in-which~~ the Ramsays have set up their holiday home. On

⁴⁰⁴ Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, 145-150.

⁴⁰⁵ Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 7, 109-110.

⁴⁰⁶ Branson and Heinemann, 30.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 150.

one hand, it is true that the Ramsay family, based for the rest of the year in London, the heart of the British Empire, functions by extracting the labour of the villagers on anthe island, located in one of the most remote reaches of the British Isles. Mrs Ramsay's social work might well be just a sopt to the family's conscience. However, it is also true that when Mrs Ramsay thinks about the trajectory she wants her social work to take, she thinks of ways which might have the potential to challenge capitalism. Her method of writing down 'in columns carefully ruled for the purpose, wages and spendings, employment and unemployment,' are reminiscent of early twentieth century writing like Maud Pember Reeves *Round About a Pound a Week* (1913) which demonstrated that working class poverty was not caused by improvidence, but was wholly a structural problem.⁴⁰⁸

This would suggest that Mrs Ramsay is aware that the systematic lack of resources is not simply something that can be sorted by controlling how family-units manage their resources, but that the networks through which families attain the resources they need, to remain fed and clothed, are compromised:

‘It was more true [that she cared] about hospitals and drains and the dairy. About things like that she did feel passionately, and would, if she had had the chance, have liked to take people by the scruff of their necks and make them see. No hospital on the whole island. It was a disgrace. Milk delivered at your home positively brown with dirt. It should be made illegal. A model dairy and a hospital up here - those two things she would have liked to do, herself.’⁴⁰⁹

Perhaps Mrs Ramsay's wish to set up a these institutions, which will stall the system of selling milk 'brown with dirt,' and ease the sufferings of cancer patients in these remote parts shows that she has a deep-rooted understanding of how households are deprived of basic requirements, and

⁴⁰⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 20. Maud Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week*, (Oxford: Isis Large Print, 1991) first published in 1913 in Great Britain by G.B. Bell, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/roundaboutpoundw0000reev_b8b9/mode/1up.

⁴⁰⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 92-93.

moreover that this is not just charity, but is something that she personally has a stake in. Wanting a model dairy, which members of the community are stakeholders in, is after all, different from wanting to buy the refrigerator she sees James cutting out in the Army and Navy Stores catalogue, to keep and use in the Ramsay's house.

Both the villagers and the working class people working in the Ramsay household bear on their bodies, the marks of labour undertaken under exploitative and unsafe conditions, from the unnamed woman dying of cancer, the man pasting a bill for a circus (with images of perfect gymnasts' bodies, 'fresh legs, hoops, horses,') balancing on top of a ladder with only one arm, after having been in an accident in a reaping machine, Mrs MacNab's body aching after a lifetime of labour which included carrying large loads of washing back and forth for the Ramsays, or the body of the gardener Kennedy whom Mrs Ramsay found attractive, left with a bad leg from a fall off a wagon.⁴¹⁰ But given Mrs Ramsay's sudden unexplained death, perhaps it is feasible that she herself did not have access to potentially life-saving healthcare for herself either.

A model dairy would have played its part in easing Mrs Ramsay's responsibilities, and taken off her shoulders the burden of Mr Ramsay's tantrums about insects in his milk. But crucially, Mrs Ramsay's plans for building something that the community can collectively benefit from, thus present an alternative to the impulsive exclamation of the narrator of 'Memories of a Working Woman's Guild,' i.e. 'labour saving appliances and housing reform.'⁴¹¹ Labour saving appliances, available only through the market, like the refrigerator, would still leave the onus of

⁴¹¹ Woolf, 'Introductory Letter,' in *Life As We Have Known It*, xx.

using them on the shoulders of homemakers, rather than taking the burden of providing a service off their shoulders. If the community were to work towards the communal provision of services like dairies, hospitals, and perhaps laundries, (as co-operative communities had intermittently done through the course of the nineteenth century) it would be able to ensure the health and emotional well-being of subjects involved in domestic labour. Mrs Ramsay's schemes would make a difference to her own life, and to the lives of Julia Stephen's ailing 'notable' housewives lying on dirty sickbeds to save laundry expenses, to Mrs McNab, with aching limbs, and Mrs Levy in *The Years*, bedridden after years of sweated labour as a washerwoman on the 'free market' of jobs available to working-class women.

8. Politics of Bedlam:

In this context, it is interesting to look at how Woolf's treatment of milk in her work, weaves in and out of the economic context of Britain between the wars, as well as of Woolf's personal history. After all, Woolf chose a milk advertisement as a paradigmatic example of how poverty and discouragement material differences made a difference in the intellectual and physical health of by supplying different standards of emotional and physical nourishment to gendered subjects, in *A Room of One's Own*:

For surely it is time that the effect of discouragement upon the mind of the artist should be measured, as I have seen a dairy company measure the effect of ordinary milk and Grade A milk upon the body of a rat. They set two rats in cages side by side, and of the two one was furtive, timid, and small, and the other was glossy, bold, and big. Now what food do we feed women as artists upon? I asked, remembering, I suppose, that dinner of prunes and custard.⁴¹²

Despite declining agricultural production, the production of meat and dairy increased in the inter-war years in Britain. Methods of transporting milk also became more efficient as lorries used in

⁴¹² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 80.

the first world war began to be used for this purpose when discarded by the army.⁴¹³ In the inter-war years, up to 1933, the National Farmers' Union sold milk at a price they negotiated annually with the state. The nutritional value of milk was being increasingly recognized as a food which made an essential difference to an individual's health and was especially valuable to vulnerable subjects like growing children, expectant mothers, and the sick. Mrs Ramsay's insistence on quality control for milk usually delivered 'brown with dirt,' was also topical, as milk in the 1930s in Britain, was a carrier for bovine tuberculosis to which children were especially vulnerable, if it was not pasteurized.⁴¹⁴

Milk was made a compulsory item on Woolf's diet, along with other dairy products, during her periods of illness related to mental disorders, throughout her life.⁴¹⁵ Milk was an essential part of model diets provided and scrutinized in public discourse, examples being the Court of Inquiry into dockworkers' living conditions—~~in the 1920s mentioned earlier~~, and diets provided for by food coupons instituted by Poor Law guardians in Birmingham in 1922, in the face of massive unemployment during the slump. In the late nineteen thirties, teachers remarked on the marked improvement in the health and overall development of children who were able to access the subsidized milk schemes in schools.⁴¹⁶

However, the enormous quantities of milk, cream, and animal produce, that Virginia Woolf was forced to eat until she developed a phobia of food, were, as Woolf would surely have been aware, products that were extremely hard for the working-class people around her to have any

⁴¹³Mowat, 235.

⁴¹⁴ Peter J Atkins, 'The Milk in Schools Scheme 1934- 45: "'Nationalization"' and Resistance,' *History of Education* vol. 34, no 1 (January 2005) 1-21, researchgate, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248984829_The_Milk_in_Schools_Scheme_1934-45_'Nationalization'_and_resistance.

⁴¹⁵ Hermione Lee, 183. According to Lee, the 'milk diet' for nervous patients, popularized by Silas Weir Mitchell, involved taking four or five pints a day, at the rate of half a pint every two hours.

⁴¹⁶Branson, 81.

access to. The armies of the unemployed dwelt in families whose meals were dominated by bread, margarine, and tea with condensed milk, in homes where people often slept early and rose late, to keep warm while saving gas and light. In unemployed or low-paid families fresh milk was not bought even for children, despite government propaganda about the value of fresh milk.⁴¹⁷ As Branson writes, '[a]ll this was not mainly, as was sometimes suggested in the press, because the working-class housewife was ignorant and bought the wrong foods, but because she was too poor to afford the right ones.'⁴¹⁸

The production of milk improved, because of state policy, after the implementation of schemes by the Marketing Board of 1933 in England and Wales. Post 1933, the state functioned as an intermediary between farmers and private milk companies. The government paid a 'pool price,' midway between the wholesale price of liquid milk and the price of milk meant for manufacturing other products. When output increased, the government tried to sell milk at subsidized prices to expectant or nursing mothers and school children in the 'depressed areas,' but per head consumption refused to pick up with even the subsidized prices being too expensive.⁴¹⁹ By 1938, only half the target population in schools was availing the halfpence for one third of a pint scheme.⁴²⁰ Sir John Boyd Orr's well-known reports on nutrition found that the average consumption of milk in Britain in the thirties was the same that it had been a hundred years ago, and in rural areas, it had actually declined. Orr's report pointed out the gross inequality in the per head consumption of milk across income groups, the poorest group

⁴¹⁷Branson and Heinemann, 204.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹Mowat, 438-439

⁴²⁰Branson and Heinemann, 217.

consumed 1.8 pints per week, including tinned milk, and the highest income group consumed 5.8 pints.⁴²¹

Indeed, Woolf's reflection on the demand for umbrella handles as the objects for which elephant and mammoth ivory are sacrificed, in 'The Docks of London' becomes prescient, given that the production of umbrella handles was occasion for more wasteful expenditure in a marketplace driven by profit. The manufacture of umbrella handles required 'manufactured milk,' or milk that was used for manufacturing other products, which the government also subsidized in the face of international competition. If, as biographical scholarship about Woolf's life tells us, milk was given to her as a part of a high fat and protein cure for 'madness,' until she developed a fervent hatred of it, as the drink that symbolized all the restrictions imposed on her, on health grounds, the government's milk policy, during a glut, was characterized as 'the politics of Bedlam' by *The Economist*. This was because milk used in the manufacture of umbrella handles was being supplied to manufacturers at five pence per gallon, which was cheaper than the milk being supplied to expectant or nursing mothers at two shillings per gallon.⁴²²

9. Domestic Labour and Modernity: What Mrs Ramsay's Plans Might Mean:

Perhaps literary scholarship on *To the Lighthouse* has found it hard to find anything worth salvaging in Mrs Ramsay's social vision, because on one hand, the narrative does suggest that

⁴²¹Ibid,209.

⁴²²Ibid, 217, Mowat 4\$39.

this is intrinsically a function of Mrs Ramsay's project of conforming to nineteenth century ideals of womanhood.

On the other hand, this might also be because there is a long tradition of reading Woolf's depiction of 'feminine principles' as closely tied to nature, to an organic realm beyond human intervention, borne out by citing relevant examples from her novels. The street singer in Mrs Dalloway is famously associated with a vision of natural plenitude, a landscape fertilized by the voice, 'bubbling' up like a stream that makes its surroundings fertile, as it issues from a mouth described in terms similar to a vaginal orifice. This voice, 'issu[ing] from so rude a mouth, a mere hole in the earth, muddy too, matted with root, fibres and tangled grasses... soaking through the knotted roots of infinite age... all along the Marylebone Road, and down towards Euston, fertilizing, leaving a damp stain,' becomes 'spacious singing flesh,' to use Cixous' term, holding out the promise of restoring the shattered, sterile masculine civilization of London in 1922, as exemplified by the mechanically marching soldiers at the Cenotaph, and the Prime Minister dressed up in the meaningless pomp of his uniform with gold lace.⁴²³

Yet, to imagine that Woolf's visions of feminine self-realization are limited to ~~equate~~ a primeval fertility that pre-dates patriarchal society, and exists outside modernity as a marginal and autonomous space, is surely a myopic view. Mrs Ramsay, after all, as noted by Mary Jacobus and others, identifies herself with a scientific intervention in society, the beam of the lighthouse:

—Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this

⁴²³ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 132; Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement, 'Sorties' in *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing, first published in Paris by Union Generale de Paris, 1975; (Minnesota, London: University of Minnesota, 1986); 88; Joanna X. K. Garvey, 'Difference and Continuity: The Voices of *Mrs Dalloway*,' *College English*, Vol 53, No 1: (Jan, 1991); 56-76, jstor.org, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/377969?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke... She praised herself in praising the light, without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light.⁴²⁴

Woolf thus deliberately associates the housewife's pleasure with a scientific intervention in the natural world meant to save human lives. Even if she is enough of patriarchy's agent to ask women to provide emotional and domestic labour, for the intellectually established white men in their midst, as a function of their femininity, her very experience of domestic labour as it plays out both in her own household, and in the homes of others, makes her well aware ~~that~~ that maternal bodies do not magically find reserves of nourishment to sustain their husbands and children, and that good quality milk can only make its way into individual households if there are dairies run on advanced lines, which supply good milk to the community, motivated by the needs of households, instead of profit.⁴²⁵

While it has been stated before, in the Introduction, that as far as we know Woolf had next to no engagement with contemporary theorists of domestic labour who argued for the necessity of collectivizing domestic labour, I would argue that in Mrs Ramsay's ambitions for a model dairy and hospital, we see a tentative movement towards taking the onus of nurturing work off the shoulders of the individual homemaker.

Through much of the novel, Mrs Ramsay is repeatedly typecast into the role of the homemaker who single-handedly takes care of everything that her family, guests, and household requires, organizing the efforts undertaken by the servants of the house to ensure that resources stretch to

⁴²⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 100; Mary Jacobus, 'The Third Stroke': Reading Woolf with Freud,' in *Virginia Woolf*, ed. Rachel Bowlby; (Longman: London and New York, 1992) 102-120.

⁴²⁵ Indeed, it is significant that Mrs Ramsay identifies with a beam which appears to be a guide to boats at the community level, perhaps to the struggling fishing industry referred to at the Ramsay's dinner table. We do not see any large ships on these waters in the novel, carrying cargoes from overseas to England's shores. Only during the war years does an 'ashen coloured ship,' appear, leaving behind 'a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea,' suggesting that it is a ship of war, leaving bloodshed in its wake.

the furthest in order to facilitate the standard of living that the Ramsays enjoy. It is Mrs McNab, who despite the abjection of her position as a 'witless' washerwoman, articulates a critique of systems of domestic labour which place enormous burdens on individual women, saying clearly and repeatedly '[I]t was too much for one woman, too much, too much.'⁴²⁶ Yet, in Mrs Ramsay's hopes about the public institutions she wanted to see in the village perhaps we can glimpse a sharing of Mrs McNab's critique. She nurtures a wish for ~~about~~ a kind of home-making in which the community at large takes responsibility, so that the fear of earwigs in their husband's milk does not worry homemakers into early graves.

To conclude, we could think of Woolf's description of 'A Woman's College from Outside,' written about the same time as *To the Lighthouse*,

'Such too the resemblance, what with tiles, corridors, and bedroom doors to dairy or nunnery, a place of seclusion or discipline, where the bowl of milk stands pure and there's a great washing of linen.'⁴²⁷

In Woolf's imagination, therefore, the women's college resembles not only the nunnery, but also the dairy and the laundry, places in which gendered labour, intrinsic to the smooth functioning of human life, are carried out outside the structure of nuclear family.⁴²⁸ This continuum between the place of learning, a form of white collar work, and dairy-work and laundry work, thus tenuously posits the possibility of a different kind of community, which will be able to incorporate a communal pattern of domestic labour, bringing women out of the heteropatriarchal family.

⁴²⁶ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 210-216.

⁴²⁷ Woolf, 'A Woman's College from Outside,' in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*; (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985) first published in *Atalanta's Garland: Being the Book of the Edinburgh University Women's Union*, November, 1926, 140, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/completeshorterf00wool/mode/1up>.

⁴²⁸ In *Three Guineas* Woolf argues that the women's college should 'teach only the arts that can be taught cheaply and practiced by poor people,' including 'the little arts of talk, of dress, of cookery.' (Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 50)

In a sense, this chapter records the different temporal planes on which Woolf's imaginings of domestic economies can be imagined. In this chapter, we have explored how Woolf studies the present in order to offer a vision of a utopic domestic economy which can be located in visions of feminist futures. If this chapter relates Woolf's writing to the socio-economic context of the inter-war years, the next chapter will study how the economies of the British country-house are reflected in Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). Moreover, it will examine how Woolf looks at the question of locating domestic labour vis-à-vis the processes through which the past is memorialized.

Chapter 4: Housekeeping and Museum-Keeping: Orlando and the Country House Novel

This chapter, like the previous chapter, will study regimes of domestic and reproductive labour in the inter-war years. It will explore these regimes in the context of the English country-house in Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). It will do so by locating *Orlando* within a feminine literary tradition as well as within a literary discourse about the role of the English country house as a repository of the national past in the inter-war years. Reading *Orlando* against the backdrop of the country-house novel allows us to examine Woolf's text in the context of a of modernist sphere of literary and cultural production, ~~which attempted to deal historicize lived environments and labour relations in a highly industrialized imperial nation~~. The chapter goes on to explore the way in which Woolf deliberately entangles the projects of memorializing a domestic space, through literature and through museum-making, with reproductive labour undertaken by working class women. The chapter argues that Woolf resists a discourse that makes the 'precious' and/or 'historic' objects in the country house into pure containers of their auratic qualities, by creating a narrative which factors in the materiality of the regimes of reproductive labour responsible for making sure that these objects do indeed survive the ravages of time.

1. Biographical Context and Textual Details:

Orlando, as is well known, is Virginia's 'love letter' to Vita, immortalizing her as the androgynous, aristocratic Orlando, much loved by 'both sexes equally'⁴²⁹. Full of biographical references to Vita's own life, *Orlando* is also, as has been widely recognized, a tale of wish-

⁴²⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, (1928; 1956; (Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Harcourt Inc, 2006) 161, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/orlandobiography00wool_0/mode/1up; for the first reference to *Orlando* as a 'love letter' please see Nigel Nicholson, *Portrait of a Marriage* (London: Wiedenfield and Nicholson, 1973) 202.

fulfilment, allowing Vita to inherit her ancestral house, Knole, which she was unable to do, due to the salic laws of primogeniture.

Tell-tale signs in the novel establish that Orlando's estate is indeed the 'real' Knole. To take one example among many, the King's Bedroom, furnished with large amounts of silver in the real-life Knole, is portrayed in *Orlando* as the room which Orlando furnishes when he has an 'inordinate passion' for silver, and later comes to regard as slightly 'vulgar'- the epithet Sackville-West used, in a qualified manner, to describe the real life room in *Knole and the Sackvilles*, a historical account of the house, written by her in 1922.⁴³⁰

The importance given to the Knole-like house, too, can be accounted for by biographical fact- as Diana Souhami and other biographers have pointed out, 'Vita inhabited Knole more crucially than her own body.'⁴³¹ As is well-known to scholars of Woolf and Sackville-West, Vita loved Knole deeply, wanted to inherit and possess it, and keenly felt the law's discrimination against her.⁴³² In this context, it appears to be deeply significant that, as this chapter will show, the politics of Orlando's subjectivity are caught up with the politics that reveal themselves in the interiors of the house and in the details of its day-to-day housekeeping.⁴³³

Both Woolf and Sackville-West wrote extensively about the country house. Woolf's *Orlando*, and *Between the Acts* (1941), and Sackville-West's history of her ancestral house, *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922) and *The Edwardians*,⁴³⁴ are often cited in academic writing on country house literature, but both writers consistently engaged with the country house elsewhere in their

⁴³⁰ Woolf, *Orlando*, 79, 221; V. Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles*; (London: William Heinemann, 1922) 15, Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/65107/pg65107-images.html>.

⁴³¹ Diana Souhami, *Mrs Keppel and Her Daughter*; (1996, London: Quercus Editions, 2013) Chapter 7, kindle ebook.

⁴³² See, Souhami, Glenndinning, Matthew Dennison, *Behind the Mask: The Life of Vita Sackville-West*, (London: William Collins, 2015) among others.

⁴³³ Woolf, see esp '22 Hyde Park Gate' and 'Old Bloomsbury' in *Moments of Being*; Nino Strachey, *Rooms of Their Own* (2018: n.p. National Trust); Souhami, Chapter 20.

oeuvres. Shorter pieces or passing references to visits to country houses, can be found through the length of Woolf's writing career, beginning with her 1903 essays 'Wilton- From Outside the Walls' and 'Wilton from Inside,' to her diary entry on Friday, 14st June, 1940 describing a visit to Penshurst.⁴³⁴ Sackville-West frequently depicts a country house in Kent in her novels, such as the ruined castle in which Miles Vane Merrick the male protagonist of *Family History* lives, a place which strongly resembles Sissinghurst, Sackville-West's home from the 1930s onwards.⁴³⁵ Her lifelong (and often politically conservative and xenophobic) commitment to the English countryside, and her aesthetic of trying to represent what Patrick Wright calls 'Deep England' appears not only in her prize winning *The Land*, but also in other works such as the pamphlet on *English Country Houses* written in 1940 as a part of the 'Britain at War' patriotic series.⁴³⁶

2. Country Houses in a Literary Tradition:

As Richard Gill's pioneering ~~text~~ *Happy Rural Seat: The English Country House and the Literary Imagination* (1972) has demonstrated, the genre of the English country house novel, with its capacity to reflect directly or indirectly on the political climate of the community in which it is written, is a flourishing modernist genre in its own right, beginning with Henry James's 'A Passionate Pilgrim' (1878) and with Evelyn Waugh's Second World War trilogy

⁴³⁴ Woolf, 'Wilton from Inside' in *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897- 1909*; (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1990); 92-97, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/passionateappren000wool_k8k9/mode/1up; Woolf, Friday 14 June, 1940, in *The Diary*, Vol VI, 296-297.

⁴³⁵ V. Sackville-West, *Family History*; (London: The Hogarth Press, 1932; London: Virago, 1986) archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/familyhistory0000sack/mode/1up>.

⁴³⁶ Patrick Wright, *Living in an Old Country*, (London: Verso, 1985; Oxford: OUP, 2009,) 81-83; **Matthew Dennison, 818.** For a sustained exploration of Sackville-West's deeply problematic politics please see Suzanne Raitt, *Vita and Virginia: The Work and Friendship of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.)

marking the ‘completion of a social and cultural arc’, even as the tradition of writing country house fiction continues through the twentieth century into contemporary British fiction.⁴³⁷

While the country house entered the genre of the novel in the late nineteenth century, the country house itself has a longer history of inspiring literary work, ~~going traced~~ back to Aemilia Lanyer’s *The Description of Cooke-Ham* (1611). The genre of country house writing has traditionally celebrated the English rural country seat as a *locus amoenus*, characterized by an abundance of the simple pleasures of life, the beauty of the rural landscape, the happiness of the people who occupy the world of the text, and the harmonious relationship between the poet-speaker, who beholds the house and the landscape, and his patron, the master of the house. It is also significant that the country house also finds a place in novels of romance and courtship in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, instituting a tradition of viewing the country house, the seat of a powerful and/or desirable man, through a feminine gaze, a point we will return to later.

One knows, of course, that the celebration of the country house was a literary trope, far removed from the specificities and class conflicts of actual rural life in various parts of England.⁴³⁸ As Marx wrote, the British aristocracy had the distinction of being the first aristocracy in Europe to dispossess their tenants and share-croppers from the estates, on a mass scale, while changing patterns of cultivation in order to maximize profits from the land.⁴³⁹ Woolf, seeing Knole for the first time, carried away mixed impressions of the place, and of her beloved:

⁴³⁷ Richard Gill, *Happy Rural Seat: The English Country House and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 37, 222, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/happyruralseat00gill/mode/2up> 37, 222; Teresa Topolovska, ‘The Country House Revisited: Variations on a Theme from Forster to Hollinghurst,’ (PhD dissertation, University Karlova of Prague, 2016) <https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/download/140049077>.

⁴³⁸ EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980) Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: OUP, 1973).

⁴³⁹ Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, 508- 519.

‘But its [sic] the breeding of Vita’s that I took away with me as an impression, carrying her and Knole in my eye as I travelled up with the lower middle classes, through slums. There is Knole, capable of housing all the desperate poor of Judd Street, and with only that one solitary earl in the kernel.’⁴⁴⁰

The popularity of the country house novel grew at a time when, as Raymond Williams points out in *The Country and the City*, populations were increasingly drawn into the networks of the British Empire, and the English countryside defined itself as the home to which the successful Briton retired, building if he could,

‘...’country-houses of capital rather than of land,’ where, the privileged might consume a simulacra of the old imagery of Penshurst: field sports, fishing, and above all, horses; often [with] a marginal interest in conservation and ‘old country ways,’ as the landed aristocracy retained much cultural capital, even as they lost much of their ability to protect their class interests. On the other hand, the rural proletariat were adjusting, often with difficulty, to the subordinate position of home agriculture, but with increasing efficiency drawn from the resources of a scientific and industrial society.’⁴⁴¹

This was the context in which the modernist country house novel emerged as a popular genre which shared in an important strand of the British inter-war *zeitgeist*. As the previous chapter has elaborated, a discourse about England being a peaceful and plentiful land, as well as an imperial power, was characteristic of inter-war Britain. The genre simultaneously created an atmosphere of nostalgia for a ‘golden’ pre-industrial past, provided a voyeuristic glimpse into the lives of an elite landowning class, and asked questions about the deep-seated inequalities of English feudalism. Most popular inter-war country house novels exemplify this hydra-like character, including Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, for instance, or the novels of Henry James and Evelyn Waugh. Moreover, given that it was a genre which was about being caught between changing environments (between an urban/ modern world, and an estate which was remnant of British feudalism) and changing human relations (between relations under capitalism and a

⁴⁴⁰ Woolf, Saturday 5 July 1924, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol II, 306.

⁴⁴¹ Raymond Williams, 281-282.

simulacra of relations under feudalism,) it could be used to explore the fractured subjectivities that came to characterize literary modernism.

