

## Virginia Woolf's Maternal Narrative in *Mrs Dalloway*

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“Do not dream of influencing other people, I would say, if I knew how to make it exalted. Think of *things in themselves*.”

- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (my emphasis)

### Abstract

Virginia Woolf's feminist/modernist project is to retrieve and inscribe in her writing the repressed, the unconscious, the feminine, or, in Kristevan terms, the semiotic, conceived as the imaginary plenitude symbolised by the maternal body. As a result of this, her narrative structure is informed by a hidden thread of desire for the absent mother which runs through her writing. I use the term *subtext* to address the inscribed desire for the maternal space within symbolic language, which is able to disrupt its hegemony. The symbolic elements, therefore, constitute the text proper of Woolf's writing, while the semiotic is the subtext which surfaces and resurfaces frequently within the symbolic text. Desire for the lost mother unearths the repressed layers of the unconscious and gives them voice. In this way, the long repressed semiotic or maternal elements are given a chance, for the first time, to be transferred into text—not through the Law of the Father, but through the uncensored dictation of desire, which seeks the lost mother after the bond between the child and the mother is broken.

### Introduction

The most noticeable part of Woolf's aesthetics is her revolutionary writing. Woolf believed that women write differently from men; she wanted to write as a woman, and through her own textual practices, she was convinced that a woman's writing should be different from a man's. She viewed language in terms of gender; that each gender writes differently, and she always attempted to devise a language to reflect the particularities of female sex. Sue Roe argues that Woolf has endeavoured to create “a language which could both reflect and enable the construction of a gendered identity within a work of art” (1). Similarly, Holden notes that “Woolf's stylistic forms were not simply aesthetic, but were intended to explore the deepest regions of her experience as a woman” (3). Woolf herself emphasises the particularities of each sex's experience, and how it relates and leads to the particularities of language:

There is the obvious and enormous difference of experience in the first place; but the essential difference lies in the fact not that men describe battles and women the birth of children, but that each sex describes itself... there rises for consideration the very difficult question of the difference between the man's and the woman's view of what constitutes the importance of any subject. From this spring not only marked differences of plot and incident, but infinite differences in selection, method and style. (qtd. in Barrett 71).

### Writing and Desire: Desire as Subtext

Woolf's feminist/modernist project is to retrieve and inscribe in her writing the repressed, the unconscious, the feminine, or, in Kristevan terms, the semiotic, conceived as the imaginary plenitude symbolised by the maternal body. As a result of this, her narrative structure is informed by a hidden thread of desire for the absent mother which runs through her writing. I use the term *subtext* to address the inscribed desire for the maternal space within symbolic language, which is able to disrupt the hegemony of the latter. The symbolic elements, therefore, constitute the text proper of Woolf's writing, while the semiotic is the subtext which surfaces and resurfaces frequently within the symbolic text. Mary Jacobus sees a complex relationship between Woolf's texts, psychoanalysis and feminist theory:

The pre-Oedipal configuration which reproduces the mother as the origin of all signification in Kristevan theory, not only allows Woolf's novels to read—to be read—beyond Freudian theory but suggests how a reading of Woolf might revise and extend feminist thinking about the pre-Oedipal (118).

Carol Mastrangelo Bove notes that “Kristeva sees the text as an unleashing of unconscious drives” (218), while Oliver adds that “[s]ince her earliest writings, Julia Kristeva has attempted to bring the semiotic body, replete with drives, back into structuralism” (*Kristeva's Imaginary Father*, 43). In this respect, Woolf prefigures Kristeva's aim in retrieving, longing for and inscribing the semiotic. This longing for the semiotic period or the maternal space constitutes the concept of *desire* in Woolf's works. Desire for the lost mother unearths the repressed layers of the unconscious and gives them voice. In this way, the long repressed semiotic or maternal

elements are given a chance, for the first time, to be transferred into text—not through the Law of the Father, but through the uncensored dictation of desire, which seeks the lost mother after the bond between the child and the mother is broken. Viewed from this perspective, Woolf introduces desire as a defining element in male and female language, and the desire for maternal space as not only as a shared characteristic of both her male and female characters, but the focal point of their identity construction.