The novel however, was not the only medium in which bore witness to this inter-war fascination with the English country house. As this chapter will explore, inter-war historiography, as well as inter-war tourism, were deeply invested in the country house.

3. 'An Extremely Hard-Worked Woman'

A staple of country house writing is the presence of a feminine figure who can be romanticized for the manner in which she presides over the traditional methods of reproductive labour followed in the house, a tradition beginning with Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst (1612).'⁴⁴² It has been easy for a masculine literary tradition to continue to celebrate a nurturing feminine presence, who is also, as it were, embedded into the landscape as one of its indigenous features. Thus, Richard Gill, could describe the importance of the 'vital' woman in modernist country house, in these terms, as late as 1972:

'Vibrant, loving, maternal, possessing not knowledge but some deep wisdom, often strangely passive, sometimes mysterious, this woman seems to create, for those around her, by her very existence, by her special quality of being, the occasion for community... And for these women, nothing illustrates the sense of the past and of the future so clearly as the feeling for the finer things that have survived and should survive- above all, houses... Even Sara Monday, a servant, shows a genuine fondness for the homes of her master, Tom Wilcher. 'How well Sara looked after both my houses,' Wilcher remembers, 'how she cleaned and polished them, and how she cherished and loved them.'⁴⁴³

At this point it is interesting to note that the first half of the twentieth century also witnessed the presence of a feminist tradition of reclaiming the life of medieval women, by writers such as Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and the historian Eileen Power among others. Perhaps it is

⁴⁴² Sackville-West, *The Edwardians*; 34-35; Ben Jonson, *To Penshurst*, 1616, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50674/to-penshurst>.

⁴⁴³ Gill, 13-14, the text quoted is *To Be A Pilgrim* by Joyce Cary (1942).

possible to find in these writings, a need to imagine a history of an alternative to the nuclear bourgeoisie family, of a time when the household gave women the space to enjoy a degree of autonomy, now forever closed off.

As Eileen Power points out, not only was the work of the housewife much more extensive and varied than it became after the Industrial Revolution, in a household, where bread, ale, candles, bacon, salt meat, napery and clothing were produced at home, but also the mistress of a medieval manor, frequently found opportunity to undertake ‘masculine’ work and make decisions:

‘Not only much more had to be done within the household, but, throughout the period, social and physical conditions of life, constant wars and slow connections, inevitably threw a great deal of responsibility on ladies as representatives of absent husbands. While the lord was away at court or at war, who looked after his manor and handed it back again, with all walls in repair, farming in order and lawsuits fought when he returned? And when the lord got himself taken prisoner, who collected the ransom, squeezing every penny from the estate, bothering archbishops for indulgences, selling the family plate? Or when the lord perchance got killed, who acted as executor of his will and brought up his children? The answer to these questions, in nine cases out ten, his wife. She had to be prepared to take his place at any moment were she Queen Regent or obscure gentlewoman of Norfolk like Margaret Paston. In theory there was the romantic, lovely and capricious lady of chivalry, flirting and embroidery and playing chess; in practice there was more often an extremely hard-worked woman and a very hard nut to crack.’⁴⁴⁴

Woolf’s 1906 fictional account of life in fourteenth century Norfolk, ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’ evokes another such image of the past:

‘ And if I marry well, the burden of a great name and great lands will be on me; many servants will call me mistress; I shall be the mother of sons; in my husband’s absence I shall rule his people, taking care for herds and crops and keeping watch on his enemies; within doors I shall store up fine linens and my chests shall be laden with spices and preserves; by the work of my needle all waste of time and use will be repaired and renewed so that at my death my daughter shall find my cupboards better lined with fine raiments than when I found them. And when I lie dead, the people from the countryside shall pass for three days before my body, praying and speaking good of me, and at the

⁴⁴⁴ Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, (Cambridge: Canto, 1975) [a](https://archive.org/details/medievalwomen00powe)Archive.org <https://archive.org/details/medievalwomen00powe> 34, 38-39.

will of my children the priest shall say mass for my soul and candles shall burn in the church for ever and ever.’⁴⁴⁵

In industrialized England, the scope of the tasks that fell to the lot of the woman of the leisure classes was narrower, as the feminine ‘indoors’ and masculine ‘outdoors’ were clearly demarcated as ‘separate spheres.’⁴⁴⁶ In perhaps the most well-known ‘middlebrow’ country-house novel of the inter-war years, Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938), the female protagonist is haunted by the weight of tradition bearing down upon her, to perform the role of the perfect mistress of the stately home. This role however, has a limited range. She is expected to be a designer of menus, curator of beautiful objects, housekeeper and fashionable society beauty. While women were still excluded from systems of inheritance through which wealth was passed among the landed classes, women retained their roles as the ornaments of their husband’s houses, and were indeed held responsible for the ‘taste’ displayed by household arrangements, as the chapter will subsequently explore.

4. ‘National Heritage’:

It is no accident that the country house novel became a prominent genre in times when British capitalists, as a class, began to cultivate their relationship with the Tory Party, which had traditionally defended landed interests, rather than automatically allying with the Whigs, the traditional defenders of free trade. In the first election after the war, as mentioned in the first chapter, the Conservative benches of the British Parliament were dominated by candidates backed by prominent capitalist ventures. It was now indeed possible to articulate a ‘harmonious’

⁴⁴⁵ Woolf, *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985) 51, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/completeshorterf00wool/mode/1up>

⁴⁴⁶ Ruskin’s ‘Of Queens Gardens’ (1865) is generally taken as the paradigmatic example of this systematization. John Ruskin, ‘Of Queen’s Gardens,’ (1865) archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/ofqueensgardens00ruskrich/page/n13/mode/2up>.

relationship between fluid, expansive networks of extractive capitalism, and the agrarian lifestyle of the country house, apparently rooted to a fixed portion of land.

Going sightseeing in stately homes is a popular English pastime to this day, a part of the ‘heritage industry.’ While the [practice of](#) visiting ~~of~~ the public rooms of country houses possibly began in the late eighteenth century, the practice of formally charging tickets for admission began with the opening of Hampton Court Palace in 1839.⁴⁴⁷

In the inter-war years, moreover, as country houses fell into dereliction and came to represent a way of life that belonged irretrievably to the past, which required public funding in order to be maintained, the frame through which these manorial complexes could be glimpsed was most frequently that of a system of historical scholarship and tourism, with varying political affiliations.⁴⁴⁸ The question of the preservation of rural landscapes as fragments of a pre-industrial past was, from the late nineteenth century onwards a site of class conflict. It involved Tory stakes in the preservation of a monolithic English history and in the right to own private property, coming into conflict with other pressure groups which saw the access to the monuments of the past, as well as access to the countryside, as worth preserving in the ‘public interest.’⁴⁴⁹ The war-years saw the emergence of pressure groups asking the National Trust, which had hitherto focused on the preservation of smaller structures, and of tracts of the countryside, to shift their main focus onto the preservation of English country houses. Both V Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicolson were closely involved in this work.⁴⁵⁰ Indeed, this inter-war activity laid the ideological foundations, on which the uniquely English industry of visiting

⁴⁴⁷ Robert Sackville-West, *Knole: Kent* (n.p.: National Trust, n.d.), 86.

⁴⁴⁸ Wright, 253.

⁴⁴⁹ Wright, esp 48-49.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 253.

stately homes in the British countryside continues to this day. As Patrick Wright says of the country house:

‘...it combines its own “historic interest” with the “natural beauty” of what are actually heavily landscaped and aestheticized surroundings: the ‘soul’ of a nation or just the perfect naturalization of a hegemonic view of the nation which has needed special preservation in the years of progressive taxation and state-led social reform, or both.’⁴⁵¹

Itself seen as a precious surviving fragment of an English national past, the aristocrat’s country seat was well suited for the task of becoming a unique version of the public museum, since in the past, the homes of nobility and royalty had functioned across Europe as the setting for aristocratic collections of rarities and curiosities.⁴⁵² Moreover, the spectatorship of a public of tourists and scholars, such as the audience described by Woolf in her Wilton essays, and her early short story ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn,’ would allow the aristocracy to be able to conform to its position as the epitome of the ‘leisure class,’ as much as, if not more than, through the publicity gathered by the lavish house parties described in V Sackville-West’s *The Edwardians*, or the attentions of celebrity journalism. At the same time, this sector of tourism portrayed English feudalism as a complex and antiquated but on the whole, as an endearingly self-sustaining and wholesome economic system, which was now lost to time. As this chapter will go on to discuss, this called for the production of a unique space, between the museum and the ‘home,’ and reproductive labour had a new role to play in the production of such a space.

5. Treasures and Luxuries:

⁴⁵¹ Wright, 51.

⁴⁵² Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Modern Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (Oxford: Routledge, 1995), 25-26, 33-37.

This view of the country house as a ‘most English house’ sustained by a local economy to the very stones that it is built with,⁴⁵³ is augmented by the fact that the noble man’s ancestral seat in the country is also the repository of treasures, the signs of a past in which the dwellers of the house participated in networks of power, such as the prayer-book of Mary Queen of Scots in Orlando’s chapel.⁴⁵⁴ This is a history that of course, cannot tidily be celebrated as the ‘product of English soil.’ The prayer book, for example, is a token of England’s much besmirched colonial relations with her neighbouring countries. Even if Knole and the noble estates in the three novels studied here, are not ostensibly financed by colonialism as Mansfield Park is, they contain, and can even be said to lovingly cherish, the fruits of British imperialism.

Shelmeldrine’s seafaring adventures in the nineteenth century might involve ‘kissing a negress in the dark’ in Cape Horn, but Lord Orlando himself kept a silent black slave in his own kitchen, named Grace Robinson, ‘by way of making a Christian woman of her,’ just as the interiors of the real-life Knole are marked by the presence of exotic slaves - the black footboys generically named John Morroccoe until one was killed in ‘The Black Boy’s Passage,’ which led to their replacement by Chinese page-boys, the portrait of one of whom, Wang-Y-Tong, the page to the Duke’s Italian mistress, was painted by Joshua Reynolds in the eighteenth century, and hangs in the Reynolds Drawing Room at Knole to this day.⁴⁵⁵

Such objects of ‘historical value’ are demonstrations of the house’s power - that while it occupies the ‘apex of a local system of exploitation,’ it is capable of grasping the spoils of distant

⁴⁵³ Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles*, 18-19.

⁴⁵⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 102.

⁴⁵⁵ Woolf, *Orlando*, 189, 52; Jaime Hovey, ‘“Kissing a Negress in the Dark”: Englishness as a Masquerade in Woolf’s *Orlando*,’ *PMLA*, 112, No. 3 (1997), jstor.org, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/462948>; Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles*, 191-92; Robert Sackville West, 34

lands.⁴⁵⁶ They are often objects that are designated as ‘luxuries,’ a category of consumption, whose function, as Arjun Appadurai points out, is ‘fundamentally political.’⁴⁵⁷ Consuming luxuries is an act of demonstrating one’s status as an elite member of one’s society, with access to commodities that can be acquired through a complex process, and hence circulate on a limited scale, and require specialized knowledge in order to use, display, or consume. It is an act that sends social messages, which reflect closely on the ‘body, person, and personality’ of the person undertaking this consumption.⁴⁵⁸

As Michael Whitworth points out, Woolf borrows extensively from past catalogues of expenditure in *Knole and the Sackvilles*, while systematically inflating the numbers given in the original records.⁴⁵⁹ If Lord Orlando fastidiously furnishes his house by selecting a ‘single plate, or one topaz ring’ from a chest that comes from Persia, he is also compelled to write up accounts of the enormous quantities of expensive commodities he purchases in order to fittingly furnish the house of his ancestors:

‘To fifty pairs of Spanish blankets, ditto curtains of crimson and white taffeta; the valence to them of white satin embroidered with crimson and white silk...

‘To seventy yellow satin chairs and sixty stools, suitable with their buckram covers to them all...

‘To sixty seven walnut tree tables...

‘To seventeen dozen boxes containing each ~~dozen~~ five dozen of Venice glasses...

‘To one hundred and two mats, each thirty yards long...’

‘To ninety seven cushions of crimson damask laid with silver parchment lace and footstools of cloth of tissue and chairs suitable...

⁴⁵⁶ Williams, 280.

⁴⁵⁷ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*; (Cambridge: CUP, 1986;) 38.

⁴⁵⁸ Appadurai, 38.

⁴⁵⁹ Michael Whitworth in Introduction to OUP *Orlando*, xxxiii

'To fifty branches for a dozen lights apiece...'⁴⁶⁰

Orlando's extravagant collecting of furniture is in the same register as the conspicuous consumption that takes place in Sackville-West's Chevron in *The Edwardians* (1930), the description of a way of life which seems almost to be a systematic illustration of Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption. Chevron runs on a system where 'only by extravagance and waste could the honour of Chevron be maintained,' and aristocratic guests consume endless, extravagant meals.⁴⁶¹ Orlando's house, furnished to repletion ('At length, however, there was no room in the galleries for another table; no room on the tables for another cabinet; no room in the cabinet for another rose-bowl; no room in the bowl for another handful of pot-pourri;') and the Chevron speciality of 'an ortolan within the quail, a truffle within the ortolan, and pâté de foie gras within the truffle;' are both examples of Appadurai's understanding of luxury as a 'register of consumption.'⁴⁶²

The vestiges of a bygone age of aristocratic consumption, like the silver state bedroom at Knole, were given a prominent place in the inter-war country-house as it was turned into a museum, as will be discussed consequently in this chapter. They could be displayed and fitted out with features that would highlight their auratic qualities like the 'Do Not Touch' notices at the end of *Orlando*.⁴⁶³ Their role was to complement the country-house's indigenous, pre-imperial, 'rustic' charm with their wealth and splendour, in order to create a *topos* that was simultaneously characterized by 'homely' agricultural abundance as well as imperial power.

The praxis of collecting these famous 'historical' luxuries, however, was one attributed to the masculine forebears of the dwellers of the country house. As the next section will show women's

⁴⁶⁰ Woolf, *Orlando*, 65.

⁴⁶¹ Sackville-West, *The Edwardians*, 25.

⁴⁶² Woolf, *Orlando*, 65-66; Sackville-West, *The Edwardians*, 43; Appadurai, 38.

⁴⁶³ Woolf, *Orlando*, 232-233.

attempts to assume the roles of discerning conspicuous consumers were always threatened with dismissal.

6. Women as Conspicuous Consumers:

As Addison, one of the wits Lady Orlando patronizes on her return to England, would ‘gently’ satirize and instruct us, the wealthy woman ‘is a beautiful, romantic animal,’ to be clothed in luxurious commodities, for whose tippet, muff, and other ornaments the natural resources of the colonies should be exploited:

“I consider woman the most beautiful, romantic animal, that may be adorned with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds, ores and silks. The lynx shall cast its skin at her feet to make her a tippet, the peacock, parrot and swan shall pay contributions to her muff; the sea shall be searched for shells, and the rocks for gems, and every part of nature furnish out its share towards the embellishment of a creature that is the most consummate work of it. All this, I shall indulge them in, but as for the petticoat I have been speaking of, I neither can, nor will allow it.”⁴⁶⁴

Addison’s benign, magisterial tone indicates his sanction of mercantilist extractivism, as well as his tolerance of feminine foolishness and love of fashion, as a performance through which the wealth of a woman’s family, and by extension of aristocratic British society, might be conspicuously displayed. He does not, however, give up his position as the arbiter of what constitutes aesthetic dressing, as he allows some items and forbids others. The ‘romantic animals’ might take pleasure in their fine clothes and ornaments as long as they follow Addison’s dictates about what to wear, instead of deciding for themselves.

The task of being an ‘ornament to society,’ is, as Veblen points out, a role in which a woman performs conspicuous consumption on behalf of the male head of her clan:

“Her sphere is within the household, which she should “beautify,” and of which she should be the ‘chief ornament... By virtue of its descent from a patriarchal past, our social system makes it the woman’s function in an especial degree to put in evidence her

⁴⁶⁴ Addison, quoted in Woolf, *Orlando*, 122.

household's ability to pay. According to the modern civilized scheme of life, the good name of the household to which she belongs should be the special care of the woman; and the system of honorific expenditure and conspicuous leisure by which this good name is chiefly sustained is therefore the woman's sphere.⁴⁶⁵

According to Veblen, like expensive horses, dogs, and male servants an upper class woman with expensive standards of living is also an object to acquire, in order to establish a man's claim to belong to the leisure classes, or the class in society with the ability to command the most resources without expending labour. As in Du Maurier's *Rebecca*, the mistress is expected to direct patterns of consumption in the household, in order to produce the effect that the house is an outstanding exemplar of aristocratic aesthetics, combining the riches available on the market in the age of High Capitalism, with the 'time-honoured' aesthetics produced by the agrarian English countryside.

Although popular literature in the first half of the twentieth century continued to advise women to cherish their homes as the legitimate space for exercising their artistic abilities, Modernism also continued a tradition of desecrating the household ruled by a woman as a space for decadence, as exemplified by Adorno's words about women's capitulation to commodity capitalism in the first half of the twentieth century, as cited in the Introduction.⁴⁶⁶ The country house thus becomes a site in which the gendered modernist subject returns to the same paradigm in which 'Mrs Brown' found herself, when she was the subject of Arnold Bennett's Edwardian modernism - a passive consumer/ victim of what the marketplace and her family thrust upon her.

After Orlando's sex change, the staff at Knole do not expect that she should distinguish herself by filling the house with a roster of luxurious items as Lord Orlando had done. Instead they

⁴⁶⁵ Veblen, [Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. 1899 \(New York: B.W. Heubsch, 1918\)](#) 179-180.

⁴⁶⁶ For a specific discussion of women's role in economy of interior decoration between 1820 to 1945, please refer to Leora Auslander, 'The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth Century France' in *The Sex of Things*, 79-112; Trefusis 9.

expect that she should provide the house with ‘some little masters and mistresses to come after her,’ and to continue to attend to a house ‘with the towels wanting mending, and the curtains in the chaplain’s parlour being moth eaten around the fringes,’ carrying out this routine reproductive labour, even as her claim to the house is being contested because she is dead, or a woman, ‘which was much the same thing.’⁴⁶⁷

In contrast to the male aristocrat, the consumption patterns of the mistress of the house are therefore, not meant to find a place in the newly arranged inter-war country-house, as ‘historic’ markers of British wealth and power. Instead, if she were to move out of her roles as a provider of reproductive labour, and a walking advertisement for the male aristocrat’s purchasing power, she would find herself mocked by the Addison as well as the cultural critics of High Capitalism.

As this chapter will go on to explore, this division of roles would have implications when the country-house turned into a museum or a simulacra of what an English country house should be.

7. The Country House as Museum:

From the eighteenth century onwards, but especially after the opening of Hampton Court Palace to the public, the English country house participated in modernity’s need to ‘enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes... constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages,’ and played its role in shaping the disciplined gaze of the modern museum viewer by adapting itself to the methods of the nineteenth century museum.⁴⁶⁸

The English country house had a long history of presenting its exterior as a visual spectacle, as it was traditionally approached through a park, the presence of which demonstrated the extent to

⁴⁶⁷ Woolf, *Orlando*, 124, 126.

⁴⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces,’ *Diacritics*, Vol 16, No 1 (Spring, 1986) 26, jstor.org, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464648>.

which the lord owned woodlands in which he had the sovereign right to hunt in. In the eighteenth century, this aesthetic was supplemented by the landscaping of the grounds in front of the house into carefully structured lawns or pastures, so that this stretch of clear land would enhance the bulk of the house in the eyes of a traveller as they approached the house. When the stately house was opened to the public for viewing, the interior of the house too, was aligned so as to make the house a slowly unfolding panorama. Guided tours were arranged through certain parts of the house, including carefully (and ostentatiously) curated ‘period rooms,’ revealing the historical and aesthetic value of objects added to the household over generations, via a process of sequential locomotion on the part of the viewer.⁴⁶⁹

Writing in 1941, Sackville-West would evoke an image of a homely heterotopia of furniture that an old English country house might possess:

‘Everything is muddled up. You may find Jacobean panelling, Chippendale tables, Chinoiserie wallpapers, Carolean love seats, Genoa velvets, Georgian brocades, Burgundian tapestries, Queen Anne embroideries, William and Mary tallboys, Elizabethan bread cupboards, and even Victorian sideboards, all in such a mixture as to make the purist shudder. There was no such thing as a purist period room decoration. Every owner acquired furniture, pictures, tapestries, statuary, *au fur et a mesure*, as the taste and fashion of his age suggested. Sometimes the taste of his age was ‘good’ sometimes ‘bad’: there is no Absolute in such matters.’⁴⁷⁰

This would suggest that country houses, themselves fragments of a past that was fast disappearing in the England of 1941, represented ed a plenitude before/ beyond the epistemological discipline of a historical narrative. However, as Sackville West had cause to know, from her childhood at Knole in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, stately homes made available to historians and tourists, including Knole, (which was an especially popular country

⁴⁶⁹ Robert Sackville-West, 86; Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces,’ *Diacritics*, 16, No 1 (Spring 1986) 26, jstor, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464648>, Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Modern Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, (Oxford: Routledge, 1995) 59- 88, Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth Century Britain and France*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1984) 77-92.

⁴⁷⁰ Sackville-West, *English Country Houses*, (1941; (London: Unicorn Press, 2014) 54.

house, given its proximity to London, and its extensive grounds where people could rest) were carefully curated, so as to make the various rooms, architectural features, and objects ‘representative’ of historical periods or processes. As Tony Bennett, referencing the work of Stephen Bann, writes,

‘... the emergence of a “historical frame” for the display of museum exhibits was concurrent with the development of an array of disciplinary and other practices which aimed at the lifelike reproduction of an authenticated past and its representations as a series of stages leading to the present - the practices of history writing associated with the historical novel and the development of history as an empirical discipline, for example (Bann 1984).’⁴⁷¹

As Andreas Hussyen points out, this form of display is inherently aligned to the commodity fetishism that impelled Western modernity forward from mercantile expansion into industrialism and empire. While the object in the museum is not viewed as a commodity, since it ‘transcends’ exchange value (like the luxury item as studied by Appadurai,) it is valued for its ‘authenticity’ and thus is interpreted as brandishing what Hussyen calls ‘a form of memory value,’ depending on how well ‘mummified’ the object is in layers of discourse testifying to its authenticity.⁴⁷²

The texts discussed in this chapter are acutely aware of the imposition of this discourse upon the stately house, working to create a space that has been ‘frozen solid, closed down and limited to what can only be exhibited as a fully accomplished ‘historical past’ which demands only appreciation and protection.’⁴⁷³ When Orlando returns from Turkey, in the eighteenth century, she walks through the house by herself, seeing, touching, and smelling. She takes up a historical prayer book, belonging to Mary Queen of Scots, and notices among its contents, a lock of hair and a flake of pastry. To these ‘odds and ends’ of the past, she adds a flake of tobacco from the

⁴⁷¹ Bennett, 75.

⁴⁷² Andreas Hussyen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 33.

⁴⁷³ Wright, 74.

cheroots she had taken to smoking in the East.⁴⁷⁴ When Orlando returns to the house in ‘the present moment,’ she travels through the house, much as she had done two centuries ago, except that she is aware that the house has been taken away from the ‘the touch and control of the living’:

“But everywhere were little lavender bags to keep the moth out and printed notices, “Please do not touch,” which though she had put them there herself, seemed to rebuke her. The house was no longer hers entirely, she sighed. It belonged to time now; to history; was past the touch and control of the living. Never would beer be spilt here, she thought (she was in the bedroom that had been old Nick Greene’s,) or holes in the carpet. Never two hundred servants come running and brawling down the corridors with warming pans and great branches for the great fireplaces. Never would ale be brewed and candles made and saddles fashioned and stones shaped in the workshops outside the house. Hammers and mallets were silent now. Chairs and beds were empty; tankards of silver and gold were locked in glass cases. The great wings of silence beat up and down the empty house.”⁴⁷⁵

However, the treasures of the stately home cannot simply remain as the fragmented and frozen relics of time past. Creating ‘the lifelike reproduction of an authenticated past,’ for the visiting viewer, is a key part of the creation of the spectacle of the country house.⁴⁷⁶ One crucial charm attached to many objects in the country-house is that, it harkens back to a history in which it was both quotidian and a luxury. It is precisely because they were thus utilized that they have come to possess the auratic quality through which they hold the viewers’ gaze in spellbound fascination.

As Patrick Wright points out, from the thirties onward, when the National Trust was pressurized into preserving stately homes, to the present, the Trust’s approach has been to create a simulacrum of life going on as if this was not an artificially preserved system. According to

Wright:

⁴⁷⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 127.

⁴⁷⁵ Woolf, *Orlando* 232-233.

⁴⁷⁶ Bennett, 75.

‘What you’re effectively seeing with the country houses scheme is the state, not the state literally, but the Trust as a statutory body, doing everything it can to preserve things while at the same time effacing its own presence. We act to preserve your house, Lord and Lady whoever, as a public body, but what we most like about it is that it’s not a public institution, and we’re going to make sure it retains that distinction. We’re going to make sure it’s not clinical, that it’s not museum-like, we’re going to keep you in residence, even if it’s not in the style to which you are accustomed.’⁴⁷⁷

Thus, it was not adequate merely to preserve the objects that had seen ‘better days’ but equally, the extravagant feasting at Chevron, or the cart bringing wood from the park, that Virginia saw at Knole, to replenish the great fireplaces at in the house just as it had as the firewood had been brought for centuries, were required to make their presence felt, as if such things were tantalizingly close at hand.⁴⁷⁸

In this context, it is interesting to think of Baudrillard’s ideas, cited in the Introduction about the characteristics of the furniture of the bourgeois family, creating a ‘presence’ through which ideas about filial bonds and their stability are reified.⁴⁷⁹ In order to create the effect that the space of the country house was (or is) space where quotidian human activities took place (albeit through a system that belonged to the past) thus inspiring feelings of affection or nostalgia for a British national past, it becomes important to arrange an aristocratic space in the terms Baudrillard describes, to create the simulacra of human affect.

This involves not only the ability to showcase a few precious objects in cases, but an ability to simulate a domestic scene in rooms that are available to the public, which would in turn require the use of fungible and quotidian objects in order to fill out the scene. In a sense, then, the British museumification of the country-house depends on the simulacra of a normatively feminine space, an ‘indoors’ where the mistress of the house can be imagined to reign and labour in.

⁴⁷⁷ Wright, 253.

⁴⁷⁸ Woolf, 23th January 1927, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol III, 123.

⁴⁷⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, translated by James Benedict, (1968; (London: Verso, 1996) 16.

8. Becoming an Ornament, Admiring a Picture:

However, there exists a persistent literary tradition in which the prerogative of being the viewer of the pomp and show of a stately home, has often been the prerogative of women and outsiders, dating from a time before the country house novel emerged as a genre in its own right. The feminine ‘biographer’ of *Orlando*, Teresa Spalding in *The Edwardians*, along with Fledda Vetch in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896), and the narrator of *Rebecca* are a part of a long tradition of literary antecedents, among whom one would number Elizabeth Bennett looking at the rooms of Pemberley, and Jane Eyre looking at the rooms of Thornfield Hall, as well as the heroines of Anne Radcliffe’s Gothic novels. The protagonists in various traditions of the female *bildungsroman*, whether Emily St Aubert, or Elizabeth Bennett, or Jane Eyre, assume a position that combines appreciation or even affection for the stately home and its history, while being acutely aware of the vulnerability of their position inside the patriarchal hegemony such a space upholds. Frequently, the narrative takes up the perspective of a woman who is an outsider, carefully observing the sights the stately house has to offer. Moreover, the powerful man who is the master of all this pomp and show, can on occasion become an object enframed in the careful observations that the heroine makes about the spectacle unfolding before her eyes.

For instance, it is worthwhile to take a sustained look at *Pride and Prejudice* where Elizabeth ruminates upon looking at Pemberley, the stately home, of which Darcy, the male protagonist, is the owner, after having rejected a proposal of marriage from him:

‘And of this place,’ thought she, ‘I might have been mistress! With these rooms I might have been familiarly acquainted! Instead of visiting them as a stranger, I might have rejoiced in them as my own, and welcomed to them as visitors my aunt and uncle.’⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁸⁰ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Donald Gray and Mary A Favret, (1813; New York: Norton, 2016,) 159.

To transpose Addison's words, it is Mr Darcy who, in Elizabeth's eyes becomes 'a beautiful, romantic animal' adorned with the riches of Pemberley, flipping the traditional role of seeing women as being the products of the houses to which they are attached, surrounded by an assemblage of objects pertaining to their households.⁴⁸¹ Moreover, Elizabeth evinces a desire for proprietorship, to be the 'mistress' of Pemberley, rather than, to merely see the fine house regularly. As Susan Fraiman notes, 'She does not merely look, but looks with a desire to possess - from thinking to rob Darcy's county "of a few petrified spars," she now imagines herself mistress of his estate. Challenging the usual gender of the aggressive gaze, she positively leers.'⁴⁸²

As I will attempt to show, *Orlando* adopts this nineteenth century legacy of a feminine viewer who inhabits the boundary between being a spectator at a museum, and being an intimate of the family circle, who 'leers' out of possessiveness, awe, or love but retains her fitness as a judge of an interior that inhabits the boundary between being a public museum and a private home. Orlando is described for the first time, quite literally, in the light of his illustrious house, his body lit up by sunlight passing through a stained-glass impression of his family's coat of arms:

'Orlando stood now in the midst of the yellow body of an heraldic leopard. When he put his hand on the window-sill to push it open, it was instantly coloured red, blue, and yellow like a butterfly's wing. Thus, those who like symbols, and have a turn for the deciphering of them, might observe that though the shapely legs, the handsome body, the well set shoulders were all of them decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando's face, as he threw the window open was lit by the sun itself.'⁴⁸³

The text enacts this 'revenge' by enframing the handsome young patriarch, the possessor of all that he surveys, within the discourse of a feminine outsider. Agency is distributed between the

⁴⁸¹ Please see n426 above.

⁴⁸² Susan Fraiman, 'The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennett,' in *Pride and Prejudice*, 366

⁴⁸³ Woolf, *Orlando*, 11-12.

voice of the feminine biographer and the ‘mother who bore’ an heir who matches the house so perfectly.⁴⁸⁴

The heir or lord of the house thus becomes a figure who can be robbed of the signifiers of his absolute prerogatives to ownership of property and his ability to ‘have’ women, which are essential props to his subjective status, as the one who is able to possess whatever the world of the country-house and the estate signify, as an inheritor of British feudal and imperial tradition. Instead, he is rendered into an object like a medal, which may have powerful auratic qualities, but which is ultimately rendered significant in human eyes, through the discourse the subject chooses to relate it with.

Like her engagement with Gaskell’s methods of life-writing, working through a legacy of using narrative strategy to explore how women can occupy and share autonomous spaces, Woolf here uses the visual tropes used in a tradition of feminine writing on the English country house, in order to stake out an alternate paradigm of visualizing objects in the country house. The lord of the house has the sovereign privilege of collecting the treasures which are to be displayed to posterity, while all others are the viewers and consumers of the spectacle. Woolf’s narrative works with the trope of the feminine spectator who is always on the sidelines of the country-house, without the agency to make a difference to its contents, but who has the ability to create a vision of a house in which the lord of the house is one more object in the series of objects he has collected, and exerts the right of property over.

9. Curating and Reproducing:

9a. Curating/ Consuming/ Reproducing

⁴⁸⁴ Woolf, Orlando, 11-12 ~~ibid.~~

The mistress of an English country house in a capitalist milieu was supposed to enjoy a certain degree of influence about how the rooms of the house would be arranged, while her husband was alive. This could be seen as an extension of the duties of the mistress of a feudal manor during the time of Mistress Joan Martyn, bolstered up by changing discourses about what was considered suitable employment for nineteenth century wives, as well as by patterns of the systematic ‘enrichment’ of the country house by the ‘spoils’ brought home by imperialism. Yet her prerogative to curate and ‘care’ about the ‘things,’ is subject to her son’s choice of a mistress for the house, after her husband’s death. ‘I’m only the Shorne family’s steward,’ says the dowager Lady Shorne in Violet Trefusis’ *Broderie Anglaise* (1936), a text which ~~was~~ refers to autobiographical details about V Sackville West’s life.⁴⁸⁵ The mistress too is a fungible object, like the luxurious food, drink, and tobacco she has furnished forth for this household, and will be replaced when her use as a housekeeper is deemed to be over.

The power Woolf imagined as accessible to Joan Martyn upon her marriage is only the power of taking care of her household, as opposed to curating a household or a museum. The mistress of the English country home is expected to remain within the conceptual boundaries of being an agent of reproductive labour, except that she is a person who has some say in the consumption patterns that her family follows, because she provides this labour. When she purchases or displays commodities which have value as aesthetic or historical objects, she is performing reproductive labour, by making sure that the conditions under which her family lives are reproduced day after day, the patterns of their consumption suited to their status in the age and

⁴⁸⁵ Violet Trefusis, *Broderie Anglaise*, trans. Barbara Bray (1936; (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1985) 54.

time in which they live, i.e. an age in which it is profitable to make the stately homes of England open to the eyes of the general public, to gaze at in awe.

As Beauvoir has famously pointed out, the temporal scheme on which household chores run, is a scheme of perpetuating the present, by eliminating ‘any rubbish created by living growth’ in the process of cleaning the home:

‘Few tasks are more similar to the torment of Sisyphus than those of the housewife; day after day, one must wash dishes, dust furniture, mend clothes that will be dirty, dusty, and torn again. The housewife wears herself out running on the spot; she does nothing; she only perpetuates the present; she never gains the sense that she is conquering a positive Good, but struggles indefinitely against Evil... Eat, sleep, clean ... the years no longer reach toward the sky, they spread out identical and gray as a horizontal tablecloth; every day looks like the previous one; the present is eternal, useless, and hopeless.’⁴⁸⁶

Thus it is interesting to note that the nature of Orlando’s affective relationship to the objects in the house, and their history, based as it is on touching furniture and objects (including the skeletons of ancestors and the residue of a lock of hair, a flake of pastry, and a flake of tobacco in the Prayer Book of Mary Queen of Scots) and smelling the potpourri in the rooms, as much as it is on seeing things, remains unchanged over the centuries. Yet, as a woman her deliberate additions to the house are limited to sheets for a double bed, bought at a department store, with the text dwelling over the complex and exciting process of purchasing mass produced goods at a department store, in contrast to the details from the catalogues of Restoration Orlando’s account books.⁴⁸⁷ As a woman, Orlando does not undertake to impose her own tastes upon the house, but merely to provision it with what it has traditionally been equipped with, i.e. sheets for a royal bed, in a bedroom which must now forever remain fixed in the image of what it was in the past,

⁴⁸⁶ De Beauvoir, 541, 539-540

⁴⁸⁷ Woolf, *Orlando*, 219-223; For feminist literature upon the role of the department store in late nineteenth and early twentieth century capitals of the west, the most widely cited text is perhaps Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, (New York and London: Methuen, 1985). Please see also other, related texts by Bowlby as well as scholarly work by Anne Friedburg, Elizabeth Wilson, and Rosalind Williams, and Tony Bennett (for the gendered roles played by the public museum and the department store) among others.

despite the fact that no king will sleep there again, that Orlando and Shelmeldrine have devised a new form of marriage in which a double bed is no longer of prime importance, and that sheets of ‘the best Irish linen,’ no longer come from a British colony in 1928.⁴⁸⁸ Her purchases are a part of the reproductive labour required to keep the house in its present state of being a museum.

9b. Reproducing a House/ Reproducing a Museum:

The role of English rural domestic goddess is not performed by the mistress in solitude, but with the aid of a retinue of servants, like the series of housekeepers Orlando sees in her lifetime, Twitchett, Grimsditch, Bartholomew, and Louise. If women are firmly relegated to the role of reproductive labour, the bulk of this gendered labour is performed by working-class women.

Women of the household, and servants alike, are expected to perform conspicuous consumption on behalf of their master, but as Veblen tells us, among the servants of a noble household, it is male servants who are especially expected to perform a vicarious consumption of finery and leisure.⁴⁸⁹ Female domestics are paid less and unlike the mistress or male servants, are expected to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Thus, while the mistress must see to things, and be fit to be seen herself, she is placed above but rendered dependent upon the work of other women, who must see to things and be invisible themselves.

In order to contemplate the significance of the labour of ‘housemaids dusting’⁴⁹⁰ in the stately home, it would be interesting to begin by considering an anecdote narrated by Stephen Bann in *The Clothing of Clio* (1984):

⁴⁸⁸ Woolf, *Orlando*, 221.

⁴⁸⁹ Veblen, 57.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 189.

“The story is told by the art historian Lord Clark that, in the days when he used to stay at Berenson’s Florentine villa, I Tatti, he would try the experiment of moving a small Renaissance bronze a few inches from its original position each evening on retiring to bed. Each morning, as he came down to breakfast, he was able to note that it had been restored with great precision to its former location. *This story illustrates, of course, more than a mere mania for domestic order.* To Berenson, no doubt - if not to Lord Clark - the bronze was not simply an object which could be moved here and there without detriment to its aesthetic significance. It was *a term in a system*, whose exact relationship to other terms has to be maintained as, by imperceptible stages, Berenson’s home became the Berenson museum.”⁴⁹¹ (my emphasis.)

Although Bann skips past this fact, the point remains that the discipline which turns the small object into a ‘term in a system’ works on principles very close to the principles on which a ‘mania for domestic order’ would function in a household. After all, systems of provisioning households are also driven by the need to arrange each detail as ‘a term in a system,’ as seen in the manner in which the three novels provide details of household arrangements in a stately home.

The tasks of cleaning and otherwise attending to the quotidian objects in a home, call for an attention to details that resemble the pains that a historian of the domestic interior would take over the same objects. If the domestic labour involves ‘holding away death but also refusing life,’ in de Beauvoir’s terms, it is significantly similar to the work of maintaining a museum. Both involve making sure that the fragments of the past are maintained as they *were*, so that what *are* is in the pristine state in which they were the day before, or whenever they were last cleaned and tended to. However, whether this task is carried out by one employed by the Lord and Lady, or by the National Trust, the agent is still expected to remain invisible, since the final spectacle is supposed to be a testimony to the taste or historical acumen of those ‘above’ her. Without her labour however, the work of reproducing the museum, the home, and the ‘English way of life,’

⁴⁹¹ Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clío*, (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: CUP, 1984), 77.

would never be possible, whether in pre-capitalist days when the estate was able to sustain itself, or in the inter-war museum.

10. 'By The Use of My Needle All Waste of Time and Use Shall Be Repaired'

In this context, it is interesting to consider how Woolf looks at how domestic labour is performed in *Knole*. Woolf's treatment of the specific servant characters she names in her narrative is sketchy and stereotypical. 'Grace Robinson' the black woman, unable to speak English or be known by a name other than the name imposed on her, in order 'to make a Christian woman of her,' when working in Orlando's kitchen, does nothing more than grin her assent to the other servants exclamations that Orlando is a 'handsome, pleasant, darling gentleman'. Like Mrs Filmer, the servants at *Knole*, do not have a chance to express subjectivity beyond performing their given roles as feudal retainers.

However, I will argue that Woolf does depart from the paradigm sketched by these two writers about the nature of domestic labour. She provides us with a different reading about the entanglements between domestic labour, its agents, and non-human objects in these practices of memorialization, if we focus on the allegorical figures and the unnamed feminine presences that haunt the text in *Orlando*. The most noticeable allegorical figures in *Orlando* are of course, Chastity, Modesty, and Purity, who attend Orlando's sex change, but there are a number of other 'beings' at the margins of the text, engaged in domestic tasks that are need repeating over and over in a household, even as Orlando moves linearly through the centuries, eternally youthful.

In *Orlando*, the passage of time is described in terms reminiscent of *To the Lighthouse*, with an old woman, like Mrs McNab, busy clearing away its ravages:

‘... how things remain much the same as they are for two or three hundred years or so, except for a little dust and a few cobwebs which one old woman can sweep up in half an hour; a conclusion which, one cannot help feeling might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that ‘Time Passed.’⁴⁹²

Hin *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf had attempted to see domestic labour as the work that shores up the material conditions of existence, so that works of culture like ‘all of Shakespeare,’ Mr Ramsay’s philosophy, and Lily’s painting might be at least be attempted, even if there is no guarantee that they will survive.⁴⁹³ In *Orlando*, published the very next year, Woolf undertakes to prove that the very praxis of attempting to memorialize is itself closely comparable to reproductive labour, the quotidian work of sweeping up after a person, is like the biographer’s labour of tidying up the narrative, **in order** to capture how ‘Time Passed.’ Woolf’s language in passage quoted above is significantly different from the famous passage about the three allegorical female figures attending Orlando’s sex change, as seen below.

Chastity, Modesty, and Purity, cite a long list of things which they are associated with. Purity, for instance, cites that she covers with her robes ‘the speckled hen’s eggs,’ signifying the ‘pure’-ness associated with the English countryside.⁴⁹⁴ Chastity and Modesty proclaim that one dwells in the ‘highest Alps,’ and the other runs from the sight of ‘the fertile field and the fruitful vineyard,’ expecting the reader to make cultural associations **ofbetween** coldness and remoteness **withand** celibacy, on one hand, and reproduction with immodesty on the other.⁴⁹⁵ Woolf’s language over here, functions solely as an interaction between various signifiers- the alps, fields, vineyards and hen’s eggs being emptied of their materiality, and used solely as the signifiers of culturally determined values, specific to the Anglophone world. The words are used for their

⁴⁹² Woolf, *Orlando*, 72.

⁴⁹³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 59.

⁴⁹⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 100-101

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid

auratic qualities signifying the abstract concepts of chastity, modesty and purity, rather than functioning as signifiers of material phenomena.

Given that Woolf does use a register in which objects are cited as signifiers of abstractions, it is even more striking when she employs a device which could be seen as the exact opposite- to describe what is conventionally thought of as an abstraction, like 'time,' using a register in which words function as 'literal' signifiers of material events.

When Woolf writes about the old woman who sweeps up the remains of time, her language does not allow for a straightforward reading of the old woman and her labour as allegorical. She may well be sweeping 'real' dust and cobwebs that accumulate in any setting where 'Time Passed'. Perhaps we can see in this a direct strategy adopted by Woolf to demonstrate ambiguities in the manner in which the history produced by the country-house through a system of objects, in which each of the objects function as containers for the historical 'value' ascribed to them.

The system is, however, underpinned by the materiality of every component of the household/museum, including both the objects, and the labour that goes into their upkeep. This materiality shapes both Orlando's affective relationship to the components of the house, based on touching, smelling, and littering the house (the pastry and tobacco left in Mary Stuart's prayer book) as well as the labour of the old woman who sweeps up this litter and makes sure that the things displayed behind 'Do Not Touch' notices are maintained as 'term[s] in a system.'

Moreover, if Joan Martyn could boast that 'by the work of my needle all waste of time and use will be repaired,' *Orlando* contains characters engaged in stitching in forms so basic that their work barely qualifies as needlework, a fit occupation for a lady. Orlando's final manuscript of the 'Oak Tree,' a poem rooted in the house and countryside in which Orlando was born, and

composed and revised over and over the centuries, is said to resemble basic needlework, ‘a piece of darning most conscientiously carried out.’⁴⁹⁶ At the same time, the allegorical figure of Memory is described as a professional needlewoman, a seamstress.⁴⁹⁶ The work of memory, according to Woolf, is not to be described in terms which would suit an English gentleman, it is not ‘a single downright bluff piece of work of which no man need be ashamed.’⁴⁹⁷ Instead, Memory, though ‘capricious,’ as if she were an artist like Orlando, is said to work with those parts of household linen which resist aestheticization and are normally hidden out of sight as much as possible:

‘... a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends within us - a piece of policeman’s trousers lying cheek by jowl with Queen Alexandra’s wedding veil - but has contrived that the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is a seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither... Thus the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at the table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting, like the *underlinen of a family of fourteen on a line in a gale of wind.*’⁴⁹⁸ (my emphasis)

History, curation, and historiography are no longer located in an abstract realm of signification to which only masculine or masculinist thought can ascend. Instead, Woolf sees materiality in terms similar to Karen Barad, as a paradigm which cannot be surpassed or overcome, but which subsumes all forms of agential activity, including the curation of a historical spectacle no less than the routine performance of reproductive labour which makes both homes and museums inhabitable.

10. ‘Memory is a Seamstress’

Sweeping, darning, stitching together odds and ends of cloth taken from a rag bag, and hanging out undergarments on a line, are all work which involve putting things together as terms in a

⁴⁹⁶ Woolf, *Orlando*, 173, 58.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁹⁸ Woolf, *Orlando*, 57.

system, to use Bann's words. By using these examples to talk about human interventions against the passing of time,² Woolf could be seen as aligning domestic work to the work of memorializing, which is undertaken by Orlando's biographer, whose gender,² while remaining hidden in the narrative, is also revealed as a woman 'Virginia Woolf,' on the covers of the textual artifact that the Hogarth Press has produced and charged the reader's pocket a price for. Memorializing, in turn, is linked to the work of museum making, thus establishing a link between textual memorialization and performing domestic labour for a household/ museum-making.

Woolf's stress on the performance of tasks, i.e. the running in and out of a needle, and the woman writer's pulling the inkstand towards her, like her emphasis on how Mrs Brown has shaped and been shaped by her clothing and accoutrements, refuses to simplify her imagery into mere metaphors. This rag-bag is not merely a metaphor for scattered memories of the past, but is also produced in the narrative as a literal rag-bag which a woman can put together, or wash and hang out to dry.

Thus, Woolf could be seen as respecting the sheer materiality of objects that survive the passage of time, as well as the domestic labour that enables them to survive, along with linking this labour to the work of commemorating and memorializing. Memory as a seamstress (a profession which was seen as the epitome of female exploitation for much of the nineteenth century in Britain, especially because it was often 'home-work,' i.e. paid work which was performed in the private sphere, precluding workers² from organizing) is an artist who puts together various things, weaving her needle in and out, in order to create a version of the past, like Woolf's work as a writer, and like the work of curating a material simulacrum of the past in the domestic interior. Thus, Woolf appears to gesture towards an understanding of domestic labour, as

performed by working class women, as work that does not merely involve unthinking toil in reproducing the same present, day after day, but as work which is an intrinsic part of the creative project of putting together various material traces, in order to come up with shifting, polyvalent images of the past.

Woolf thus breaks with a modernist tradition of country house writing and country-house curating that denigrates both non-human objects and women's labouring bodies by repudiating the materiality of objects. This repudiation involves denigrating women and objects who fail to measure up to standards of associating themselves with 'authentic' historical and aesthetic values, or simply looking 'through' the physical presence of various objects in order to value them simply for their auratic qualities of being able to evoke the qualities of country-living, luxurious living, and historical 'value'.⁴⁹⁹ Instead, Woolf deliberately feminizes the work of memorializing through literature, poetry, and museum-curating. By linking this work with washing, darning, and sweeping, she reminds us that the shoring up of the past is a material process. The treasures of the past, the remnants of an age of aristocratic consumption, are not simply invested with history, but are essentially entangled with the gendered labour that ensures that the fragments of the past continue to keep a household going despite the fact that 'Time Passes.'

This chapter, thus further illustrates Woolf's dissent from a tradition of seeing women as passive consumers of objects and discourses produced under capitalism. If the first and second chapters had outlined Woolf's interventions as a feminist modernist within the genre of life-writing, this chapter illustrates how Woolf effects a subversion of country-house literature and tourism, by refusing to subscribe to the parameters ~~to either~~ of either of these two modes of engaging with

⁴⁹⁹ Bill Brown, *Other Things*, 9.

the 'historical' domestic spaces of inter-war Britain. The final two chapters of this thesis will examine how Woolf engages with other modernist texts and contexts, in order to understand how women shape and are shaped by the domestic interiors that (unlike the country house) appear to offer them a concrete chance at achieving a significant measure of autonomy.

Chapter 5: Living Among ‘Movables’: Rented Accommodation in the Novels of Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson

While the previous chapter dealt with the themes of trying to understand how ‘possessions’ and objects of various categories are the sites of ever-shifting balances of power in the context of the rural English country house, this chapter will talk about personal spaces and personal ‘belongings’ in urban rented spaces, ‘bachelor’s digs,’ of various kinds located in London in the early twentieth century. It will especially focus on rooms rented by single women, away from their natal or marital families.

1. Woolf and Richardson

The chapter will weave a web of inter-textuality between Woolf’s novels about rented ‘lodgings’ for subjects located outside the heteropatriarchal family, and Dorothy Richardson’s (1873- 1957) *Pilgrimage* series (published from 1915- 1967). As this particular section will show, it is important to study how their imaginings of feminist autonomous spaces overlap, given that their feminist politics borrow from each other in crucial ways.

Richardson and Woolf began their careers as published novelists in the same year, 1915, and despite the ambivalence that they appear to have had towards each other, as revealed in their personal papers, with both women being wary of reviewing each other, distrusting their own judgment of the other, they also acknowledged each other, as has been studied by Leonora Penna Smith, Averill Buchanan, and Deborah Parsons.⁵⁰⁰

⁵⁰⁰ Woolf’s diaries reveal her feelings towards Richardson’s, claiming firstly on 28th November 1919, that she refused to review Richardson, recognizing her own competitiveness towards women writers, and at the same time bearing in mind Katherine Mansfield’s hostile review of *Night and Day* (1919): ‘Today, bearing K.M. in mind, I refused to do Dorothy Richardson for the Supt. [Times Literary Supplement] The truth is that when I looked at it, I

Most interestingly, Woolf undertakes a conscious or unconscious debt; towards Richardson when, in *A Room of One's Own*, she writes about Professor Von X's monumental work on '*The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*.' (Woolf's italics) The name given to the angry professor's work in the context of Woolf's critique of patriarchal literature, in the form of a lecture given at a women's college, are strikingly similar to the reflections of Miriam Henderson, Richardson's protagonist, upon reading an unnamed book :

'Her miserable hand reopened the last page of the Index. There were five or six more entries under 'Woman.'

felt myself looking for faults; hoping for them... If she's good then I'm not.' On January 26th 1920, Woolf writes that she wishes to be free of 'the damned egotistical self' that ruins the Joyce and Richardson, in her own writing. (Woolf, *Diary*, Vols I and II.) Richardson in turn, wrote in a letter to Bryher in March 1937 that she refused to review Woolf's *The Years* for the *London Mercury*: 'I told them that V.W., enormously as I admire her work, does not deeply move me & that I felt it would be unfair for me to write about her...' (Cited in Renée Stanton, 'Genette, Paratexts, and Dorothy Richardson,' in *Pilgrimages: The Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, No 5 (2012), 82-109, accessed from jstor.org <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26647630>) Richardson, in her preface to the first collected volume of *Pilgrimage* (1938,) somewhat obliquely (and ambivalently) refers to Virginia Woolf as a peer, 'a woman mounted upon a magnificent caparisoned charger,' who came to practice the literary technique Richardson had embarked upon by beginning the *Pilgrimage* series (Dorothy Richardson, Preface to Vol 1 of *Pilgrimage* (London: J.M. Dent and The Cresset Press, 1938) 10, accessed from archive.org <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.45667/page/n9/mode/2up>) Woolf's reviews of Richardson are significant, acknowledging the radical narrative innovations the *Pilgrimage* novels implement using the protagonist's consciousness as a narrative medium--- foreshadowing Woolf's ideas articulated in her essays about novel writing after the First World War, and about 'Women and Fiction.' Woolf's description of Miriam Henderson, Richardson's protagonist, as a 'lump of matter, half transparent and half opaque,' prefigures her use of metaphors to describe 'life itself' in *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*.~~of I~~ In her 1923 review, Woolf credits Richardson with having '... developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender[,] a significant motif of importance in Woolf's historicization of the development a feminine literary tradition. (Woolf, 'The Tunnel' and 'Romance and the Heart,' in *Contemporary Writers* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1969) 120-126, first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* 13th February, 1919 and *Nation and Anathaeum* on 19th May, 1923 respectively, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/contemporarywrit0000unse/mode/2up>.) For scholarship see especially, Averill Buchanan, 'Dorothy Miller Richardson: A Bibliography from 1900-1999,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol 24 (no 1) 2000, 135-160, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3831704>; Deborah Parsons, *Theorists of the Modern Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); Leonora Penna Smith, 'Revising the Feminine Self in the Fiction of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf,' Doctoral thesis submitted at Rice University, Houston, Texas, 1992. <https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/16554>

If one could only burn all the volumes; stop the publication of them. But it was all books, all the literature in the world... How could Newnham and Girton women endure it? How could they go on living and laughing and talking?

And the modern men were the worst... There was no getting away from the scientific facts ... inferior; mentally, morally, intellectually and physically ...⁵⁰¹

Richardson's uncited presence in a book in which Woolf explores the importance of autonomous spaces for women, ~~thus~~ reminds us that Woolf would have been keenly aware, whether she acknowledged it or not, of the production of Richardson's monumental thirteen volume work, centred upon the consciousness of a woman who searches for autonomous spaces, trying out a variety of paid jobs in various locales, from the age of seventeen onwards.⁵⁰² The first twelve of these novels were published in Woolf's lifetime.

Indeed, in a sense, it is possible to read *Pilgrimage* as an ur-text present in *A Room of One's Own*, informing Woolf's hypothesis about the new form of novel writing that could be brought to birth if women had the basic conditions which would allow them a fair chance to write fiction, as exemplified in the hypothetical text Woolf embeds into her own- 'Life's Adventure' by 'Mary Carmichael.' Woolf's review of Richardson's *The Tunnel*, for instance, quotes Miriam Henderson formulating ideas about writing which resonate with Woolf's articulation of the need to break away from a masculinist stylistic tradition of writing literature:

...but if books were written like that, sitting down and doing it cleverly and knowing just what you were doing and just how somebody else had done it, there was something

⁵⁰¹Dorothy Richardson, *The Tunnel*, in *Pilgrimage*, Vol 2, (London: J.M Dent and The Cresset Press, 1938) first published in 1919, 219, accessed from archive.org <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.45670/page/n9/mode/2up>.

⁵⁰² The shape of the argument of this chapter does not allow space for an exhaustive analysis of Woolf and Richardson's literary relationship to each other, although Richardson is certainly a crucial, if unacknowledged, influence upon Woolf. For such analyses please refer to, for example, Lenora Penna Smith, 'Revising the Feminine Self in the Fiction of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf,' Doctoral thesis submitted at Rice University, Houston, Texas, 1992 <https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/16554>; Averill Buchanan, 'Dorothy Miller Richardson: A Bibliography from 1900-1999,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol 24 (no 1) (2000), 135-160, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3831704>; Deborah Parsons, *Theorists of the Modern Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); Angela Frattarola, 'Developing an Ear for the Modernist Novel: Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, and James Joyce,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol 33 (No 1), (2009), 132-153. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jml.2009.33.1.132>.

wrong, some mannish cleverness that was only half right. To write books knowing all about style would be to become like a man.⁵⁰³

This chapter and the next will argue that for both writers, these autonomous spaces, the rooms of one's own, are crucially informed by contemporary economies of non-human objects in the marketplace for property, from the ornaments filched by Crosby in *The Years* (1937), to hyper-objects (to use Timothy Morton's term) like light, running water, air, and the rented room or flat itself.⁵⁰⁴ I would argue that these economies, along with patterns of domestic labour (whether rendered visible, or invisibilized) inform the categories of freedom and unfreedom, cleanliness and pollution, belonging and alienation in a context where various human beings, outside the biological family, constantly share the same surfaces. It will study how ~~the~~ gendered narratives produce a vision of the material world in a process of constant becoming, creating dynamic domestic spaces.

2. Rented Homes in an Industrialized Society:

To begin with, it is important to understand layered context in which a subject came to 'find lodgings' in an urban space in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Sharon Marcus writes, in the English context, the private house, 'the Englishman's castle' was valorized as the ideal form of a dwelling, in which the self-respecting and 'free' citizen could dwell with his family.⁵⁰⁵ As England became an industrialized nation over the course of the nineteenth century, however, renting homes, especially urban homes became important feature of the economy.

⁵⁰³ Richardson, *The Tunnel*, 131.

⁵⁰⁴ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

⁵⁰⁵ Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 68-69.

This was true not only for the industrial proletariat, but also for the middle classes. As Davidoff and Hall have pointed out, rented homes, where turnover was frequent, were ~~also~~ a standard feature of middle class life in England from the early nineteenth century onwards, especially in urban or suburban contexts.⁵⁰⁶ Since addresses were important markers of social status in a society exceptionally mindful of class distinctions, people were willing to live as tenants in neighbourhoods they felt corresponded to their social status, ~~and were willing~~ to make several moves in their lifetimes, according to the terms on which they could secure leases for property. Thus, despite a strong rhetoric about the home as a centre of stability in the Englishman's life, most people in Britain lived in a context in which their homes were spaces they occupied according to the fluctuations of the market for real estate and housing, across social strata.

This changed markedly in the inter-war years. As Pam Morris writes, the 1930s were the years in which the British bourgeoisie, on the one hand, began to buy houses in greater numbers than ever before, through building societies, where earlier generations earning equivalent incomes would have looked to purchase leases. On the other hand, they also participated as shareholders in the processes of speculative wealth creation, that the building boom brought.⁵⁰⁷ A home now became 'a primary financial asset dividing those who could buy property from those who had to rent.'⁵⁰⁸ A single woman who hoped to rent a small lodging, a few rooms or a flat, for the whole of her working life, was thus an outsider to this new culture of home-owning.

⁵⁰⁶ Leonore Davidoff and Caroline Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (Routledge: London and New York, 2019) ~~1987~~, 189-90.

⁵⁰⁷ Pam Morris, *Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, and Worldly Realism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) 170.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

3. Housing: Pre- 1914 Contexts:

3a. Working Class Homes

From the early days of industrialization in Britain, working class families, upon arriving in the cities to join the industrial proletariat, took up residence as tenants in a variety of houses. England's cities became well known for their extensive poor neighbourhoods, in which families lived with the most minimum faculties, and for 'rookeries,' in which large families crammed into single rooms in derelict buildings. Most of Britain's urban working class remained life-long tenants, from the nineteenth century onwards, being rack--rented by an intricate system of subletting, and ever threatened with eviction, since the loss of a single week's wages or the occurrence of a mishap in the family could render them unable to pay their rent. Their claims to the place they called home was thus no less vulnerable than that of the rural proletariat in the nineteenth century, farming the land with the threat of losing land and livelihood hanging over their heads, if their farm and farmland failed to yield rents and profits that satisfied the rural landlord. Indeed, the very valorization of a family home built on a plot of land which the householder owns as his private property, reveals a deep seated cultural anxiety felt by a rapidly industrializing nation, in which an enormous number of urban poor were crammed into tiny rooms in houses which, in the capital, were often the crumbling mansions of the landed aristocracy.

It is interesting, especially in the context of the next chapter, to take note of Octavia Hill's famous philanthropic experiments in housing the urban poor from 1865. A part of Hill's project of making the workworld of philanthropic housing in urban areas a fieldwork which 'women of good family' were particularly well-fitted for, was making the point that urban landladies could perform their duties as benevolently as rural landlords for whom 'it is a delight to keep thus fair

the part of the earth over which it has been given him to rule.⁵⁰⁹ In contrast to the landlady who rented out her rooms to, and acted as a ‘servant’ to her middle-class lodgers in boarding houses, Hill’s landlady who rented her rooms to working-class subjects, could take up a patrician role, directing the household affairs of her tenants. As a part of her project of working with the ‘worst’ of the London poor, for example, Hill would prescribe cleaning tasks in the common areas of her ~~for~~ the tenements ~~to~~for the daughters of her tenants.⁵¹⁰ Indeed, to judge from Hill’s personal writings, cleanliness emerges as the *primary* qualification that the tenant has to abide by. Hill’s formulation places the onus of ‘care’ for this improved state of domestic environs upon the working class homemaker. Adopting a ‘higher’ standard of cleanliness, performed through hard and regular unpaid labour, becomes what makes the household ‘deserving’ of anything which might make their lives and home spaces more comfortable.⁵¹¹

3b. Bachelor’s Quarters:

A striking feature that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century was the cultural significance of the figure of the reclusive bachelor living in lodgings in London. He was portrayed as a man of simple but choice habits, living a life in which he valued his privacy, while living in the midst of the hustle and bustle of London, (and hence geographically located close to the central nodes of power and influence in the British Empire), ~~and~~ leading an eccentric but exciting existence. When Woolf portrays Jacob Flanders and his friend Bonamy in *Jacob’s Room* (1922), she is aware of the iconic popularity enjoyed by the figures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. Like Holmes, Jacob is able to enjoy the comforts and pleasures of a good home, without the cares that marrying and setting up a home with a wife would have entailed. Crosby, Martin Pargiter’s

⁵⁰⁹ Octavia Hill, ‘Landlords and Tennants in London,’ (1869) in *Octavia Hill and the Social Housing Debate*, (London: The IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1998), Kindle edition published 2012, Loc 1426.

⁵¹⁰ Hill, ‘Four Years Management of a London Court,’ (1866) in *Octavia Hill*, Loc 1207.

⁵¹¹ Hill, ‘Cottage Property in London,’ (1877) in *Octavia Hill*, Loc 1041

childhood servant, in *The Years*, periodically visits Martin's bachelor rooms in the West End, even after retiring from years of active service in his old family home, in order to take his clothes back to her own lodgings for mending. She negotiates with his laundry on his behalf, (a laundry serviced by unseen female labour,) and makes friends with his landlady.⁵¹²

This good life is made possible through the labour of the landlady and the staff she might employ. As Kay points out, landladies were seen as respectable because the career replicated the role of the housewife, but on the other hand, in a culture which valorized the privacy of the home, the work implied a fall from middle class norms of privatizing domestic labour for the individual family.⁵¹³ Moreover, Kay also points out that 62 percent of lodging houses employed domestic servants, the employees usually being young girls from workhouses or orphanages. Domestic labour in lodging houses was grimly referred to as 'slavery' in popular parlance.⁵¹⁴

3c. Lodgings for Single Women

As seen in nineteenth century novels like Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, single working class women in Britain's cities frequently occupied the very bottom of the market for rented housing.⁵¹⁵ Such women were a part of the target population of housing reform by philanthropists like Octavia Hill, and ~~were, would~~ no doubt, be expected to gratefully perform free duties to the community of the tenement if they were 'good' women.

Victorian women's writing, ~~on the other hand,~~ is characterized by the figure of the governess—the single woman who seeks her fortunes in the house of her employers, where she takes up

⁵¹² Woolf, *The Years*, 220-221.

⁵¹³ Alison Kay, *The Foundations of Female Entrepreneurship: Enterprise, Home and Household in London c. 1800-1870* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009) kindle edition, p.110; Lenore Davidoff, 'The separation of home and work? Landladies and lodgers in nineteenth and twentieth century England,' in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. S. Burman (London: Routledge, 1979) 70, 82, 90.

⁵¹⁴ Davidoff in Kay, 114.

⁵¹⁵ See Gaskell's depiction of the house of Alice Wilson, a washerwoman in Manchester. Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, 12.

residence. The fact that the governess lived within her employers household was often crucial to the manner in which her life was entangled with the lives of those who employed her, in many Victorian novels. However, by the end of the nineteenth century we also witness the presence of single women engaged in white collar professions looking for lodgings in urban areas, on terms similar to those of bachelor's lodgings - the New Woman had anteceded the High Victorian feminist heroine.

In many important ways this was a liberating paradigm to move into. In the mid-nineteenth century, 'alternate' domestic interiors in which women had to be accommodated were signifiers of deviancy and shameful lapses from familial or conjugal roles- women inhabited attics or rooms with yellow wallpaper, if they were madwomen. The work of Woolf and Richardson, on the other hand, delineates a cultural milieu in which women were claiming the ir right, as 'lodgers,' or 'tenants,' while they participated in the workforce and led independent lives away from natal or marital families. Woolf's 'Jessamy Brides,' living in an attic, are indeed 'sapphic' deviants from the economic and sexual order of the world they live in, but instead of being written off as 'madwomen,' they are the privileged viewers of landscapes that lie beyond imperial geographies, accessible only from the vantage point of their room which is so high up, that they can see:

'One can see anything (for this is all fantasy) the Tower Bridge, clouds, aeroplanes. Also old men listening in the room over the way... The ladies are to have Constantinople in view. Dreams of golden domes...'⁵¹⁶

Indeed the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury, with which both Woolf and Richardson were intimately familiar, witnessed the establishment of lodgings for upper middle -class working

⁵¹⁶ Woolf, Diary entry for Monday, March 14th 1927, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol III, 1925- 1930 (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 131, archive.org, https://archive.org/details/diaryofvirginiaw0003wool_h1x5/mode/1up.

women in the late nineteenth century, their architectural layout organized to facilitate the provision of domestic services on co-operative principles of housekeeping. Agnes Garrett and her sister, the famous ~~Drdoeter~~ Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, were directors of the Ladies Dwellings Company (LDC) which established a number of successful lodging houses in central London, around Bloomsbury, in the 1880s and 90s, as well as in London's affluent suburbs. These flats were individual units which maintained their privacy, and could be of two to four rooms, ~~theyand~~ had either sculleries or kitchens, along with water closets, larders, cupboards, coal bunkers, and dust chutes. However, residents combined to meet the costs of cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and could take meals in the communal dining room. New technology, such as R. W. Hitchen's system of silicate cotton and plaster slabs was employed for sound-deadening and fireproofing. Rents were from ten to twenty-five shillings per week, with ten shillings for dining-room and caretaker charges, given that twenty two shillings a week was considered the mean wage for blue collar workers holding steady jobs, at the turn of the century.

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Few women could afford to live in flats like these. However, London at the turn of the century, was in fact witnessing a steady rise in the number of single women seeking white collar work, as jobs requiring secretarial or salesmanship skills, or skills such as typing and book-keeping, became available to women. Although cultural critics hailed this as the dawn of an age of the 'New Woman' who was independent and liberated, women were being employed at wages well below the rates at which men would be employed, for equivalent work. As Margaret Drabble writes about the 1890s, 'It was the time when office life as we know it began to be organized;

⁵¹⁷ Lynne Walker, 'Home and Away: The Feminist Remapping of Public and Private Space in Victorian London,' in *New Frontiers of Space, Bodies, and Gender*, ed. Rosa Ainley (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 70, Maud Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week*.

and it was a system that required a vast amount of cheap female labour... It found her employment, conceded her right to work, and then exploited her.⁵¹⁸

According to Anna Snaith, single women who required cheaper lodgings found a place in Bloomsbury, around the time that Richardson, like her protagonist Miriam Henderson, worked as a secretary in a dentist's surgery. This was also the time when Virginia Stephen moved to Bloomsbury with her siblings:

“Bloomsbury was an area in which single, independent women could find accommodation in flats, rooms or bedsits. With the rise in ‘surplus’ women came a shortage of suitable accommodation... Subsidized boarding houses sprang up in Bloomsbury, often run by philanthropic organizations, where women could live communally with a private bedsitting room but shared dining and living areas. While Virginia and Vanessa lived with two male siblings at 46 Gordon Square, we know, for example, that in 1903 a Miss Lidgett lived alone at No. 40 in the Square. The *Holborn and Finsbury Guardian*, a local weekly newspaper covering the Bloomsbury area, carried advertisements in 1905 [the year the Stephen siblings shifted to Bloomsbury] for rooms and flats available for rent by single working women.”⁵¹⁹ (my parenthesis)

The inter-war years saw a steady increase in a female workforce striving to survive, on extremely low wages for the skilled white collar services they produced. Given the patterns of rent and purchase that developed in these years, it made sense that these women would continue to look for older parts of the city which had not yet been ‘improved,’ or gentrified, and in which there were correspondingly, lodgings available at rates they could still afford. These lodgings would afford a degree of freedom which hostels like the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), with minimum standards of privacy and little regard for adult women’s desire for autonomy over their lives, did not afford.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁸ Margaret Drabble, *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980) 53, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/arnoldbennettbio00drab/mode/1up>.

⁵¹⁹ Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2000) 26.

⁵²⁰ Dolores Hayden, 168.

The writers studied in this chapter ~~were~~are acutely aware of the economic conditions that were the lot of the majority of white collar women workers. Richardson's protagonist, Miriam Henderson is shown soldiering on, and taking what life offers her, throughout her long years in London, in spite of the fact that her wages do not allow her to eat balanced meals. Woolf, too, appears to have been well aware of the fact that her feminist polemics were addressed to a feminine reading public who, despite having secured a level of formal education unavailable to previous generations of women, would be marshaled into badly paying jobs, and correspondingly pushed to living at a subsistence level. Writing in her diary about her experience of delivering, at Girton, the lecture which would become *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf pointed out that these women were '[i]ntelligent eager, poor; and destined to become schoolmistresses in shoals.'⁵²¹ In *Three Guineas* (1938) Woolf cites literature researching the diet of typists living on 'a bun and an apple' for their midday meals.⁵²² In the meanwhile capitalism created the phantasm of the independent single woman inhabiting an exciting new domestic space and enjoying her affluent entry into the workforce. In 1930, for example, the expensive ~~f~~Furniture ~~s~~Store Heals' exhibited a fully electrified 'Bachelor Girls' Flat.'⁵²³

Woolf and Richardson thus, came to write about urban life in lodgings, in the context of these economic facts, and layered discourses about prerogatives to space, ~~gender,~~—and labour. If lodgings offered independence to women, this independence was being offered on terms based on a system that rendered the worker separable from the place she wished to call home, and asked her to pay for that place from the wages earned in a capitalist market place. As Miriam Henderson explains:

⁵²¹ Woolf, 27th October 1928, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol III, 200.

⁵²² Woolf, *Three Guineas*, n20, 271-272.

⁵²³ Pam Morris, 170.

But the theory of Rent has been worked out... by people sincerely trying to discover where it is that temporarily useful parts of the machinery of civilization have got out of gear and become harmful. No one ought to have to pay for the right to sit down on the earth. No one ought to be so helplessly expropriated that another can buy him and use him up as he would never dream of using up more costly material—horses for instance.⁵²⁴

Characters in Woolf's novels are often found living in rented accommodations in London, a space distinct from the fully fledged 'home' inhabited by a bourgeoisie family- Mary Datchett, and William Rodney in *Night and Day* (1919), Jacob, Bonamy, Florinda, and Fanny Elmer in *Jacob's Room* (1922), Septimus and Rezia in *Mrs Dalloway*(1925), Nell in *Orlando*(1928,) Louis in *The Waves*(1931), and Mira, Mrs Levy, Mrs Potter, Mrs Sims, Mrs Toms, Delia, Sara and Maggie Pargiter, and Eleanor in *The Years*(1937). *Pilgrimage*, of course, stays with a single protagonist through the series, as Miriam Henderson moves from living in the accommodation given to her as a part of her teaching jobs in the first three volumes of *Pilgrimage*, to living at Mrs Bailey's lodging house in Tansley Street in Bloomsbury when she starts working at a dentist's in London in *The Tunnel*, staying on at Mrs Bailey's through the next few volumes, as Mrs Bailey changes her house from a 'lodgings' to a boarding house, providing regular meals at a dining table, and access to common sitting rooms. Miriam meets people of various nationalities at the boarding house, including her lover and friend Michael Shatov, and finally decides to share a flat with Miss Holland at Flaxman's court, also in Bloomsbury, in the eighth novel, *The Trap*. The flat sharing appears to be a huge emotional failure to Miriam and she moves back to Tansley Street, where her lover Amabel has a room close to hers. Miriam also lives in other kinds of places in her London years, including the homes of friends who are more affluent than her, (sometimes providing emotional links to the affluent family home in which she lived as a child, before she was compelled to work for a living) and a Swiss resort in *Oberland*, until she

⁵²⁴ Richardson, *Oberland, Pilgrimage*, Vol 4, (London: J.M Dent and The Cresset Press, 1938), first published in 1928, 54.

moves to the countryside in *Dimple Hill*, to live in a Quaker family while she writes the history of the sect. In the final volume of the series, *March Moonlight*, Miriam moves out, after rejecting an offer of marriage from one of the sons of the family, paining their sister who longed for Miriam to become her sister-in-law, staying first in a women's hostel, and then finding rooms for lodging in St John's Wood, a different part of London from her old haunts. *Pilgrimage* is peopled with women Miriam knows, who find small, unorthodox lodgings for themselves in various parts of London, such as her friends Mag and Jan, who share a flat where their landlady does sex-work in the same building, ~~the room in which~~ her friend Eleanor Dear, lives out of a box, and cooks haddock in a tiny room, and the working women's hostel her sister Eve lives at.⁵²⁵

For both writers, I would argue, it is important to dwell upon the fact that urban rented spaces exist as sites which pose an alternative to the ideal of the British citizen's family being safely organized on heteropatriarchal lines, and isolated on a private plot of land. However, it is equally important to explore the dynamics of how these spaces are inhabited, how the myriad surfaces of these lodgings are worked upon, and how they, in turn, shape the inhabitant.

4. Messing about with the Room of One's Own:

As Susanna Zink has pointed out, Woolf's rooms in London are the spaces where different kinds of modernity are played out by protagonists who are often young, single, and free to implement unorthodox measures in their lives.⁵²⁶ As Jane Hamlett's study of college students' study rooms in Victorian England has illustrated, personal spaces away from the family home were sites

⁵²⁵ *The Tunnel*, 83-86; 258. *Interim*, first published in 1919, in *Pilgrimage*, Vol 2. (London: J.M Dent and The Cresset Press, 1938); [aArchive.org](https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.45670/page/n9/mode/2up), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.45670/page/n9/mode/2up>.

⁵²⁶ Suzana Zink, *Virginia Woolf's Rooms and the Spaces of Modernity*; (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); kindle edition.

where young people could express their individuality in choosing how to decorate and use their rooms.⁵²⁷ Jacob's room, for instance, is a space, which his privilege allows him to use as a study where he enjoys a solitude that not even the narrative can infringe upon, as a love nest, or a place to entertain friends. It is a memorial to his life as a scholar and upper middle class young man about town, haunted by his absence, as well as an opaque, meaningless space, marked by the presence of British imperial confidence which ultimately leads him to his death.

Woolf's oeuvre also contains examples of young people using the objects and surfaces in their lodgings in multiple ways that resist the dominant political narrative of the age. In Woolf's *Night and Day*, Mary Datchett's rooms at the top of a building are a source of immense pleasure for her, a space which gives her the confidence to lead her independent, feminist existence in London. Frequently, it morphs into a space for literary and political meetings with a community.

Night and Day dwells upon how Katherine Hilberry's life is consumed by the chores that she is occupied with in her natal household, the upper middle class house in Chelsea, which takes pride in their famous ancestor Allardyce, (keeping up all the proprieties her family finds indispensable in living up to their ancestor). However, Mary's domestic labour remains present on the margins of the narrative, even as she is a gender-subverting consumer of services that are conducted outside the household, daily taking solid meals in the masculine space of an eating house in the city, and having, as Victoria Rosner points out, home-like teas at her workplace where she and her colleagues have a rule to avoid talking about work.⁵²⁸ She is introduced in the narrative in the act of shifting her things in order to make her room ready for a meeting, transforming, as Rosner points out, the private into the public. The narrative informs us that

⁵²⁷Hamlett, 144-172.

⁵²⁸ Lisa Angella, 'The Meat of the Movement: Food and Feminism in Woolf,' *Woolf Studies Annual*, vol 17 (2011), 179-184, accessed from jstor.org, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24906877>, Rosner, 154-160.

‘Miss Datchett was quite capable of lifting a kitchen table on her back, if need were.’⁵²⁹ Mary’s bodily labour, however, is invested in the act of transforming her cherished personal space into a community space, on her own terms. Mary arranges things by ‘moving, and pulling, and ranging [...] furniture against the wall, and placing [...] breakable and precious things in safe places,’ pulling the mattress off her bed onto the floor of her drawing room to make a space for people to sit together. Her only condition for those wanting to borrow her room is that she should have sole charge of the arrangements, laying out a meal to which the eater can help themselves rather than perform the hierarchies of the dining table in the patriarchal household.⁵³⁰ Instead of the furniture creating the heteropatriarchal ‘presence’ critiqued by Baudrillard, the furniture instead comes together to create a space which actively resists the bourgeois division of space into public or private, masculine or feminine. Mary Datchett uses her labour to relate to these objects, caring for them (not allowing any harm to come to the furniture) while also caring for her friends who require a room to come together as a community.

Night and Day’s other striking example of innovative domesticity, I would argue, is the arrangement of William Rodney’s lodgings. The tea which William Rodney gives Katherine in his own chambers, in *Night and Day*, is unorthodox in that the lovers meet unchaperoned in a pre- World War I context, and smoke cigarettes together after tea. However, it is also interesting to notice how William’s methods of arranging his home are in themselves subversive of standards for ‘accommodating’ one’s life into a given space:

‘Rodney’s room was the room of a person who cherishes a great many personal tastes, guarding them from the rough blasts of the public with scrupulous attention. His papers and his books rose in jagged mounds on table and floor, round which he skirted with nervous care lest his dressing-gown might disarrange them ever so slightly. On a chair

⁵²⁹ Woolf, *Night and Day*, first published in London by Duckworth and Co, 1919 (New York: George Doran and Co, 1920) 47, archive.org <https://archive.org/details/nightday00wool/mode/1up>.

⁵³⁰ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 47-50.

stood a stack of photographs of statues and pictures, which it was his habit to exhibit, one by one, for the space of a day or two. The books on his shelves were as orderly as regiments of soldiers, and the backs of them shone like so many bronze beetle-wings; though, if you took one from its place you saw a shabbier volume behind it, since space was limited.⁵³¹

Though a deeply patriarchal person ~~in the novel~~ and a cultural snob, the limited space available to Rodney, linked to his limited income and his status as a bachelor, makes him a practitioner of the traditionally feminine practices of creating a domestic aesthetic with limited resources. Rodney's method of displaying photographs of paintings and sculptures (cheap copies of possibly expensive 'originals') for a day or two makes the domestic space, which stereotypically ought to be stable, signifying the permanence of home and family, into a contingent, constantly morphing space. This could be read as a form of *perruque* which he practices not against the employer, as de Certeau outlines in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, but against the landlord, manipulating the limited space given to him, in order to meet his desire of being able to display things that are valuable to him in his personal space.⁵³²

Indeed, it is significant to note that Katharine Hilberry, agrees to marry him in this room, after having a tea which he has provided, having made the room comfortable, with a bright fire, pots of jam, and food covered in bright tin covers, thus undertaking a conventionally feminine pursuit performed in order to give welcome to the men of a household when they return from the work place. Katharine accepts him after having a vision of returning in the evening with books of mathematics, the subject she wishes to study, to the comforts of this room. The lodging therefore, allows a space for a subversion of gender roles, allowing Katherine to imagine a different kind of marriage, a vision that breaks down soon enough when they start discussing the

⁵³¹ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 73.

⁵³² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 40-44.

terms of the marriage, which of course requires renting a ‘proper’ house in a middle class part of London.

Similarly, Richardson shows lodgings as spaces that allow subversions of the way in which the consumer is expected to use things. For instance, in the way in which Miriam’s friends Mag and Jan, have supper with soup from a packet, thickened with pea flour in *The Tunnel*, served on bowls that are meant for very different things, ‘the sugar basin, the pudding basin, and the slop bowl.’⁵³³ In *Dawn’s Left Hand*, Amabel writes ‘I love you’ across Miriam’s mirror in Flaxman Street with Miriam’s soap.⁵³⁴

In this context, it is interesting to look at the way in which the servant Crosby sets up her home in lodgings, when she is pensioned off by the Pargiter family in *The Years*. While the Pargiter children are mostly happy about getting rid of the antiquated household, the site of their childhood repression, Crosby is unhappy about losing the house of which she knows every ‘groove’ and ‘stain.’ Perhaps things can be earned and brought into one’s personal space, even when they are not bought off barrows in the street, (as depicted in Woolf’s essay on Woolf imagines–Walter Sickert discussed later in this chapter’s protagonists doing,) like the things Crosby filches from the Pargiter household and brings away with her.⁵³⁵ These include memorial presents such as photographs but also things she has scavenged, and perhaps stolen, in order to furnish her home:

“Her room was at the top, and at the back, overlooking the garden. It was small, but when she had unpacked her things it was comfortable enough. It had a look of Abercorn Terrace. Indeed for many years she had been hoarding odds and ends with a view to her retirement. Indian elephants, silver vases, the walrus that she had found in the waste-

⁵³³ Richardson, *The Tunnel*, 87.

⁵³⁴ Richardson, *Dawn’s Left Hand*, first published in 1931, in *Pilgrimage*, Vol 4, 196, 217.

⁵³⁵ Woolf, *Walter Sickert: A Conversation*, first published in London by the Hogarth Press in 1934, project Gutenberg, <https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/woolfv-waltersickert/woolfv-waltersickert-00-h-dir/woolfv-waltersickert-00-h.html>, html version.

paper basket one morning, when the guns were firing for the old Queen's funeral--there they all were. She ranged them askew on the mantelpiece, and when she had hung the portraits of the family--some in wedding-dress, some in wigs and gowns, and Mr Martin in his uniform in the middle because he was her favourite--it was quite like home.⁵³⁶

Apparently, Crosby's acts of salvaging appear to be acts of slavish loyalty to the bourgeois household, recreating Abercorn Terrace, where she lived and worked in a basement in abysmal conditions, even after she is finally free of the job.⁵³⁷ However, her loyalty, I would argue, is not just loyalty towards her masters but also towards her own labour. Her room is no less a room of her own, than the parlour furnished by Charlotte Brontë, with her own earnings as a woman writer. Crosby's treasures, like Brontë's, are inflected by the socio-economic climate around her, but like Brontë's, they are hers to claim a personal relationship with, rather than serve as markers of the status of the patriarch of the household. Crosby cares for these things that truly belong to her, just as she cares for the old family dog, despite the fact that he is no longer her responsibility, and her employers have offered to take him off her. She is free of the aesthetic policing present even in the progressive Post-Impressionist household, since she is free to deal with the objects and find her pleasure among them, free of the restrictions placed on Roger Fry's Mrs Filmer, or on the 'house-maids dusting' (and curating) in England's country-houses.

The opening chapter of *The Years* creates a vision of the Pargiter household as a space in which the various expensive objects attendant on the daily life of the upper middle class family are ranged into a system where they are used as props to bolster up the daily routine that shores up the power of the patriarch, Colonel Abel Pargiter. But if the Pargiter sisters have had the ornamental details of implements **foref** pouring out the tea and keeping family accounts seared

⁵³⁶ Woolf, *The Years*, 218.

⁵³⁷ Woolf, *The Years*, 216.

upon their memory, Crosby has an even more acute knowledge of the appurtenances of household and the marks on their surfaces:

“She had known every cupboard, flagstone, chair and table in that large rambling house, not from five or six feet of distance as they had known it; but from her knees, as she scrubbed and polished; she had known every groove, stain, fork, knife, napkin and cupboard.”⁵³⁸

As mentioned in passing in the Introduction, I would argue that Crosby’s act stretches de Certeau’s notion of *perruque*, since Crosby does not merely ‘borrow’ from her employers, but permanently keeps the objects that she has been rendering functional through her own labour even when they were ostensibly the possessions of the family that bought them.⁵³⁹ Her creation of ‘home,’ filled with objects she has appropriated from the bourgeois home, is an act of *perruque* against the spatial constraints imposed upon her, both when she was made to live in a basement, and when she is pensioned off into an attic, ~~in turn~~ freeing the objects from the rigid bourgeois patriarchal order in which they were expected to signify meaning in the Pargiter household.

Thus, for Mary Datchett, Crosby, Miriam, Amabel, and briefly for William Rodney, the question of ~~whom to~~ how to furnish a room of one’s own, and whom to share it with, as articulated in ‘Professions for Women,’ is resolved in exciting new ways. They discover paradigms of co-existing with the non-human objects in the rooms of their own, in which both they and the

⁵³⁸ Woolf, *The Years*, 216; for readings of the Pargiter sisters’ orientation to the stuff of the bourgeoisie drawing room please see, Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 78-79; Zink 153-183.

⁵³⁹ De Certeau defines *perruque* as ‘... the worker’s own work disguised as work for the employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen... *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary writing a love letter on ‘company time’ or as complex as a cabinetmaker ‘borrowing’ a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room... Accused of stealing or turning material to his own ends and using the machines for his own profit, the worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed towards profit.’ (De Certeau, 41-42)

objects are released from the burden of producing a fabric of signification which upholds heteropatriarchy under imperial capitalism.

5. 'The Modern Ownership of Movables'

It is interesting to note that the examples of *perruque* described, involve movable follow the process of moving objects in the room which can be quickly shifted around. These are commodities which can be seen as exemplars of Maurizia Boscagli's concept of 'stuff,' since they are objects which are receptive to being moved around within the room, unlike the larger components part of the house which remain fixed. Although the subject does not own the house, and needs to defer to the landlord/ landlady's authority when those larger parts are in question, they might be able to assume the prerogative of owning the smaller objects, of being able to claim an intimate relationship between themselves and the object. It is through manipulating these small things that the owner of the movables exerts their agency within the space they have managed to secure in a capitalist housing market, and in turn seeks to define themselves as homemakers through these objects. Personal rooms thus become the site of creative maneuvers with the 'stuff' that furnishes ones existence when one comes home, the liberating counterpart of the Stephen household, or the Pargiter household, where objects are arranged to facilitate the patriarch-as-bully's appropriation of women and non-human objects, as entities which exist as the mere facilitators of whatever use he will put them to.⁵⁴⁰

As Judith Flanders points out, the Victorian period was marked by the growing importance of outlay on furniture as a part of housekeeping expenditure, most probably because an urban

⁵⁴⁰Boscagli, 5 (see page 50 of this thesis) ~~page~~ and also Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 160-161.

population felt more secure about movable possessions than their rights to the space in which they set up housekeeping.⁵⁴¹ This provided a multivalent context for modernist critiques and explorations of a culture that prioritized the accretion of movable objects at the level of the household, rather than of an ethos of personal attachment to ‘the land.’ E.M. Forster, for instance, could comment that:

‘The feudal ownership of land did bring dignity, whereas the modern ownership of movables is reducing us again to a nomadic horde. We are reverting to the civilisation[sic] of luggage, and historians of the future will note how the middle classes accreted possessions without taking root in the earth, and may find in this the secret of their imaginative poverty.’⁵⁴²

While Forster’s words lament the ‘poverty’ of modern civilization, I would argue that for women and working class subjects whose claims to landed property are either precarious or non-existent, these ‘movables’ are the means of getting a chance at shaping a space according to one’s own needs, and in turn having one’s own subjectivity ‘furnished’ forth by these objects.⁵⁴³

It is no chance co-incidence that ‘[h]ow will you furnish it? [h]ow will you decorate it? With whom will you share it and on what terms?’ are the key questions Woolf asks about rooms of one’s own, in ‘Professions for Women,’ having already stated that it is a matter of great effort for her audience of professional women to manage to pay the rent for these women.⁵⁴⁴

For Woolf and Richardson as women writers, these movables could be the site of aesthetic and political readings of the subject’s orientation to the spaces they occupy, when these movables are paid for by the subject herself. Miriam tells one of her lovers, Hypo, a married man, ‘Women carry all the domesticity they need about with them. That is why they can get along alone so

⁵⁴¹ Flanders, ‘The Drawing Room’ in *The Victorian Home*.

⁵⁴² E.M. Forster, *Howards End*, 1910 (New York: Everyman’s Library and Alfred Knopf, 1991) 156, [archive.org https://archive.org/details/howardsend002321mbp/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/howardsend002321mbp/mode/1up).

⁵⁴³ Boscagli, 5 (see page 50 of this thesis)

⁵⁴⁴ Woolf, ‘Professions for Women,’ 242.

much better than men.’⁵⁴⁵ Miriam’s words could be read as an attempt at imagining a feminist domesticity, in which a life alone can be imagined, with the things one can carry about, instead of being caught within the spatial confines of a familial space.

For Miriam, in *The Trap*, a part of her initial excitement about moving into a flat with Miss Holland is the fact that she has acquired furniture of her own in contrast to the lodging house furniture she used earlier:

‘The new furniture peopled the room with clear reflections.... And upon the polished surfaces of the little bureau, set down with its back to the curtain, and upon its image, filling the lower part of the full-length strip of mirror hung opposite against the wall, were bright plaques of open sky. The bureau was experience; seen from any angle it was joy complete. Added to life and independent of it. A little thing that would keep its power through all accidents of mood and circumstance...’⁵⁴⁶

Miriam’s pleasure in her bureau is interesting, because she sees the object as an ‘experience.’

The bureau’s self is not, for Miriam, realized in its functions as a surface for writing upon or a container for storing things, as Heidegger would expect an object to realize its *dasein* through its ‘readiness to hand.’⁵⁴⁷ Instead, Miriam attempts to grasp at the object’s multifaceted existence

through her understanding of the object that has been ‘added to life’ with the income she has earned herself, and which cannot be alienated from her; (unlike the spaces she inhabits.)

However, at the same time she sees it as rendered ‘independent’ of her existence, or the uses she might put it to, because of its beauty. It is significant that Miriam sees the bureau, a quotidian, probably mass produced object as an independent, distinct aesthetic presence which exists outside of her, something more than an appendage to herself.

⁵⁴⁵Richardson, *Dawn’s Left Hand*, 226.

⁵⁴⁶Richardson, *The Trap, Pilgrimage*, Vol 3, (London: J.M Dent and The Cresset Press, 1938) first published in 1925, 410, accessed from archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.45668/mode/2up>.

⁵⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: SUNY, 1996) first published in 1953, 95; Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001) 1973, 161- 184.

Crosby's special relationship to the furniture ~~at~~ the Pargiter's' is, also, about recognizing the autonomous, aesthetic presence of these objects, even while recognizing how she has been shaped by them. Her ability to relate to the furniture is importantly, a literal difference of perspective from the owners. She has seen the furniture, not at the distance of 'five or six feet' at which the owners of the house have seen it, as the consumers of the domestic space. Instead she has seen, and gained a knowledge of the exact knowledge of the contours of the myriad things of the household, during the processes of dusting, and polishing, processes through which the her gaze and her body sensuously trace out these surfaces. Similarly, in the passage quoted above, Miriam appears to be caressing the contours of the bureau with her gaze. Perhaps it is possible that such an apprehension of the world of the domestic interior ~~thus~~ makes way for an aesthetic that appreciates the materiality of an object, as opposed to their use or display values. Moreover, perhaps it is possible to see how a knowledge of domestic labour informs this gendered apprehension of the object. In *The Years*, Maggie Pargiter looks at a lodging house room:

'Maggie lay back in her chair. Behind their heads rose the curve of the mahogany chair back. And behind the curve of the chair back was a crinkled glass with a red lip; then there was the straight line of the mantelpiece with little black-and-white squares on it; and then three rods ending in soft yellow plumes. She ran her eye from thing to thing. In and out it went, collecting, gathering, summing up into one whole, when, just as she was about to complete the pattern...'⁵⁴⁸

Like Miriam looking at the bureau, Maggie's appreciation of the room as an assemblage, which includes ~~of~~ a source of light, the chair, the glass, the mantelpiece and the rods ending in feathers, is an open-ended process, of seeking patterns and combinations, self-aware of the human subject's ability to grasp only a part of the object, that which offers itself to her gaze. This passage, however, is prefigured in a previous passage which is filtered through Crosby's consciousness:

⁵⁴⁸ Woolf, *The Years*, 349.

“The silver paid for polishing, she thought. Knives and forks rayed out round the table. The whole room, with its carved chairs, oil paintings, the two daggers on the mantel-piece, and the handsome sideboard—all the solid objects that Crosby dusted and polished every day—looked at its best in the evening. Meat-smelling and serge-curtained by day, it looked lit up, semi-transparent in the evening.”⁵⁴⁹

Crosby’s pleasure in the dining room scene, as a ‘composition’ with objects tactically arranged to create a visual effect (the knives and forks ‘rayed out,’ the effect heightened by the lighting making it ‘lit up, semi-transparent’) is clearly inflected by her awareness of the labour she has invested in making this composition happen, i.e. the work of dusting and polishing.

Thus, when subjects who have a knowledge of how much labour goes into keeping a living space in a usable form every day, are able to put in this labour on their own terms, they interact with objects to create new spaces which are distinguished, not only through the manner in which they sustain life on new terms, but also by the fact that they create a new aesthetic. Indeed, these accretions of things, as Woolf would point out in the context of the working class interiors in the paintings of Walter Sickert, become ‘expressive of the owner’ when the subject has bought the things with money one has earned, and used them consequently:

“The reason may be that people who inherit beautiful things sit much more loosely to their possessions than those who have bought them off barrows in the street with money earned by their own hands... The bed, the chest of drawers, the one picture and the vase on the mantelpiece are all expressive of the owner. Merely by process of use and fitness the cheap furniture has rubbed its varnish off; the grain shows through; it has the expressive quality that expensive furniture always lacks; one must call it beautiful...”⁵⁵⁰

Woolf goes on to explain how the non-human things in these paintings are metaphors for the emotional states of the human subjects in these pictures, but this description also highlights how at a literal level, the owner and the object are bound together by the traces upon the objects which have been used, after being purchased. Her description of furniture in working class rooms

⁵⁴⁹ Woolf, *The Years*, 35.

⁵⁵⁰ Woolf, *Walter Sickert*, <https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/woolfv-waltersickert/woolfv-waltersickert-00-h-dir/woolfv-waltersickert-00-h.htm>.

~~being thus marked~~, like her reading of Crosby's claims on the Pargiter furniture discussed later in this chapter, gains poignancy in the light of the fact that from the late nineteenth century onwards, the market was filled with an increasing quantity of products which promised to magically do away with, or keep off the 'fingermarks' of working class women on the surfaces of the middle class home when they cleaned the household furniture.⁵⁵¹

It is also significant to note at this juncture that this culture of movables was an intrinsic part of British Post Impressionism, as practiced in the Omega Workshops. As studied in the second chapter, the Omega's investment in individual items for furnishing the domestic interior was what made it different from the High Modernist conception of a flat which was produced complete with all the fixtures it would need. Such a flat would seem like an alienating place to characters in this chapter, none of whom possess the economic and cultural capital to dictate their choices to the architect or engineer who made their homes. It is only through their piecemeal acquiring of movables that they are able to establish a relationship of mutual belonging between the furnishings in their homes and themselves. Miriam and Crosby's deeply personal pleasure in the piece-meal assembling of the domestic interior, and their awareness of the aesthetic object's ability to constantly intrigue the human subject, and elude a stable frame of meaning, are thus in sync with this aesthetic.

Moreover, as the Sickert essay shows, the labour that has gone into producing the specific assemblage of the domestic interior, where the subaltern subject and the hard-earned object co-exist, is a palpable presence wedged in between the two. It is either present in the form of visible marks upon the object, due to the wear and tear of reproductive labour, ('merely by the process

⁵⁵¹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Imperial Contest*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, 207-231

of use and fitness the cheap furniture has rubbed its varnish of) or as a presence that makes itself felt to the subject, as she feels compelled to affectively relate with them, like Miriam with her bureau, or Crosby with her salvaged objects. The gendered subject-as-homemaker and the object-as-domestic-object come to define each other through the performance of domestic labour which leaves indelible physical or affective marks upon both entities.

6. Porous Rooms in an Urban Setting:

At the same time, it is interesting to note how both Woolf and Richardson posit lodgings as a site ~~much more~~ porous to the influences of entities beyond the enclosed space one pays rent for. Rooms are affected by a number of hyperobjects, (to use Timothy Morton's term) which come into the commercial transactions which establish the lodger as a tenant, but which cannot be contained within the walls of the room.⁵⁵² If inter-war feminist modernism is shaped by the dream of being able to create fruitful negotiations between the public sphere and the room of one's own, then it significant to note that the public resources of light, air, and sound, located just beyond the walls of the room, are always entangled with the room. The public sphere thus also emerges as a material sphere, shaping and being shaped by the materiality of private spaces, i.e. the sound of a person practising musical scales in a nearby room, carrying through the neighbourhood, and entering Sara Pargiter's room in *The Years*.⁵⁵³

In an urban setting, the room which is an apparently private space is inflected by the presence of the public sphere outside. Homes in the heart of the city are frequently seen as undesirable for the reason that they let in large amounts of street noise, but for Woolf and Richardson's single women, this very closeness to the public sphere is in itself an exhilarating experience. In

⁵⁵² Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, (Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

⁵⁵³ Woolf, *The Years*, 311, 316.

describing the homes of Miriam Henderson, Mary Datchett, and Sara and Maggie Pargiter in *The Years*, the narrative dwells upon the play of light upon their household appurtenances, and the disparate sounds coming from the street, nearby houses, (including, for both Miriam in *The Tunnel* and Sara in *The Years* the sound of people practicing music,) and churches. These sounds establish a larger human community beyond those whom the subject designates as friends and invites or visits, in rooms of one's own. Maggie and Sara, for instance, learn of the death of Edward VII, not through a newspaper delivered on the doorstep of their home through an invisibilized network of commercial circulation, but through the shouting of a man passing beneath their window, who draws them into the communities of the neighbourhood and the nation, as they lean out of their windows to catch what he is saying.⁵⁵⁴

Like sound, light is also a hyper-object which comes into play in the room. Like sound, it is a factor that is monetizable in the real estate market, sinceas it is one of the factors considered when a space is bought or rented for residential purposes. Yet, when it pours in from outside, it is also a common good, beyond market transactions. Miriam's close relationship with the bureau cited above, as well as Maggie and Crosby's relationships with the rooms they survey, are rendered possible because of the quality of the light in which theyshe can closely observe the visual presence of the object. Similarly, *Night and Day* dwells upon Mary Datchett's pleasure in looking at the walls of her room bathed in the morning light:

High in the air as her flat was, some beams from the morning sun reached her even in November, striking straight at curtain, chair, and carpet, and painting there three bright, true spaces of green, blue, and purple, upon which the eye rested with a pleasure which gave physical warmth to the body... . She was robbing no one of anything, and yet, to get so much pleasure from simple things, such as eating one's breakfast in a room which had nice colours in it, clean from the skirting of the boards to the ceiling, seemed to suit

⁵⁵⁴ Woolf, '1910,' *The Years*, 191. This episode is in marked contrast to the opening '1880' chapter of the novel where their cousins Milly and Delia peek into the street outside their house, amidstwith admonitions not to be caught looking, ineffectively trying to see who is calling on their neighbours (*The Years*, 18-19)

her so thoroughly that at first she used to hunt about for someone to apologize to, or for some flaw in the situation.⁵⁵⁵

Mary's room is thus the site for the light coming from outside to interact with her possessions, 'curtain, chair, and carpet,' to 'paint' them in 'true' spaces that would give pleasure to Bloomsbury's Post-Impressionist eyes. Mary's daily pleasure in her solitude is thus the product of her interaction with the non-human objects and hyperobjects that populate her room, with which she interacts through the motions of her daily routine, noticing the light and colours when she laces her boots to go out. Similarly Miriam Henderson's process of learning to love her own room is shaped by her relationship with the way in which light falls in different ways in her room, and the way in which light falls upon things, as these excerpts from *The Tunnel* show:

But the dark yellow graining of the wallpaper was warm. It shone warmly in the stream of light pouring through the barred lattice window. In the further part of the room darkened by the steep slope of the roof it gleamed like stained wood. The window space was a little square wooden room, the long low double lattice breaking the roof, the ceiling and walls warmly reflecting its oblong of bright light... When Miriam drew her eyes from its confusion of rich fresh tones the bedroom seemed very dark... The blue and gold had gone from the skylight. Its sharp grey light shone in over the dim colours of the threadbare carpet and on to the black bars of the little grate and the little strip of tarnished yellow grained mantelpiece, running along to the bedhead where a small globeless gas bracket stuck out at an angle over the head of the bed. The sight of her luggage piled up on the other side of the fireplace drew her forward into the dimness... I'll paint the bright part of the ceiling; scrolls of leaves... A soft wash of madder lay along the grey tiles. There must be an afterglow somewhere, just out of sight.⁵⁵⁶

This attention to colour and form in a person's mapping out their relationship to a designated personal space is interesting. As Victoria Rosner points out Mary's enjoyment of the sunlight in her room is 'explicitly compared to the experience of viewing an abstract picture.'⁵⁵⁷ Moreover, as Rosner points out, '[a]bstraction has the effect of purging reminiscence, stripping the home of

⁵⁵⁵ Woolf, Chapter VI, *Night and Day*, 77.

⁵⁵⁶ Richardson, *The Tunnel*, 13-14.

⁵⁵⁷ Rosner, 157.

its memorial qualities and replacing them with spontaneity.⁵⁵⁸ Mary and Miriam's rooms partake of a Post-Impressionist moment of awareness that the qualities of the visual objects in the domestic interior are not inherent, but shaped by the light that comes from outside the four walls of the home, and is hence an ever-shifting phenomenon dependent on interactions between the light, the object, and the spectator.

7. 'Looking' at Colour, Form, Gender, and Domestic Labour:

Moreover, perhaps the very act of 'looking' at the room, could, in fact, be a gendered practice, informed by an awareness of the labour that goes into keeping a space clean, a field of household labour which has always been the work of women in the Western world.⁵⁵⁹ As Roger Fry points out:

“Biologically speaking, art is a blasphemy. *We were given our eyes to see things, not to look at them...* With all the ingenuity and resource which manufacturers put into their business, they can scarcely prevent the ordinary eye from seizing on the minute visual characteristics that distinguish margarine from butter...

In the practical vision we have no more concern after we have read the label on the object; vision ceases the moment it has served its biological function. But the curiosity vision does contemplate the object disinterestedly; the object *ex hypothesi* has no significance for actual life; it is a play or fancy object, and our vision dwells much more consciously and deliberately upon it. We notice to some extent its forms and colours, especially when it is new to us.

But human perversity goes further even than this in its misapplication of the gift of sight. *We may look at objects not even for their curiosity or oddity, but for their harmony of form and colour...*

Suppose, for example, that we are looking at a Sung bowl; we apprehend gradually the shape of the outside contour, the perfect sequence of the curves, and the subtle modifications of a certain type of curve which it shows; we also feel the relation of the concave curves to the outside contour; we realise that the precise thickness of the walls is consistent with the particular kind of matter of which it is made, its appearance of density and resistance; and finally we recognise, perhaps, how satisfactory for the display of all

⁵⁵⁸ Rosner, 157.

⁵⁵⁹ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, 1983; (London: Free Association Books, 1989).

these plastic qualities are the colour and the dull lustre of the glaze.⁵⁶⁰ (my ellipses and italics)

This passage has been quoted at length, in order to make it easy to see that Fry's method of observing the Sung bowl, are in fact very close to Richardson's description of Miriam's gaze slowly resting on the her bureau, the furniture, walls, ceiling, and floor of her room, and find resonances in the manner in which both Crosby and Maggie look at domestic spaces in *The Years*, sensuously apprehending the objects in the room, rather than seeing a series of objects.

Now, I would argue that perhaps it is possible to look at the practice of dwelling in a house, as a subject with a knowledge of domestic labour, as incorporating this 'misapplication,' of the gift of sight. Even as both Woolf and Richardson remain constricted by their attitudes to working-class women employed to do the rough work of cleaning a house, perhaps it is possible that our understanding of the kind of care we choose to bestow upon the things in our houses is reached through a careful reading of 'curiosity or oddity,' as well as 'form and colour.'⁵⁶¹ Objects become exhilarating aesthetic experiences rather than the components of a rigid familial hierarchy or economic order of consumption.

When Miriam looks through the room at Tansley Street, she looks how at the changing colours of the sunset interacting with the various surfaces of the room, noting patches of bright colour in the linoleum, worn to a shiny texture with constant use and; some furniture with the paint scratched off, by similar processes of use, by unknown people. By deploying these visual methods, she is undertaking an aesthetic appreciation of a space on terms similar to those

⁵⁶⁰ Roger Fry, 'The Artist's Vision,' in *Vision and Design*; (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920); first published in the Athaeneum, 1919.

⁵⁶¹ For instance Richardson's relationship to Mrs Bailey, her landlady at Tansley Street discussed in the next chapter, or Woolf's ambivalent relationship to Mrs McNabb in *To the Lighthouse*. Looking at working class women in 'Memories of a Working Women's Guild,' Woolf imagines them as alienated from the 'detached emotions' required for aesthetic or intellectual thinking, their eyes trained to see 'something actual- on saucepans that were boiling over, on children who were getting into mischief.' (Woolf, 'Memories of a Working Women's Guild.')

described by Fry and later, Bill Brown. Her knowledge is informed by a gendered knowledge of care-work which factors in form and colour, as a part of its everyday praxis.

This is exemplified par excellence by Crosby's intimate knowledge of the things she cleans quoted above, or Miriam's matter of fact noting of what she needs to fix, while looking at her room with pleasure for the first time. ('[Ss]he must ask for a bath towel and do something about the blind, sponge it or something; that was all.')562 As outlined in the introduction, domestic labour thus becomes a praxis which participates in looking 'at' objects, rather than 'through' them, to use Bill Brown's thing theory.⁵⁶³ A gendered appreciation of the aesthetics of the domestic interior is thus made possible through Miriam, Mary and Crosby's multi-layered awareness of a) how a given object *should* look when it is immaculate according to a the standards of 'good housekeeping' and of the marketplace b) how objects deviate from this immaculate state c) how objects can be made to look pleasing to the homemaker's eye and d) how the object exists as an immediate sensuous presence, before the feminine subject's eye.

Perhaps then, it becomes possible to take cleanliness out of a moral framework and look at it as an aesthetic category, like Mary Datchett reveling in the room 'clean from the skirting of the boards to the corners of the ceiling,' or Miriam enjoying the freedom from dust in the house she has set up with Miss Holland, which Miss Holland keeps spick and span:

—Pools of light rested on the squat moss-green crockery of the wash-table, set, flanked by clear wall and clear green floor, between the mirror and the end of the small bed which skirted the wall as far as the door opening on to the landing. The unencumbered floor made a green pathway to the window. It was refreshment merely to walk along it, between clean sightly objects.²⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶² Richardson, *The Tunnel*, 16.

⁵⁶³ Bill Brown, *Other Things*, 9.

⁵⁶⁴ Richardson, *The Trap*, first published in 1925, in *Pilgrimage*, Vol 3, London: J.M Dent and The Cresset Press, 1938, 410, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.45668/mode/1up>

Miriam here does not think about hygiene or dwell upon how this cleanliness feels good in a moral sense, but rather dwells upon the sensual pleasure that the room gives her eye and her body. As the next chapter will touch upon, this pleasure is not based on a rigid code of domestic order followed by Miriam. Instead, Miriam's quest for pleasure can just as easily take her to rooms in which codes of cleanliness are topsy-turvy, a state which she enjoys just as much.⁵⁶⁵

8. Conclusion:

Miriam and Mary Datchett's close examination of their surroundings in the domestic spaces they inhabit, therefore, could be seen as exemplars of one of the central aspects of this thesis, that modernism's ability to understand how the object acts upon the subject's perception, can be seen as a gendered tactic. It employs a feminine point of view which 'looks' carefully in order to understand the nuances of the physicality of an object. The culture of movables thus becomes in its own way, something more than a system of marking social status. Instead, it becomes a repository of aesthetic pleasure, and memories of freedom from the patriarchal family.

Indeed, Richardson and Woolf appear to be foreshadowing the ~~paradigm-breaking~~ understandings of emotionally charged spaces brought about by queer theory in the late twentieth and early twenty first century, interpreting them as polyvalent spaces which are always in a state of becoming. As Sara Ahmed points out, we live in a society in which the images of domestic interiors are continually produced in order to uphold a heteronormative orientation to the world.

⁵⁶⁵ As the next chapter unpacks, however, the gendered subject also carries with her a Protestant, post-industrial attitude towards 'dirt' which threatens to breach spatial boundaries. This attitude is thrown into sharp relief whenever they encounter ethnic or class Others.

The fixed quality perpetuated by arrangements of objects in the family home are a part of the project of directing the subject to co-operate with the given narrative of heteronormative familial harmony through the construction of the history of the family's home. Yet, she points out, that queer interventions (including *A Room of One's Own*) have repeatedly broken up this fixed order so as to create feminist, queer, and anticolonial spaces by rearranging the various movable parts of quotidian domestic spaces, and made them their own.⁵⁶⁶

Woolf and Richardson refuse to conform to a system where the permanent possession of things assures the consumer of his prerogatives, by solidly and permanently occupying the same form and colour. Instead, in their narratives, movables are seen, changing from moment to moment, with the changing, fluctuating light. ~~Instead,~~ Subject and object 'furnish' each other, the subject's labour mediating the place the object occupies in the room/ narrative, the object affecting the subject's emotional and aesthetic life.⁵⁶⁷

The single woman thus establishes herself in a liminal and exciting position, in this rented space, through her use and appreciation of the space. On the one hand, she exists as a marginal presence, stepping away from the role of a fully-fledged householder, on the other she is able to establish her presence through her arrangement of her precious possessions. She is at once renting a cheap accommodation, as well as sharing in the riches of light and sound, which enter her household for free, ~~and is close to~~ Light and sound, are part of an urban commons which she can share. She is a 'single' woman, as well as a part of a community of the things that make up her room of her own, as well as of the city at large. It would appear that Woolf and Richardson are able, ultimately, to give us a vision of a truly liberating paradigm through which women can inhabit

⁵⁶⁶Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 88-89. Also Baudrillard, as cited in on page 47 of this thesis.

⁵⁶⁷ Boscagli, 5 (see also page 50 of this thesis)

domestic spaces. However, as the next chapter will illustrate, Woolf is deeply aware of the shortcomings of these apparently autonomous spaces which, after all, exist within a capitalist economy.

Chapter 6: Living with ‘Immovables’: Cleanliness and Domestic Labour in Rented Accommodation

This chapter remains with the urban lodgings of the previous chapter and attempts to contextualize dwelling practices in the light of changing patterns of domesticity imposed by the structures of inter-war houses. However, if the previous chapter had dealt in ‘movables,’ in E.M Forster’s words, this chapter will deal with what we might call ‘immovables.’⁵⁶⁸ It will focus on those aspects of the house which are rendered beyond day-to-day manipulation in the first half of the twentieth century, and how these changes affect patterns of domestic labour, even as old biases prove as ‘immovable’ as these new networks.

1. Cutting up Houses, Linking up Houses:

As Pam Morris points out, it is significant that *The Years*, a story about the dispersal of a bourgeois family, ends with a large gathering of several generations of the family in an estate agent’s office.⁵⁶⁹ The narrative tells us, as a side note, that the family home in London’s West End is proving hard to sell, and that Eleanor Pargiter is being advised to cut it up into flats. The inter-war boom in private housing revealed that more and more people in urban areas were willing to attempt to give up the cultural cornerstone of home as a ‘house’ upon a plot of land, and live in apartments. But the apartments were still built on the principles of upholding the private nature of the nuclear family under capitalism. The big family house shared by the Pargiters, obviously, needs to be properly partitioned and provided with new fixtures, so that the flats are neatly separated from each other.

⁵⁶⁸ E.M. Forster, *Howards End*, 1910 (New York: Everyman’s Library and Alfred Knopf, 1991) 156, [archive.org https://archive.org/details/howardsend002321mbp/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/howardsend002321mbp/mode/1up), please see page 246 of this thesis.

⁵⁶⁹ Morris, 167.

At the same time, urbanization and the technology of high capitalism ensure that these houses, though neatly separated from each other, are united by extensive networks providing sources of water, heat, and light. As Morris points out, despite the differences of wealth and social status that were carefully demarcated by individuals' addresses, and the nature of their houses, the residents of large tracts of land were sharing the same water and energy networks, whatever their socio-economic differences might be.

As Henri Lefebvre writes about the modern house:

‘... our house would emerge as permeated from every direction by streams of energy which run in and out of it by every imaginable route: water, gas, electricity, telephone lines, radio and television signals, and so on. Its image of immobility would then be replaced by an image of a complex of mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits.’⁵⁷⁰

Inter-war Britain noticed a movement towards the extension of supply grids, a movement which was accompanied on occasion by the nationalization of supply grids. Even before the First World War, in 1903, the Metropolitan Water Board had been formed in London by the agglomeration of nine water companies, after the city had suffered through a number of ‘water famines.’ In 1926, the Electricity Supply Act established a Central Generating Board, and a National Grid.⁵⁷¹

In this context, it becomes interesting to flip the carpet, as it were, to see the patterns that come through when we see the household as participating in a culture of ‘immovables.’ What comes to light, I would argue, are domestic spaces serviced by a dynamic network of forms of energy rushing through rooms, which are accompanied by the presence of permanent fixtures, which the individual homemaker has little control over. This becomes especially evident when we look at how the lodgings studied in this chapter are kept clean.

⁵⁷⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford and Cambridge (USA): Blackwell, 1991) first published in 1974, 93.

⁵⁷¹ Morris, 169.

2. Domestic dirt and Domestic Living:

Cleanliness was a mark of civilization, and as Eleanor Pargiter notices in *The Years*, a mark of the English national character, of a nation where people wash their persons thoroughly, assisted by the plentiful availability of chemical-based, mass manufactured soaps, in the marketplace of an industrialized nation.⁵⁷² Tellingly, these reflections about English cleanliness are triggered by Eleanor's recent holiday to Spain. A discourse of cleanliness is thus always a relative discourse, pitching one system of organization against another. As Mary Douglas points out:

“We can recognise in our own notions of dirt that we are using a kind of omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems. It is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.”⁵⁷³

The onus of this organization is of course, laid on the homemaker. As Simone de Beauvoir points out, in the context of Collette Audry's short story, ‘La poussière’ (‘Dust,’) domestic detritus is what gathers as a result of human beings living together, domestic dust being largely composed of the ‘dirt’ or organic matter sloughed off the bodies of the inhabitants.⁵⁷⁴ The task of making sure that the household is organized according to culturally determined standards of cleanliness

⁵⁷² Woolf, *The Years*, 194. For a discussion of hygiene and ‘commodity imperialism’ as discourses that mutually reinforced each other at the level of systems of domestic labour, and advertising for household goods, (especially soap and cleaning products) please see Laura Humphreys, Chapter 4 in *Globalizing Housework*, and McClintock, 207-231. It is interesting perhaps that Miriam does have feelings of revulsion towards processes of cleanliness, arranging her feelings on the axes of nation and class. Her shock of disgust at having her hair washed in *Pointed Roofs*, by German women with cheap materials- soap, water, and an egg, can be juxtaposed by her delight in the luxurious room she is given when working with an affluent English family, where she notices a brand of soap known for being bad for the skin, but thinks ‘even Dare's soap could not hurt’ in a place as beautiful as this in *Honeycomb* (1917).

⁵⁷³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, 1984; 1996, (Routledge: London and New York, 2001), 37.

⁵⁷⁴ De Beauvoir, 540.

could thus be seen as a task that involves attacking 'life' given that human activity in the domestic interior necessarily involves mixing up strict categories of household organization:

... housekeeping mania is a form of sadomasochism; it is characteristic of mania and vice to make freedom want what it does not want; because the maniacal housewife detests having negativity, dirt, and evil as her lot, she furiously pursues dust, accepting a condition that revolts her. She attacks life itself through the rubbish left from any living growth...⁵⁷⁵

3. Living in Messy Lodgings:

Living in lodgings, however, appears to be a site where people can choose to do away with national strictures of cleanliness, and domestic regimes which organize themselves around punishing standards of domestic organization. This is exemplified in Woolf's descriptions of scruffy London neighbourhoods, in *The Years*, where the dominant form of housing are lodgings and boarding houses.⁵⁷⁶

This is similar to Richardson's Miriam Henderson, from the last chapter, who finds that happiness lies in Tansley Street where her room is furnished with soap that is 'cracked, dried and seamed with dirt.'⁵⁷⁷ Miriam enjoys this life of daily inversions, in which the soap that is meant to keep things clean is dirty. This soap can in turn be used by her lover Amabel to 'smear' a declaration of love across the mirror, thus disrupting the mirror's normative role as a surface, which, as Anne McClintock writes, turned the domestic interior into 'a spectacle to be consumed,' in the bourgeois household.⁵⁷⁸ Miriam also admires 'the wonderful rich life' of Mag and Jan, who are full of exciting ideas about how to live their life as working girls in the city,

⁵⁷⁵ De Beauvoir, 541.

⁵⁷⁶ Woolf, *The Years*, '1880,' '1891.' 3-128.

⁵⁷⁷ Richardson, *Interim, Pilgrimage*, Vol 2, 293, first published in 1920; *The Tunnel*, 16.

⁵⁷⁸ Richardson, *Dawn's Left Hand*, 196, 217; McClintock, 218-219.

when having soup with them. At this late-night soup party, the slop bowl, meant to receive the dregs of tea that has been drunk, is pressed into service for drinking hot soup from.⁵⁷⁹

The shabby, grimy state of Miriam's room, could perhaps be read as an intrinsic part of the 'richly renewed consciousness' that Miriam finds for herself while inhabiting in the room, a trace of her own presence, as well as a mark of her ability to leave the room to itself at her own will.⁵⁸⁰

It shows her ability to break away from the Victorian project of rendering invisible both use and reproductive labour, the workings of which have been discussed in detail in the Introduction and in previous chapters.⁵⁸¹

4. Agents of Domestic Labour:

However, looking carefully at Richardson and Woolf, it becomes possible to notice the way in which, ~~for~~ both writers deal with the cleaning jobs undertaken by women from different class strata. A working-class woman can ~~thus~~ be the upholder of patriarchal domestic standards, in a household like the Hilberry household in *Night and Day*, through her practice of regimes of cleanliness. Equally, she could be the facilitator of Miriam Henderson's entry into a liberated, autonomous existence, by taking the burden of performing, or conforming, to the routines of domestic chores, off Miriam's shoulders.

While Mary Datchett is able to use her labour, doing even the dirty, rough domestic chores like metal cleaning, to maintain a space where she can invite people and work on a manuscript by herself, *Night and Day*, dwells upon how Katherine Hilberry's life is consumed by the chores that she is occupied with in her natal household.⁵⁸² Though Katherine engages in a lot of unpaid

⁵⁷⁹ Richardson, *The Tunnel*, 87.

⁵⁸⁰ Richardson, *The Tunnel*, 16.

⁵⁸¹ McClintock, 219.

⁵⁸² Woolf, *Night and Day*, 191.

labour, including shopping, procuring household repairs, and talking/ giving orders to servants, it is the paid domestic help engaged by the household who undertake the actual work of ordering and cleaning spaces. When Mrs Hilberry goes out, they use the opportunity to tidy her room, washing ornaments and organizing papers, so as make the space where she undertakes her writing work with her daughter's help, resemble the study of a professional middle-class man, and symbolically dismissing Mrs Hilberry's work:

‘To Katherine it seemed as if they had brushed away sixty years or so with the first flick of their damp dusters. It seemed to her that the work she had tried to do in the room was being swept into a very insignificant heap of dust... The writing table might have belonged to a professional man of methodical habits.’⁵⁸³

Mrs Hilberry and Katherine's feminine labours as writers, amanuenses, and daughters, are thus physically reduced, through the hands of working class women, into the standards of ‘professional men,’ a space where the organization of objects reflects the prerogatives of the patriarch and those who conform to his power.

Indeed, it is worth comparing these modes of performing domestic labour with the complex relationship between gendered subjects and domestic objects in the *Pilgrimage* series, studied in the previous chapter. Miriam's housekeeping is done by Mrs Bailey, whose domestic routine is characterized by its slapdash yet magical character:

‘The large dusty house, the many downstairs rooms, the mysterious dark-roomed vault of the basement, all upright in her upright form; hurried smeary cleansings, swift straightening of grey-sheeted beds, the strange unfailing water-system, gurgling cisterns, gushing taps and lavatory flushes, the wonder of gaslight and bedroom candles, the daily meals magically appearing and disappearing; her knowledge of the various mysteriously arriving and vanishing people, all beginning and ending in her triumphant, reassuring smile that went forward outside beyond these things, with everybody.’⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸³ Woolf, *Night and Day*, 428.

⁵⁸⁴ Richardson, *Interim*, 428.⁵

Mrs Bailey's labour thus inaugurates a kind of housekeeping different from the manical labour of Beauvoir's housewife, of 'smeary' cleansings, and faded or dirty sheets, allowing her lodgers to get on with life and enabling a transnational community through the regular meals and the communal spaces she makes available to the boarders in the downstairs rooms. This allows her boarders, including single women like Miriam,² to access a degree of autonomy. It also incorporates modernity in 'the strange unfailing water system,' and 'the wonder of gaslight,' which co-exists with candles, an older and more expensive system of lighting. Mrs Bailey's system thus exists as a polar opposite to Crosby's painstaking housekeeping which enforces the discipline of the patriarchal household ~~run according to~~^{ruled over by} Colonel Pargiter's rules. (Literally embodying the house in her own appearance, however, Mrs Bailey remains associated with downstairs and the basement of the house, ~~while~~^{in which} Miriam occupies the attic room, marginalized, yet associated with the 'head.')

5. Life in Flaxman Square:

The third situation of course, is that of economically autonomous single women taking the onus of domestic labour onto their own shoulders, instead of engaging paid domestic service. Miriam begins her time in a flat in Flaxman Square by questioning her own assumptions about domesticity, and wondering whether she can use this opportunity to learn the ropes of domestic labour from Miss Holland, her flat-mate. She wonders whether she can explore her own identity in the process:

⁴Miriam wondered whether, after all, housework might not hold some strange charm. Something that was lacking in a life lived altogether in the world of men; altogether on the surface of things. Always, in relation to household women, she felt herself a man.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸⁵ Richardson, *The Trap*, 412.

This queer energy that Miriam brings to this flat sharing, however, eventually devolves into a system which mirrors a heterosexual marriage, even as the two women split costs between themselves. Miriam goes out to the office where she works every day, and takes the responsibility of paying the rent and dealing with the landlord, while Miss Holland stays at home and takes care of all the domestic chores. This is in contrast to Miriam's life in Tansley Street, where Miriam had to take time off from her plans to socialize, in order to get her room in order, which would in turn help her to get through the working week.⁵⁸⁶ However, the Flaxman experiment goes wrong because Miriam develops an intense dislike for Miss Holland. Moreover, she finds that she is unable to feel at home in the flat:

‘This stillness was impermeable. Wrapped within it the rooms disowned her... Bereavement. Not only of her self [sic], left behind irrevocably in the old room, but also now that she surveyed it undisturbed by Miss Holland's supporting presence, of the bright motley of her outside life. Everything had thinned, was going thinly forward without depth of background. ...

If she were living alone in them? *She imagined herself living alone in them, and at once the tide of her life began to rise and flow out and change them. They dropped their ancient preoccupations and turned friendly faces towards her, promising welfare.*

But as long as she stayed in them accompanied they would acquire no depth. Their depth was the level of her relationship to Miss Holland. ...

All through the week in coming home late each evening to the certainty of talk, to hurried sleep in the orderliness created by Miss Holland, there had been a glad sense of life renewed ...

Apart from that life they were nothing. They stood defined, mean and dismal, crushing her.⁵⁸⁷ (my italics)

The failure of Miriam's experiment at co-sharing a flat is interesting, given that Miriam invariably responds enthusiastically to all the places she comes to stay in after leaving her parents' house. Only Flaxman represents 'enclosure in squalor' for her.⁵⁸⁸ But paradoxically,

⁵⁸⁶ Richardson, *The Tunnel*, 320-322.

⁵⁸⁷ Richardson, *The Trap*, 446-7.

⁵⁸⁸ Richardson, *March Moonlight*, 'Chapter VII,' 1967; n.p.: Virago, 2002, ebook, accessed from fadedpage.com <https://www.fadedpage.com/showbook.php?pid=20180883>

Flaxman is the one place where Miriam is actually free from ‘squalor,’ as the passage from *The Trap* quoted in the previous chapter, about Miriam’s bureau, illustrates.

Miriam’s dislike of Flaxman’s is apparently linked to a snobbish dislike of the humdrum, unimaginative life that Miss Holland expects her ~~to~~ conform to, yet it is also interesting to notice that Miriam’s alienation from the objects arranged in the rooms at Flaxman, stem not only from having to share them, but also from the fact that Miriam does not perform the work of caring for these things. By coming to perform the temporal patterns of the male breadwinner, Miriam gets the due of the working husband, i.e. ‘orderliness’ and companionship in her home-space, but the special relationship that she ~~had~~ with her room in Tansley Street, when left alone to negotiate with the dust and grit, is lost. Miriam’s queerness, caught up with her identity as a woman earning her own keep in the male world of a dentist’s surgery, locates her on the edges of roles performed within a household economy, her ability to ‘extend’ herself, to use Sara Ahmed’s term, over the space she calls home ~~comes~~ ~~into~~ its own only when she lives by herself, without the presence of an Other to demarcate her performance of gender.⁵⁸⁹

Miriam’s ‘freedom,’ comes from her powerful impetus to refuse to mimic the patterns of bourgeois domesticity, refusing to settle happily ~~into~~ a self-sufficient and private home, ~~cooking~~ ~~its own meals and~~ ~~kept~~ ~~clean~~ with the help of gendered labour available ‘within’ the household. Instead, she chooses to embrace the lodging house where she feels part of a community which does not claim any ‘exacting personal relationship,’ or impose the bonds which even an imitation of bourgeois domesticity imposes.⁵⁹⁰ To settle down into a ‘marriage’

⁵⁸⁹ Sara Ahmed, 109-110.

⁵⁹⁰ Richardson, *Dawn’s Left Hand*, first published in 1931, in *Pilgrimage*, Vol 4, 195-196.

with Miss Holland would stifle Miriam's role as a dissenter from normative domestic relationships.

However, Miriam's feelings of suffocation also reveal anxieties about her class position which underlie her proud assertion of her ability to thrive despite her marginalized position in familial networks and the marketplace for white collar jobs. Indeed, perhaps what Miriam finds so revolting in flat-sharing with Miss Holland, is an 'impoverished' pattern of life, not merely because she finds Miss Holland narrow-minded but also because Miriam and Miss Holland are imitating a model of working-class domesticity, where paid domestic service is absent and the 'wife' undertakes the labour of keeping the home fit to live in. Domestic labour cannot therefore be pushed onto the shoulders of 'servants,' and Miriam has to deal with the fact that the person who carries out this labour is someone she is forced to recognize as her social equal.

As I will discuss consequently, Sara Pargiter and Crosby are required to face their existence as abject subjects, unable to part with the human subject who has been expelled from the body politic (the Jew and the exile from East Europe) in their rooms of their own, or the effluvia expelled from the human body literally lining the space of cleanliness i.e. a bathtub. Miriam's moment of abjection in Flaxman's square, on the other hand, comes with the realization she is unable to separate herself from the routines of normative domesticity. Flaxman's is a space where the subject undertaking domestic labour can no longer be rendered invisible.⁵⁹¹ The very cleanliness, is thus a mark of the 'squalid' presence of the abject figure of the working-class housewife, ~~who~~. As is reflected in de Beauvoir's words quoted earlier, Miss Holland seen as a creature driven by the narrow struggle against 'dirt' instead of being a subject who can't~~the~~

⁵⁹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), esp page 4.

'broad-mindedly' embrace ~~of~~ untidy living, an attitude which has traditionally been the privilege of those who need not be defined by this labour.

Living on her own in Tansley Street, while Mrs Bailey takes care of the minimal standards of cleanliness in her room, allows Miriam to live the life of the mind, overlooking the 'squalor,' and thus approximating the life of a 'bachelor' who can afford to go slack on the higher standards of household order that 'family life' produces. The services of Mrs Bailey, a beloved presence, who never occupies the position of a social equal, are therefore a crucial part of Miriam Henderson's role as an independent, modernist subject, earning the rent for her room of her own through paid labour and using the room to engage in creative labour, as she embarks on a literary career.⁵⁹²

6. The Count/ Jew in the Bath:

In *The Years*, written over the mid-1930s, Woolf problematizes these freedoms by dwelling upon the revulsion felt by lodgers when negotiating with the persistent presence of people outside their family in intimate settings. These people are the Polish 'Count' in Crosby's lodgings in Richmond, and Abrahamson, the Jew in Sara Pargiter's rooms in Hyams place.⁵⁹³ In both chapters, these men leave behind bodily detritus in commonly shared ceramic baths, so as to be

⁵⁹² Indeed, in this context, it is interesting to note the presence of Sissie, Mrs Bailey's daughter, who dwells on the margins of *Pilgrimage*. Known by her mother to be a clever and resourceful girl, Sissie could at one point in her life have made the attempt to get white collar work like Miriam's by learning skills such as typing or book-keeping (Miriam promises her mother to look out for Sissie and guide her choice of career but we do not know if these promises are kept.) Sissie takes French lessons from Miriam, (who has received the education of a daughter of the leisure classes, and briefly pursued the genteel career of a governess,) in order to have a 'chance' with the foreigners in her mother's lodgings and make Mrs Bailey's establishment more accessible to customers, finally graduating into becoming a landlady in her own right, shouldering the responsibilities of Mrs Bailey's establishment. In this role, she snoops on Miriam and reads the letters Miriam receives from lovers, passing judgment on Miriam and Amabel when they live in Tansley Street. Sissie Bailey thus emerges as an alternative trajectory to Miriam, Amabel, or Mary Datchett's narratives, caught in the confines of the house which she is the owner of, but can never escape from. (Richardson, *Interim*, 329-330; *Deadlock*, 38-39; *Clear Horizon, Pilgrimage*, Vol III, London: J.M. Dent, 1938, first published in 1935, 274-278.)

⁵⁹³ Woolf, *The Years*, 339-341, 301-303.

textbook examples of Douglas and Julia Kristeva's ideas about the dangers of 'marginal stuff,' culturally treated as abominable.⁵⁹⁴ Both Sara and Crosby abuse these men behind their backs in unambiguously xenophobic terms, and feel denigrated to have to share bathrooms with them. Their fierce reactions, would serve as exemplars of the biases that underlie the identity of the modern, Occidental subject as one who operates according to a scientific logic of hygiene, rather than a 'primitive' logic of pollution which regards 'unclean' matter as invested with inherently dangerous qualities.⁵⁹⁵ Sara and Crosby do not regard the hair and the spit they encounter in shared bathrooms 'merely' as dirt they can shrug off, but rather as matter which will spread the pollution that the originators of the effluvia, the 'yellow foreigner' and the working-class Jew, are seen as carriers of in inter-war England.

The 'Jew in the Bath' episode stands out as especially shocking given that Sara exists in this house where the 'bells don't ring and the taps don't run,' in an impoverished neighbourhood without conforming to the standards which her cousin North expects her to conform, given her upper middle class British upbringing. She offers friendship, hospitality, and literature without apologizing for her circumstances.⁵⁹⁶ Like Miriam's room, Sara's room is a furnished lodging house room where the furniture, and tableware, though not her own, [areis](#) rendered beautiful through the shifting lights from the street as darkness falls, as explored in the previous chapter. But is this domestic interior, thus excitingly porous to the light, sound, and energy of the public sphere, also linked to the British Union of Fascists graffiti seen by North Pargiter on a wall in Sara's street?⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹⁴ Douglas, 122, Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

⁵⁹⁵ Douglas.

⁵⁹⁶ Woolf, *The Years*, 321.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 348-350.

Like Miriam, Sara takes the inversion of the proprieties of housekeeping in her stride. When the joint of mutton is underdone, the blood from the meat pooling into the serving dish, Sara and North decide to eat it just as it is without worrying about it.⁵⁹⁸ Douglas points out that dirt is problematic and dangerous as long as it has an ‘identity,’ or remains ‘raw bits of whatever it was they came from.’⁵⁹⁹ But if this is so, what makes the ‘line of grease’ left by the Jew in the bathtub essentially more loathsome than the blood from the meat, since both of them share the status of being dirt that still has links to what it used to be? Lodgings allow subjects to invert accepted proprieties and disciplines of cleanliness, to co-exist with things that one is not the sole owner-consumer of, and with accumulations of detritus that signify one’s autonomy. However, conflict arises when marks of an outsider to the body politic one remains attached to, (despite breaking away from its heteropatriarchal standards of domesticity,) are left upon the things one has wishes to share, even for the feminist subject.⁶⁰⁰

Moreover, as Tracey Hargreaves points out, the dirt that Abrahamson leaves is also a mark of his status as a working class man. According to McClintock, dirt, especially on colonized or working class bodies is threatening in imperial England because it functions as a ‘memory trace’ that value is created by labour, and not by the ‘abstract, rational principles of the market.’ Abrahamson’s presence in the bathroom triggers Sara’s rant about the sordidness of the lodging house and the stinking, dirty city she inhabits, which is in turn interpreted as a reference to the fact that she has to earn her own living.⁶⁰¹ For Sara, and for Miriam, the autonomous space paid for by one’s own earned income, delivers these shocks which bring out their ideological

⁵⁹⁸ Woolf ibid, *The Years*, 318.

⁵⁹⁹ Douglas, 160.

⁶⁰⁰ For a detailed analysis of baths and dirt in Woolf’s oeuvre, focusing on *The Years*, please refer to Rosner, 59-90, Zink 153- 183, for a specific discussion of Woolf’s politics over ethnicity in this scene, please see Tracey Hargreaves, ‘I Should Explain He Shares My Bath:’ Art and Politics in *The Years’ English: The Journal of the English Association*, 50 (2001): 183-98.

⁶⁰¹ Woolf, *The Years*, 340-341.

inheritance as daughters of the rentier class, transforming the cherished and beautiful room into, in Sara's words, 'this cave, this little antre, scooped out of mud and dung.'⁶⁰²

One of the rules governing how the room of one's own should be furnished then, for women like Sara and Miriam, is that the dirt and disorder should be one's 'own,' or brought into being by one's position at the head of this 'one roomed' household (i.e. the improperly cooked meat being served up by a servant-). ~~States of cleanliness and D~~dirt, when ~~produced~~mediated by subjects whose status as outsiders to capitalism and patriarchy, are due to their lack of access to cultural capital (i.e. Miss Holland, the Polish count, and Abrahamson) ~~is~~are in fact unbearable to both women.

7. Piped Water, Piped Gas, Electricity

Given this fraught context, it is important to factor in how Woolf and Richardson were both witness to a period of rapid change in the material conditions of domestic labour. Piped gas, oil for fuel, and electricity were becoming increasingly available for use, as alternatives to household coal, even as gas remained up to five times as expensive as coal in the 1920s, and electricity was even more expensive.⁶⁰³ Both women would have been the first generation to grow up in urban English homes which had pipes and taps for running water, an amenity that began to spread to homes only after the middle of the nineteenth century, even as they would have been aware of working class districts, even in London, where as late as 1934, it was the rule rather than the exception to have running water from public taps. It was even more of an exception to access running water indoors in rural areas.⁶⁰⁴ Yet, as mentioned earlier, these

⁶⁰² ~~Woolf, *It*~~*The Years*, 189.

⁶⁰³ Caroline Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles 1650-1950*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1982, 33-34, 73-100; Flanders 'The Drawing Room.'

⁶⁰⁴ Davidson, 28-32.

networks were expanding, interacting with houses in a symbiotic fashion - the networks expanding so as to reach more and more houses, while houses were simultaneously being built along the supply lines.

If, as described by Anne McClintock, commodity capitalism in the nineteenth century had promised to remove all traces of the labour of working class maids in the middle class household through the use of mass produced commodities which could be brought home in packages, the early twentieth century brought with it a promise of homes being 'equipped' with hyperobjects.

Piped water, sewage, gas, and electricity bore the promise that they would make household labour magically easier to perform. The provision of these technologies was located at an ideological crossroads. On one hand, piped supplies of gas, electricity, and water were owned by private corporations, but on the other hand, from the nineteenth century onwards, there was a need to look at such services as a part of philanthropic projects, especially for the urban poor.⁶⁰⁵ As demonstrated by Annmarie Adams, an interest in plumbing, and providing good sanitary infrastructure, were a crucial part of housing reform in the nineteenth century.⁶⁰⁶

Various forms of 'lavatory accommodation,' and piped water supplies proliferate in *The Years*, from the repeatedly malfunctioning plumbing in the working-class housing scheme organized by Eleanor Pargiter at the turn of the century, to the lack of bathrooms in her own family house in the West End of London, which makes the house difficult to sell off in 1910.⁶⁰⁷ Eleanor's housing scheme appears to resemble Octavia Hill's, in the presence of a landlady who regularly looks after the house and makes sure repairs and improvements are in order, takes an interest in the health and well-being of her tenants, and spends all the money she collects for rent on

⁶⁰⁵Davidson, 28-32.

⁶⁰⁶Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses and Women 1870-1900* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

⁶⁰⁷Woolf, *The Years*, 215, 97-100.

repairs. It is significant that while Hill scrupulously stressed the importance of repairing the sanitary systems of the tenements of the urban poor, she categorically refused to put in new appliances of any kind until ‘they had proved themselves capable of taking care of them.’⁶⁰⁸

Eleanor perpetuates Hill’s economy of distributing largesse to the working class by employing Judd the plumber, giving him a chance for proving himself ‘deserving,’ and contemplates dismissing him, if she can make up her mind as to whether has been cheating her. However, the price of mistakes in plumbing, are paid for by the homemakers occupying the rooms of her model tenement, whose sinks and drains are jammed.

It is of crucial importance that the homemakers who have to deal with the fall-out of the home-making, philanthropic project which Eleanor jettisons, are left to operate within a framework in which they are forced to deal with a system of plumbing which they have little agency over. When the sinks in their tenement houses are clogged, or when damp causes their ceilings to disintegrate, these women have little hope of getting a solution, since the plumbing can only be fixed by a man who has the equipment and specific knowledge required to fix these problems, and who puts his profit before their needs.⁶⁰⁹ The constituent parts of this water supply, which is meant to cater to the needs of households, cannot be manipulated by the people who live in these households. Moreover, this ‘immovable’ structure of plumbing is held in place by the equally rigid hierarchy of nineteenth century philanthropy, the middle class lady functioning as an intermediary between the working class homemaker and the plumber.

In her old age, Eleanor, much admired by the younger generation of the Pargiters for her travelling the world in her old age and her ability to speak her mind, comes to live in a

⁶⁰⁸ Hill, p68.

⁶⁰⁹ Woolf, *The Years*, 97- 100.

‘workman’s flat,’ where, however, she installs a modern shower bath which she proudly shows her guests.⁶¹⁰ Eleanor’s reflections in the galley proofs of *The Years*, about the bathroom that she comes to inhabit, assume a crucial paradox:

‘She went into the bathroom. It gave her a thrill of pleasure. It was lined with gleaming white tiles; the taps shone silver; jars and brushes stood on a shining glass shelf. She lit the geyser; water instantly began to steam into the pure white bath. At Abercorn Terrace the water always ran cold, she remembered. She began to undress. Yes, she thought, as she as she slipped of her clothes, and hung them on a silver hook, this is a luxury, a hot bath. And, to think, she thought, taking the pins out of her hair, that if I had a quarter of a millionth part of the money - she saw Rigby Cottages again and the sunflower with a crack down the middle, I could have... But what’s the use of thinking? she thought. The steam rose in a cloud; she turned on the cold tap. She waited for a moment for the water to be cool enough to get into. She was stark naked; the window had no blind. She stood looking at the dappled iridescence of the moon-lit sky, which seemed to make her bathroom whiter, cleaner, more dazzling in its purity than ever; and then she stepped in.’⁶¹¹ (Woolf’s ellipses)

Eleanor’s life would thus appear to be a trajectory from the unsatisfactory philanthropy of her youth while based in the middle class house in the West End of London, which left her feeling profoundly guilty and inadequate, to the ‘workman’s flat,’ where she inhabits a working class space equipped with modern technology, so as to do away with the drudgery of water chores that working class women traditionally performed, whether as a part of paid or unpaid labour. This flat does away with the uneasy suppression of the body which characterized life at her parents’ house, where the large family had shared one bathroom, each person always trying to get ahead of the others in order to secure the luxury of a bath, and manages to establish a space in which an embodied female presence can revel in a sense of privacy and security. Rather than presenting or shielding her naked body vis a vis from an intrusive gaze, she is the spectator who gazes at the modern domestic space of a bathroom. Her close examination of the colours and the lustre of

⁶¹⁰ Woolf, *The Years* ibid., 331.

⁶¹¹ Woolf, ‘Wartime London,’ galley proofs of episodes excluded during final revisions of *The Years*, in ‘Appendix’ to *Virginia Woolf’s The Years: The Evolution of a Novel*, variorum edition of *The Years*, ed. Grace Radin (Knoxville: Tennessee University Press, 1981) C_B480-481,

her bathroom fittings, are like Miriam's moments of wonder at her furniture, an example of the form of 'looking' advocated by Fry.⁶¹²

At the same time, it is important to note ~~that~~ that Eleanor is troubled by thoughts of her old plans. The gleaming white tiles rupture her appreciation of modernity, by reminding her of the cracked terracotta tile which had adorned her model tenement, which had gone hopelessly aground because of chronic problems with the drains, the price of which was largely paid by the housewives in the tenement. The abrupt foreclosure of the project ~~which involved improving the drainage of working class houses,~~ signals the foreclosure of a different kind of modernity, which had a vision of a society in which the benefits of science and technology would be more evenly distributed. Unable to access funds which would make this public project possible, Eleanor accesses the funds that are available to her personally as the daughter of a prosperous man who has benefitted from the Empire. She dwells in this space which is called a 'workman's flat,' except that workmen and working class homemakers are absent, and, as she is reminded, do not have access to the pleasures and comforts of this modern bathroom.

8. Crosby and the Bath: Shaping the Aged Body for New Forms of Domestic Labour

Woolf further complicates this trajectory by juxtaposing Eleanor's life in the mid-1930s with one of Crosby's mornings in 1918 in the aftermath of the Armistice in 1918. Crosby's encounter with the bath tub used by a fellow-lodger in her lodging house in Richmond, who calls himself a Polish count has received less scholarship than Abrahamson's bathing in *The Years*. However, I would argue that Crosby's dilemma in 1918 is critical in understanding Woolf's reading of the

⁶¹² It is interesting to note that Eleanor's bathroom is close to the standards of the healthy bathroom in which the athletic human (male) body is celebrated, as postulated by Le Corbusier. (trans. Frederick Etchells, first published in English in London: John Rodeker, 1931 (~~Dover Publications: New York, 1986~~))

gendered tenant's position at a moment where the material circumstances household spaces were rapidly changing:

[Crosby] had had some words that morning with Mrs Burt about the Count's bath. He spat in it, and Mrs Burt had told her to clean it.

"Count indeed—he's no more Count than you are," she continued. She was talking to Mrs Burt now. "I'm quite willing to oblige you," she went on. Even out here, in the mist, where she was free to say what she liked, she adopted a conciliatory tone, because she knew that they wanted to be rid of her... It was no pleasure to her to live in the house anymore; but there was nowhere else for her to go; that the Burts knew very well.

... But the truth was that she was no longer able to work as she had done. Her legs pained her. It took all the strength out of her to do her own shopping, let alone to clean the bath...

"Drabs...hussies," she muttered. She was now addressing the red-haired servant girl who had flung out of the house yesterday without warning. *She* could easily get another job. It didn't matter to her. So it was left to Crosby to clean the Count's bath.

"Dirty brute, dirty brute," she repeated; her pale-blue eyes glared impotently. She saw once more the blob of spittle that the Count had left on the side of his bath—the Belgian who called himself a Count. "I've been used to work for gentlefolk, not for dirty foreigners like you," she told him as she hobbled.⁶¹³

I would argue that Crosby's anger is certainly the product of an internalized discourse of racism, and to the abjection of her own position as the constitutive limit of the upper middle class imperial family she has spent her life shoring up, but also, that this anger also depends on the nature of the unpaid work that is being dumped upon her.

Firstly, the increased visibility of physical traces of the body left after taking a bath₂ are a product of modern technologies that find a place in the household at the turn of the twentieth century. While it is easy to notice how Woolf historicizes the hip bath at 22 Hyde Park Gate and the systems of cleanliness in the Carlyle household, the pumping and carrying of water up flights

⁶¹³ Woolf, *The Years*, 302-305.

of stairs that characterized the daily tenor of Victorian life, it is also important to notice that she also historicizes the labour surrounding bathtubs in *The Years*.⁶¹⁴ In the first half of the twentieth century, the fixed ceramic bath would have been quite a new invention, and certainly, it was something that Woolf herself acquired in her own house, only in the 1930s, according to her letters and diaries from that period. It was of course, supposed to encourage cleanliness for obvious reasons. It was easy to fill, and being ceramic, it would have allowed the water to stay hot for longer. Moreover, ceramics were associated with making ‘civilized’ standards more accessible, as mass produced china had changed the use of crockery for the English poor. Being a permanent fixture, it encouraged the existence of designated spaces for bathing, and was thus intimately aligned to new patterns of plumbing.⁶¹⁵

However, if we look at its physical presence carefully, the ceramic bath does not make life ‘easier’ in a simple way. As Ruth Cowan Schwartz points out in the American context:

“Cleaning a bathroom was not light work; and, given the frequency with which the room was used, and the seriousness of the diseases that might result from unsanitary conditions, it was not casual work either... Thus, if it makes sense to say that, in the absence of modern water-supply systems, women (and other members of the family) had to “produce” water for cooking and hot water for bathing and laundering, then it also makes sense to say that, with such systems women have to “produce” clean toilets, bathtubs, and sinks...”⁶¹⁶

Eleanor’s shining new bathroom, aligned to Corbusier’s vision of a house in which the machinery of producing a healthy and clean human body, is seamlessly integrated into a total system extending across the topos of the ‘home’ country of the British Empire. But this space needs to be maintained in a state in which it can be seen as a modern domestic interior through

⁶¹⁴Rosner 59-90.

⁶¹⁵ For a discussion of the historical circumstances in which ceramic bathtubs came into being in the West in the first half of the twentieth century, please see, Davidson, 7-32, 133, and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, London: Free Association Books, 1982, 13, 85-89.

⁶¹⁶ Schwartz Cowan, 88-89,

the routines of domestic labour. The work of the maids in the Carlyle family is not rendered obsolete, it is merely re-formulated, for the Baileys in *Pilgrimage*, and for Crosby in her old age in *The Years*. Without the homemakers' reproduction of a standard of cleanliness, day after day, the desired end product of the network of water-supply, a population of clean and healthy human subjects, could not be produced. After all, the Polish count, and Abrahamson are probably not even aware of the reactions they arouse in Crosby and Sara, they have merely used the bathtub for its 'appointed function,' expecting that invisible female hands, whether paid or unpaid, will clean up after them.

Given that it depends upon the technology of being drainable through a pipe which can be blocked or unblocked at will, the process of bathing in a bathtub leaves behind the water-indissoluble dirt that might be partly be swilled out if the water were chucked out by hand. More crucially, the ceramic bath requires a different kind of bodily labour to clean it out. Apparently, a more convenient device, the fixed bath is more unwieldy for the person cleaning the bath, as instead of the bath being moved around, as it would have been if it was a portable metal tub, the person cleaning it has to shape their bodily movements according to the shape of the bath in order to get the right angle at which to clean it. For even a moderately sized bath, one needs to assume postures that involve lowering a part of one's own body 'into' the bath in order to rub unwanted matter off the surface.

Crosby's angst at having ~~to~~ come down in the world, to find herself washing the bath after a 'yellow foreigner' is of course shaped by her xenophobia and her own identity as a superior servant. However, her humiliation is also shaped, I would argue, by the fact that when she 'did' for gentlefolks, the state of her own body in her youth, as well as the technology of cleaning

allowed her to assume a degree of flexibility and control over the stuff she cleaned, polished and gained an intimate knowledge of.

In the moment in which Crosby confronts a gob of spit which impresses itself upon her perception with the same vividness with which the furniture she had cared for had confronted her, we are drawn into an assemblage, to use Jane Bennett's term, in which several agents emerge as political forces. Caught between the count who uses the bathtub without regard for others who might have to deal with it and clean it, the material surface of the bathtub, the landlady's expectation that Crosby should make herself skills as a servant useful, the employers who have tied her down to these lodgings with nowhere else to go to, and the modern plumbing system to which the bath is attached, Crosby finds herself at a point where her very expertise makes her eligible as a victim to new regimes of domestic labour.

Crosby is stuck because the praxis of domestic labour, instead of becoming more 'labour saving' has in fact become more punishing. Instead of becoming more flexible, the taps are fixed, and the bath is fixed, and the domestic worker has to figure out how to work with this system of fixtures. The space which ought to grant Crosby autonomy becomes a space to which she is tied and where she is still vulnerable to the demands made on her by those she shares a home with, replicating both the quasi-familial, feudal terms of domestic service, as well as the framing of servants as liminal creatures caught between cleanliness and whiteness on the one hand, and dirt and racial deviance on the other, that characterized Victorian domestic service and the bodies of those who performed this service.⁶¹⁷ The role of the bath-tub as an immovable fixture in the modern bathroom is thus consolidated by the understanding that there already exists a social

⁶¹⁷ McClintock, 75-180, Humphreys, 109-137.

structure, which relentlessly attempts to fix women into roles in which they can be pressurized into performing vis a vis ever proliferating forms of domestic labour.

Crosby's inability to negotiate the terms on which she stays here are also related to her position as a woman and a lodger, who, unlike other protagonists of Woolf or Richardson, cannot move from the lodgings which her previous employers have chosen for her. Moreover, in light of Hill's specific targeting of the 'daughters' of working class homes as subjects who could 'oblige' or carry out unpaid labour outside the limits of their personal space, Crosby's position appears to be an important strand in the legacy that this discourse had in the twentieth century. Unable to leave these lodgings, Crosby's painful undertaking of hard labour 'gratis' for her landlady in her old age, could in fact be the realization of Hill's ideal that landladies in the field of urban housing could approximate the methods of rural landlords (present all over the empire) and extract labour from tenants, tied to their plots of land.

9. Conclusion: Staying with Crosby

Crosby's experience as a lodger thus functions as the anti-thesis of the movement away from the rigours of unpaid domestic labour imposed by the family which independent, rented rooms of one's own were supposed to promise or the freedom of movement that such lodgings grant people like Sara, Eleanor or Miriam. The room of her own, is not really her own, but is only the room that landlord^s and employers in a capitalist regime can allot to her in order to effectively extract her labour. If the fixities of Abel Pargiter's house have been dismantled, and we are promised a new beginning away from the patriarchal household in the lodging house or the workman's flat, we still find ourselves in the midst of formulations of abject subjects, objects,

and forms of labour. These continue to perpetuate a new set of quotidian ‘tyrannies’ (to use one of Woolf’s favourite words for patriarchy) through which gendered labour can be appropriated.

On the one hand, this chapter has shown, how Richardson arrives at an honest exposition of the way in which ~~how~~ the ‘autonomous’ feminine subject’s delight in reading an autonomous aesthetic in her own lodgings is clouded by her fear of being surrounded by the signifiers of working class reproductive labour. The abject figure of the woman defined solely by her role as a provider of domestic labour is seen as a creator of normative domestic interiors, in which every constituent part of the home is fixed into an unimaginative domestic landscape, and must hence be replaced by the working class landlady, who has no pretensions to being a social equal. On the other hand, in *The Years*, Woolf dwells upon an exploration of limits to extending and embracing the sensuous materiality of the rooms one shares with people outside the heteropatriarchal family by exposing how the provider of domestic labour is constantly threatened with being reduced to a cog in the wheel of athe culture of fixed material parts, and immovably fixed roles for women and the non-human objects in the domestic labour. Mrs Brown’s capacity for being an old woman of ‘unlimited capacity and infinite variety,’ who builds a home which can never be exhaustively written out by writers, ~~who concede to patriarchal capitalism~~ is thus constantly under threat. She is constantly vulnerable to being reduced to operating in a household where all the ‘fixtures,’ including herself, are stuck in immovable ‘positions’ and roles, under the systems through which her domestic labour is appropriated in industrial capitalism.⁶¹⁸

Absent at the family gathering of the Pargiters at the end of *The Years*, even though we are told she is still alive, Crosby’s existence spills over into *Three Guineas* (1938), as a topic of

⁶¹⁸ Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, 24.

conversation to brought up to smooth things over, if the atmosphere of a gathering becomes uncomfortable when the question of admitting ‘the daughters of educated men to the Church or the Stock Exchange or the diplomatic service’ is raised.⁶¹⁹ Yet, as *The Years* points out, the topic of ‘the old family servant called Crosby, perhaps, whose dog Rover has died,’ raises questions about the limits of formulations of modern homes and domesticity made by the ‘daughters of educated men’ themselves. Crosby thus emerges as the new modernist gendered subject, trapped in the nightmarish history of modernizing domestic spaces, and domestic labour.

Crosby as a ‘topic of conversation’ might be used in order to function as a signifier ~~as a figure~~ symbolic of women who do not threaten to join ‘the Church or the stock exchange or the diplomatic service,’ and unquestioningly continue to care for the ‘less-than-human’ objects like an ailing family dog, even after they have been discarded themselves.⁶²⁰ However, Crosby sitting alone in the park, after being hustled out of a shopping queue, while guns announce the Armistice; (proving that in the British Empire, instruments of violence will continue to be in use even in peacetime); is a position from which a new formulation of what constitutes ‘subject and object and the nature of reality’ might be reformulated. Given that Crosby does not die at the end of *The Years*, the possibility that this close knowledge of ‘every groove, stain, knife, and fork,’ present in the household, might yet produce a new vision of ‘the nature of reality,’ which will expose the politics of manipulating the objects of the domestic interior, into traps for the subject marginalized on the grounds of sex and class.

Yet, Woolf’s gendered subjects themselves are not free of biases which limit their pursuit of rooms of their own, any more than the author in whose work they dwell as characters. If Roger

⁶¹⁹ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 196-197.

⁶²⁰ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 196-197.

Fry had participated in the project of invisibilizing both racial minorities and working class women from his artistic worldview with his biographer's blessing, when Woolf writes about Sara and Crosby she is critically aware of how both women deliberately embrace the xenophobia of the inter-war years. Neither the working class Crosby nor the middle class Sara are able to read the material traces on the surface of the bath as material traces, but instead are compelled by their biases as the products of an inter-war Britain, to read them as signifiers of the racial others they understand to be 'degrading' and abject presences.

Conclusion

1. 'A Many Sided Substance'

“‘The flower,’ said Bernard, ‘the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives...’”

“Marriage, death, travel, friendship,” said Bernard “town and country; children and all that; a many-sided substance cut out of this dark; a many faceted flower...”⁶²¹

As it draws to a close, this dissertation, like *The Waves*, appears to have assumed the structure of a flower, with six chapters spreading out like petals, in different directions, yet inextricably dependent on each other. This is, of course, informed by the structure of the research question located at its core, i.e. how domestic labour informs those aspects of Woolf’s writing which question the supremacy of the masculine subject as the interpreter of objects in the domestic interior, and posit other, alternative ways of understanding the dynamics of a domestic space.² The quest to seek this ‘how’ did not yield an argument with a simple linear structure culminating in ‘a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever.’⁶²² Instead, it has devolved into this branching structure, along the nodes of which are scattered various dissimilar pieces of furniture and women, bowls of milk, heirlooms, Post-Impressionists pots and paintings, second-hand bureaus, ceramic baths, the clothes of Charlotte Brontë, and the wall-paper of Jane Carlyle.

The thesis tries to tie together a number of discourses about how subaltern human subjects can interact with the non-human world. It incorporates a critique of how we, assigning to ourselves the position of human subjects, relate to each other *through* objects and/or commodities in a capitalist society, with explorations of how we try to exist *with* objects, and how we understand

⁶²¹ Woolf, *The Waves*, 162.

⁶²² Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 6.

our society as a place in which the human and the non-human exist in a continuum rather than a binary. In my study, Woolf as a writer assumes the various (and contradictory) positions the chapters of this thesis explore. She emerges at once, as the writer who sticks with the question of how subjects are shaped by their labour, the writer who is shockingly blind to the same question, and the writer who, in a magnificent feat of self-reflexivity, points out the blindness of the liberal classes who hope to dismantle the military industrial complex which bombs homes in Spain, while expecting ‘maids to cook the dinner and wash up afterwards.’

Crosby, as it were, brings us to the vanishing point of this study. Whether the kitchen table will become a site on which a mass in B minor will be written by the kitchen-maid, or the poor women’s college will teach the ‘arts of talk, of dress, of cookery,’ having done away with the expensive and historic furnishings of the wealthy men’s colleges, ‘carved stone and stained glass... chained books and first editions under glass cases,’ remains an adventure Woolf bides us to wait and watch for, rather than presume to take up the burden of narrating.⁶²³ We are also left biding our time for narratives in which the material world can be responsibly understood without normative readings of domesticity, abjection, and hygiene shaping the ~~white-gendered~~ subject’s response to the world of human subjects and non-human objects.

2. Afterlives

Gendered relationships with non-human objects and domestic spaces, are of course, shaped by time and space and have mutated into different forms since Woolf’s death in 1941, the year that saw the final death-knell of paid domestic service in Britain, as the workforce who had

⁶²³Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 49.

performed this labour were almost entirely absorbed into the military-industrial complex, ~~unless the employer could cite exceptional circumstances.~~

Yet, this did not mean that women across class groups were ‘liberated’ from reproductive labour. In the Western hemisphere, the post-WW2 years were characterized by the relentless pressure on women to be stay at home wives and mothers, and assume responsibility for ~~a~~-producing a docile and productive labour force. At the same time, in the domestic interior, the modernist *zeitgeist* found expression in the mass production of what Baudrillard characterizes as ‘functional’ furniture, as opposed to traditional pre-modernist furnishings. In contrast to the labour-guzzling, high-maintenance, nineteenth century furnishings, ‘functional’ furniture is characterized by lightness and convenience. However, as Baudrillard points out, a piece of post-1945 furniture~~it~~ is as much, if not more, tightly bound to the marketplace, as a ‘serial’ object, a portion of a sequence of consumption towards which the consumer is oriented, through advertising discourse. Correspondingly, the user is also tied into a new, but nonetheless normative method of using the domestic object, rather than establishing a unique relationship with it.

In 1970, Kate Millett would argue that in her novels, Woolf ‘glorified two housewives,’ (Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay) and recorded the struggles of Rhoda and Lily Briscoe, women who dissented from sexual mores, without trying to explore what caused these struggles, using the form of the essay, in *A Room of One’s Own* to investigate the structural causes of patriarchy, rather than fiction.⁶²⁴ Yet, Woolf was consequently re-interpreted by Selma James, in the 1980s and 90s, as cited at the beginning of this thesis. James, who advocates for the ‘Wages for Housework’ movement, pressing for domestic labour to be remunerated, and more broadly, for

⁶²⁴ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*. 1969; New York: Doubleday, 1970, 169, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/sexualpolitics00mill/mode/1up>.

all forms of unwaged work to be recognized as intrinsic ~~to~~ economic structures, points out that reproductive labour does in fact unite Woolf's fiction with her politically conscious prose. James, writing as an activist agitating for wages for housework, thus began ~~an~~ a tradition of reading texts like *To the Lighthouse* as an analysis of how women's reproductive labour enables human civilization, (and Mr Ramsay's academic career,) before reproductive labour became a concern for academic Woolf studies.⁶²⁵

Moreover, feminist intervention has taken up Woolf's project of facilitating the emergence of the kitchen table into a place of rightful prominence, while foregrounding the lived experiences of the subjects who dwell in the close contact with the kitchen table. If the printing press at Hogarth House, began operations on the dining table owned by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, in 1980-81, the Kitchen Table: Women of Color [sic] Press was founded by Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde and other feminists of colour with the express intention of creating a publishing house which would publish the work of feminists of colour. In 1921, the new piece of furniture acquired by the Woolfs, the Minerva treadle printing press, facilitated a realignment of the patterns of domestic service, as the machine was moved from the dining room, to the basement, ~~since~~ it posed the risk of falling through the floor and onto the cook's head, if left in an upstairs room.⁶²⁶ The Hogarth Press, thus caused the movement of domestic workers from the 'beetle-haunted basement' so that their employers, autodidacts in the art of printing, could experiment with this new piece of furniture, perhaps inspired by Roger Fry, the Post-Impressionist householder.

The Kitchen Table Press, as a vibrant assemblage of entangled networks of labour, energy, and technology propelled by human and non-human agents, took ~~as~~ its name from the relationship

⁶²⁵ Selma James, 'The Global Kitchen' 1985 in *Race, Sex, and Class: A Perspective of Winning* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012) 167, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/sexraceclasspers0000jame/mode/1up>.

⁶²⁶ Lee, 365.

between women of colour and a surface which shaped their labouring bodies, even as they shaped the surface through their labour. As Smith writes in 'A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table':

“We were saying that as women, feminists, and lesbians of color we had experiences and work to do in common, although we also had our differences... We chose our name because the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other. We also wanted to convey the fact that we are a kitchen table, grass roots operation, begun and kept alive by women who cannot rely on inheritances or other benefits of class privilege to do the work we need to do...”⁶²⁷

Through the title of this essay, Smith cites Woolf, but at the same time, this press simultaneously critiques and extends Woolf's vision, including in its ambit not just Crosby, but the black, enslaved, and inauthentically named Grace Robinson who sat silent in Lord Orlando's kitchen. The object of Mr Ramsay's enquiry 'a table when you're not there' is thus definitively replaced by the enquiries of working class women of colour, who are very much 'there' alongside the kitchen table, about the nature of their existence and their work in domestic spaces. It opens up the utopic possibility of a future when~~future that~~ the kitchen table and the cook of colour might finally come to collaborate on the 'mass in B minor,' bringing to light a different paradigm of domestic labour beyond the white feminist tradition of studying the role of domesticity in the lives of Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Jane Carlyle, and Virginia Woolf.⁶²⁸

Writing in 1982, Dolores Hayden concludes her study of patterns of domestic labour in America through two centuries, by talking about three contemporary situations- the arrival of a company car for a firm called 'Rent-A-Maid,' early in the morning, to pick up~~for~~ a number of women of

⁶²⁷ Barbara Smith, 'A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color [sic] Press,' *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 1989, Vol 10, no 3 (1989): 11-13.

⁶²⁸ Woolf, 'Speech Before the London/ National Society for Women's Service, January 21, 1931,' in *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: The New York Public Library and Readex Books, 1977) xxxiii, archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/pargitersnovel00wool/mode/lup>.

colour, in a poor neighbourhood, to take the women to an up market locality where they work as cleaners; a number of silent commuters eating mass-produced breakfasts in a fast food outlet before setting off to a long workday; a nuclear family with small children and two working parents hustling through the motions of getting ready in the morning, the father, mother and children performing the tasks they unthinkingly practice every day. Hayden writes that each of the American feminist thinkers she studied in her work, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, would have been able to pinpoint specific aspects of what was exploitative and unhealthy in these scenes from Hayden's everyday world. Yet, there is no single thinker who would produce an overarching analysis of the ways in which paid and unpaid labour play out against each other in late-capitalism. Moreover, she recognizes, there are aspects of exploitation in these scenes, which would entirely escape the canon of white feminists whose writings on reproductive labour have been saved up for posterity.⁶²⁹

This thesis was written in a time and space vastly different from the milieu in which Woolf lived and wrote. The tentacles of capitalist patriarchy have continued their project of extending themselves into people's lives all over the globe, moving past Woolf's lifetime and the spaces of the First World. Capitalism has continued to meet unequal societies located outside the Occident, and mutate into newer forms.

I wrote much of the thesis sitting in a block of apartment flats. In our building, some of the inhabitants have washing machines and some of us depend on paid domestic workers to wash our clothes. The water supplied to us by the municipality has, in recent years, become so salty to taste, that we now pay for our drinking water, 40 rupees for a big barrel that lasts half a week for

⁶²⁹ Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighbourhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1982) 303-305.

a family of three or four. We are used to seeing the lines of people who do not have supplies of running water at home, mostly women, at the public taps during the hours when the municipality supplies water. We also know that in summer the bore-wells nearby all dry up. However, to judge from the clothes strung up on the washing lines ~~strung-up~~ on our terrace, we are avid consumers of water and domestic labour when it comes to doing our laundry, since each family hangs out a load of washing every single day. In the age of the washing machine, as members of India's middle class, functioning between the rules of hygiene and ritual purity, we have accepted the norm of tossing most of our clothes into the laundry after a single wear, whether the clothes be washed by paid domestic workers, who subsidize our standards of living (we pay them sums that ensure they and their families remain below the poverty line) or by women in our families who sort the clothes, load the machine, unload it, hang them to dry, bring them in, iron them if required, fold them, and put them away as a routine part of the working day.

Like Hayden, looking at her everyday life, and then looking to the writers she had studied and researched, it is possible for me to look around me and then look at the paradigms that I had traced in my study of Woolf's oeuvre. It is possible to see links between my daily experience and the work of Woolf's and other modernists, even though, of course, the two do not map neatly onto each other. Looking, back, it is possible to see why certain details seemed to spring into significance and form networks for me. The fact that they caught my eye is as much about my exposure to the world around me and my need to find a way to articulate what I thought, as it is about what Woolf and the other writers I have studied wrote, thought, or lived through.

The domesticity and materiality that Woolf witnessed and wrote about are today recognizable as things of the past. If Woolf's lifetime saw the invention of Bakelite, the first fully synthetic 'plastic' that promised₂ in time₂ to do away with the need to extract the elephant and mammoth

tusks that Woolf saw being shipped from the margins of the world to London, the imperial centre, we live today in a world in which plastic has mutated into various forms which promise to outlast human civilization.⁶³⁰ While we use it every day in various forms to furnish our homes and our persons, it may well be furnishing forth our very existence, as microplastics in our bloodstreams.⁶³¹ Yet, the need for gendered negotiations with the material world has not grown irrelevant. Rather, the burden of negotiating with the impact of environmental degradation has fallen on the shoulders of women in the developing world, often in the sphere of routine domestic chores. It is significant then that Woolf scholarship has led in coming up with ecocritical readings of modernism.⁶³² As pointed out by Bonnie Kime Scott, Woolf's exploration of ways of 'blending with environment rather than imposing the self upon it' makes her aligned to many schools of ecofeminism.⁶³³

3. Limits and Limitations

This thesis was written with a lot of love and conviction, but even so, it is important to locate the limitations that are clear to me, at the end of writing it. It made sense to undertake a sustained study with Woolf's oeuvre at the centre, because, as I had stated at the beginning, literary modernism has been a fertile ground for studying how the conventional understanding of matter changed at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the aesthetics of the period as practiced in

⁶³⁰ Michael D Sloane, 'The Poetics of Modernism's Plastics,' in *Modernism and the Anthropocene: Material Ecologies of Twentieth Century Literature*, ed Jon Heggund and John McIntyre, (Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Lexington, 2021) 191- 208.

⁶³¹ Boscagli, 5 (see page 50 of this thesis)

⁶³² Michael Rubenstein and Justin Neuman, 'Introduction' to *Modernism and its Environments*, (New York, London, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) 11; for ecocritical readings of Woolf see for example Bonnie Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2012); and Kelly Sultzbach, 'The Phenomenological Whole: Virginia Woolf' in *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.)

⁶³³ Bonnie Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2012) 113.

the West, challenged the human subject's superiority over the material world. However, as the thesis progressed, it revealed that despite the many subversions taking place in modernist domestic interiors, despite the incisive critiques of an unequal society that modernist studies of subaltern figures offer, moments in which women and non-human objects can in fact blast apart the status quo of commodity capitalism are not present (to my best knowledge). I had to take recognition of the fact that I could not possibly fruitfully juxtapose all of the contemporary discourses about domestic labour taking place internationally, with Woolf's writing. It was especially significant for me that I could not fit the revolutionary impetus to completely collectivize social reproduction and work towards the abolition of the bourgeois family—~~along bourgeois lines~~, which attended the days following the Russian Revolution, in the USSR, into the scope of my dissertation. Ninety nine years after the publication of *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, Woolf's reputation as a writer whose work exemplifies the modernist encounter with the world of objects and commodities, may well outshine the fame of the trinity of Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells, whom she called upon her contemporaries to oust from prominence. Yet, as Christopher Reed points out, the Bloomsbury Group, after all, consciously defined themselves as a subculture, as opposed to proponents of utopian thinking. As Reed points out, subcultures, as opposed to utopias, provide for a sustained opposition to dominant norms, without the promise of a total social overhaul that moves beyond the boundaries of their community.⁶³⁴ Woolf's work is located within a capitalist space, and her Mrs Brown and Crosby make use of what they can filch from the marketplace, even although their writer provides a searing critique of how the military-industrial complex of inter-war ~~Britain is built on a capitalist marketplace system which~~ makes sure that women do not receive anything resembling an adequate remuneration for any form of work they perform.

⁶³⁴ Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 13.

Perhaps this limitation is a product of its time. After all, Woolf remains a writer embedded in the zeitgeist of inter-war European modernism, which thrived on the euphoria that Western civilization would come to control the non-human world in its entirety and harness its resources in order to produce a narrative of progress. In order to look for solidarities between women and the non-human world, which might take down capitalist relationships of production and the regimes of unwaged domestic work it thrives upon, it makes sense to now turn to look among texts produced in times and spaces which were not centred upon commodity capitalism, or those produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, with the sense of urgency produced from the realization that human beings have in fact created the anthropocene. Perhaps texts which provide a revolutionary vision of breaking up old relations ~~between in which~~ women and the material world ~~are resources to exploit~~ are being written in the present moment, now that we are in fact inhabiting a hybrid reality in which the 'human' and the 'non-human' have literally come to become ~~the~~ constituent parts of each other.

A major lacuna which affected the exploration of the relationship between Virginia Woolf and the Co-Operative Women's Movement, is the lack of extensive scholarship on Margaret Llewellyn Davies. In this thesis, it has only been possible to piece together Woolf's relationship with this influential feminist figure in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, by piecing together Woolf's side of their correspondence available from Woolf's letters. Access to archival materials, or the publication of Margaret Llewellyn Davies' own writing, as well as extensive secondary scholarship, would make it possible to actually come to grips with the extent to which Woolf would have had exposure to the activities of the Working Women's Guild.

Similarly, while Woolf's writing has been studied in the light of the extraordinary material conditions of the two World Wars, and the rationing of daily necessities, it is possible to

undertake further research on how the praxis of domestic labour was interrupted by war.⁶³⁵ If I had been able to access further secondary material on the nature of rationing in Britain in the two wars, an emergent sub-field⁵ within Woolf studies, this thesis might have been better researched.

4. Ideas for Further Research

Along with a more extensive study of how the Women's Co-Operative Guild and inter-war rationing influenced Woolf's thinking on domestic objects and domestic labour, as mentioned above, it would be most interesting to look at Woolf's understanding of the domestic interior in the face of war. Woolf's discussion of the photographs of the Spanish Civil War dwell upon the domestic interior as the site of a ghastly ontological confusion in which the remains of the bombed out house blur the boundaries between human, non-human, and inorganic, even as the eye gropes to recognize forms:

“They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning's collection contains the photograph of what might be a man's body, or a woman's; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a birdcage hanging in what was presumably the sitting-room, but the rest of the house looks like nothing so much as a bunch of spillikins suspended in mid air.”⁶³⁶

Woolf's personal writings about bomb damage in her home spaces could be studied in this context, dwelling upon what it means when the gendered subject loses the objects that constituted an integral part of her experience of that space.

Lastly, I think it would be extremely interesting to look at the afterlives of domestic spaces that have been preserved in order to memorialize Woolf and her contemporaries- Vanessa Bell, and

⁶³⁵ For example, Bill Brown, Chapter 2 in *Other Things*, 49-78; Vicki Tromanhauser, ‘Eating Animals and Becoming Meat in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*,’ *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol 38, no 1 (Fall 2014): 79-93, jstor, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.38.1.73>.

⁶³⁶ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 14-15.

Vita Sackville-West. Monk's House, where Woolf lived for the last two decades of her life, for instance, has been maintained, to judge from the extensive guide book literature, the official website, and a number of expensively produced 'histories,' ~~has been carefully preserved~~ in a form that attempts to create an image of the house as it must have been in Woolf's time (except of course that the very care with which this image has created must give away that this is not a place in which day-to-day life takes place).⁶³⁷

At the same time, these spaces attempt to remain relevant by attempting to 'recognize' the way in which subaltern figures must have existed within those walls 'back in time,' by naming them, and producing some form of memorial to them. Yet, these very attempts to historicize an unequal domestic sphere are in a manner, an attempt at rendering inequality into a safe, faraway historical event. Ironically, the caretakers of Monk's House, for instance, live in the non-public parts of the house, including the kitchen, their lives resembling the invisibilised labour of servants, ~~the~~ servants who make sure the house looks as if its most important 'inhabitants' are dwelling in it at the present time.⁶³⁸ (Appearing to echo the point this thesis makes about the similarities between 'house-keeping' and 'museum-keeping.') Similarly, Grace Higgens, the long-time cook and general servant at Charleston has been commemorated in an ambivalent fashion, Quentin Bell having designed and built a plaque to her memory, which is placed over the kitchen, thus commemorating her, while symbolically confining her presence to the kitchen. Similarly, Stewart McKay's biography of Higgens, called *The Angel of Charleston* could be seen as deliberate writing in of lives on the margins, but as the title suggests, it still retains a frame in

⁶³⁷ Julie Singleton, *A History of Monks House and Village of Rodmell* (London: Cecil Woolf, 2008); Caroline Zoob, *Virginia Woolf's Garden* (London: Jacqui Small, 2013); Quentin Bell and Virginia Nicholson, *Charleston: A Bloomsbury House and Garden* 1997 (London: White Lion, 2018).

⁶³⁸ Caroline and Jonathan Zoob, Karolina Jakubowicz, 'The Garden and Monks House,' podcast dated April 11, 2019, <https://www.literaturecambridge.co.uk/news/podcast-garden>.

which class differences are harmoniously reconciled, as the working class woman is simply reassigned the virtues conventionally assigned to the bourgeois homemaker.

It is also worth exploring the ways in which these domestic spaces have been re-interpreted on informal, ephemeral locations on the internet, such as vlogs and ~~and their comment sections,~~ comments on Youtube videos, in which communities of strangers discuss their ideas about Virginia Woolf and her house. If, as Brenda Silver, has pointed out, ‘Virginia Woolf’ has emerged into the post-modern era as a shifting, polyvalent entity, it is worth studying the varying valences that her house continues to have long years after her death.⁶³⁹

Given that this thesis engaged extensively with how domestic spaces are packaged into sites of ‘historical significance,’ for their role as the reminders of a bygone era, as well as for their association with women writers, - it might be possible to study Woolf’s house through this lens, and to examine how the ‘homes and haunts’ of women writers exist in our times. this thesis might constitute a significant way of extending this research and giving it contemporary relevance.

If nothing else, for me, personally, the thesis has taught me ways of understanding the politics of domestic spaces, domestic objects, and practices of labour, and left me with a desire to keep learning about the myriad ways in which our lives are shaped by the labour we dedicate to the objects which fill up our homes and ‘furnish’ our subjectivities. Despite the grind involved, this thesis will always be a thing of joy, for inculcating in me the habit of noticing the grooves and stains on the objects around me, and trying to figure out how these might be entangled with myriad entities, including myself. This thesis is, therefore, my response to Woolf’s call, asking her readers to respond with joy and excitement, to the challenge of finding out what ‘Life Itself’ might mean for the gendered subject.

⁶³⁹ Brenda Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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