Of course, desire for the maternal space is inflected and inscribed differently for male and female characters due to their different relations to language and the body. It is arguable that women are closer to the semiotic and the maternal body—the origin of signification—since they never recover from abjection nor leave their maternal space completely. Since their desires are more intensely geared towards the maternal space, their language becomes more rhythmic and musical, as well as adopting at times some non-linguistic elements. On the whole, the system of signification in their language is more plural than their male counterparts. But since male characters are able to detach from maternal body easily and substitute the mother figure with another female figure—their future wives—they leave the semiotic behind easily, and enter the masculine world of the symbolic with its arbitrary signification, wherein there is no inherent relation between the signifier and the signified. The symbolic order is governed by the chain of signifiers and is simultaneously informed by the phallus signifier, and thus it accommodates and constructs masculine identity as primary, and considers feminine identity as secondary. In this light, I will argue in this study that identity formation does not follow the patriarchal path depicted and delineated by Freud or Lacan, but instead accords to Kristeva's theorisation of the configuration of identity, wherein both male and female identity is partly born out of the resignification of pre-Oedipality.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, different forms of non-linguistic signification together with structural innovations and new methods of narrations, like stream-of-consciousness, introduce a new understanding and configuration of characters' identity; in this respect, desire functions as a subtext to deconstruct and disturb social and cultural norms regarding heterosexuality, gender identity and the sequential nature of language as well. Woolf employs a different system of signification in this novel, which is the inscription of semiotic elements through a desire for the repressed maternal space, so as to undermine and challenge traditional fictional forms, norms and structures of oppression (i.e., heterosexism), and to question the sole hegemony of masculinity in the construction of gender identity. This particular system of signification speaks the unspeakable, as it were, in the Western literary and philosophical tradition, especially in terms of the complex configurations of gender, desire and sexuality which structure subjectivity. It urges the liberation of female subjectivity from stabilised and fixed cultural expectations and prescriptions. The aestheticising power of this new system resists structures of domination, in that it both retreats from involvement in patriarchal values and provides a way to approach what cannot be contained or articulated explicitly: the semiotic, the repressed and unconscious desires. Woolf employs stream-of-consciousness to disturb and displace the sequential nature of symbolic language. Since feminine writing practice is inscribed by the semiotic, it does not accord to logical sequence. Therefore, the technique of stream-of-consciousness is a perfect device for inscribing the antisequential aspects of the semiotic.

### **Lacan's Symbolic and Woolf's Semiotic**

Lacan's view is that, from the time we enter language, we always have to "pass through the defiles of the signifier" (qtd. in Easthope 41). Lacan asserts the supremacy of the signifier in the symbolic order, and argues that "the effects of the signifier on the subject constitute the unconscious" (Evans 189). Lacan also introduces the term 'signifying chain' to refer to a series of signifiers which are linked together. A signifying chain can never be complete, since it is always possible to add another signifier to it, ad infinitum, in a way which expresses the eternal nature of desire; for this reason, desire is metonymic. The chain is also metonymic in the production of meaning; signification is not present at any one point in the chain, but rather meaning 'insists' in the movement from one signifier to another (190).

This metonymic and linear nature of the distribution of signifiers in discourse introduces sequence to the symbolic order. Once desire is caught in the inevitable signifying chain, it would be impossible for desire to find its signified, that is the object of desire, since it is lost in the semiotic period—unless it recovers and retrieves the semiotic. For this very reason, Woolf in her feminine practice of writing attempts to employ a different logic to deconstruct the Lacanian notion of the signifier/signified and the supremacy of the signifier, by prioritising the supremacy of the signified: the lost object, or the Woolfian thing-in-itself. Woolf has theorised and developed a unique kind of female language in her *A Room of One's Own* which drastically moves away from phallogocentric language.

Because language is the most commonly recognized of all those signifying practices which try to ensure that we grow up fully socialized, there is a prima facie case for supposing that it encodes androcentric attitudes in an androcentric society. If so, then language itself is complicit in the oppression of women (Ruthven 59).

It seems to me that her notion of thing-in-itself, which she has repeated in several places, such as *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, and the way her characters attempt to approach it through their different forms of language, dexterously corresponds with what later came to be called *écriture féminine* by French feminists. In 'writing the body', one is closer to a kind of non-linear and non-arbitrary writing style, which stands in sharp contrast to phallogentrism and its linear and arbitrary structure. Since *écriture féminine* privileges non-linear discourse and the world of the signified, Woolf's concept of the thing-in-itself points to the final transcendental signified to escape the Lacanian signifying chains. Like the French feminists' concern with a new configuration of language, Woolf's concept of thing-in-itself is inscribed while erasing the signifier in favour of signified. She renders her characters' physical experiences and bodily sensations through this technique; for example, an act can function as a thing-in-itself before getting caught in the arbitrary system of signifier and signified to render the immediacy of that experience.

### The Surfacing of Clarissa's Real Desires

Clarissa's connection to Peter and Richard is just a mere disguise in the restrictive domain of the symbolic order and does not mirror her real desires. Clarissa's real desire surfaces within the restrictive and oppressive domain of the symbolic through the function of memory. Woolf employs the function of memory and the technique of stream-of-consciousness to emphasise the fact that whatever can be witnessed about the characters' apparently natural desires are mere veils of their repressed desires, which cannot be expressed or practiced within patriarchy: "She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was *something central* which permeated;" (*Mrs Dalloway*, 24, emphasis mine). Still, "she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman, not a girl, of a woman," A realisation that comes like a "sudden revelation" with

some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores. Then, for that moment, she had an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. (24)

Many critics have commented on these richly sexual images, and have different interpretations of them. As Snaith notes on Patricia Cramer's radically lesbian feminist take on the excerpt:

Cramer reads the crocus, and the flower Sally picks before kissing Clarissa, in the English literary tradition of associating flowers with women's sexual parts, a tradition that writers such as Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, and others have drawn on to represent lesbian desire. She reads the petals of the flowers as labial and the match in the crocus, as well as the image of a diamond that Clarissa associates with Sally's kiss, as clitoral images. (qtd. in Snaith 201)

Clarissa's experience of *jouissance* with women for that fleeting moment takes her back to the fusional moment she had already experienced in her mother's womb; the description depicts a feminine desire (and in particular, lesbian desire), as well as an explicit portrayal of a female orgasm. The excerpt clearly exposes Woolf's conscious attempt at inscribing desire between women, which in my opinion does not simply reflect lesbian desire, but also highlights the significance of the presence of the maternal power, which exerts its power in both verbal and nonverbal ways. With regards to the latter, Judith Roof argues that lesbian sexuality cannot be represented through phallogentric language, and that the images created by Woolf above are her attempts to represent what cannot be represented. Whatever the interpretation, however, it seems fairly self-explanatory that the above excerpt is invested with sexual imagery, and they bear and express an intense desire for a woman by a woman.

But how is an "inner meaning" (i.e., desire) expressed? Reading Woolf, one should realise and come to terms with her conception of *expression*: it does not and should not encompass verbal expression merely; in the world that she creates, other forms of expression are conceivable. Language only uses words to transfer meaning, and is not able to completely capture the emotion and the truth of the things being expressed. Wordless communication, on the other hand, is able to express what words cannot, and more economically. To return to the scene above, Woolf connects "a sudden revelation" to "rapture" to overemphasise the "moment" which is shared; if this moment was expressed through words, much of the emotion would be lost. For this very reason, most of Woolf's characters' ecstatic moments are exchanged in silence, which is a form of feminine language since it transcends the words of a symbolic language.

Remembering things that occurred in her past, Clarissa comes to believe that her life at Bourton was "sheltered." "Shelter" here, as well as "the attic room" and "the bedroom" elsewhere (which also act as shelters), recall the safety and all the other qualities of the *chora*. The latter two images represent a choraic space which Clarissa and Sally Seton could have successfully reconstructed within an extreme patriarchal atmosphere, and this, in turn, reveals their desire of returning to the maternal space. The attic is always reminiscent of her bedroom at Bourton where she had developed her extraordinary relationship with Sally:

There they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world. They mean to found a society to abolish private property...read Plato in bed before breakfast. (*Mrs Dalloway*, 25)

This excerpt also explicitly reveals the fact that Clarissa's connection to Sally cannot be reduced to mere physical attachment; instead, they are attached to each other intellectually. If the relation were only confined and limited to the physical, then one could credit Woolf for developing and promoting lesbianism and lesbian identity, but this does not hold true. What I believe Woolf is doing instead is subordinating all identity construction to a feminine character. The intellectual connection between Clarissa and Sally underscores Woolf's concern that attachment to a feminine character, whether the mother or someone else, is not undertaken merely out of sexual inclination, but reflects characters' primordial desires for the lost mother.

Sally is also significant in that she can be seen as Clarissa's first object of desire in the symbolic order, who serves as an ideal substitute for the latter's first 'Objet a', i.e., her mother, prior to her entry into the symbolic order. Their relationship seems promising, in that it restores a sense of primordial *jouissance*, and hence Clarissa calls it "the most exquisite moment of her whole life" (*Mrs Dalloway*, 26). Clarissa resists the phallogocentric assumption that desire runs from one sex to another (i.e., the opposite sex). She develops a lesbian relationship with Sally to adopt a new gendered identity other than a culturally and socially enforced one. Therefore, Clarissa as a term-in-process or subject-in-process defines and redefines her own gendered identity. Remembering her romance with Sally in their youth, Clarissa remembers that "all that evening she could not take her eyes off Sally. It was an extraordinary beauty of the kind she most admired, dark, large-eyed, with that quality which, since she hadn't got it herself, she always envied" (24). Of course, their relationship is physical as well: "Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally" (26).

As Moriconi states:

The distinctions between them have disappeared in this moment of an intimacy which unites and merges them. Sally and Clarissa connect beyond thetic utterances, communicating through a silent, choric gesture. Clarissa's stream-of-consciousness recreates this wordless intimacy of her kiss. (37)

### **The Choric Relation between Clarissa and Peter**

The phallogocentricity of social practices forces Clarissa to move from a female object of desire to a male object of desire: Peter Walsh. This compulsory move is reminiscent of Adrienne Rich's term "compulsory heterosexuality," through which she explores the ways in which patriarchal society oppresses women. In Clarissa's case, her heterosexuality is more of a compulsory patriarchal social construct than it is biological determined. Her compulsory embrace of heterosexuality, which occurred in the phallogocentric symbolic order, can be interpreted as castration. Therefore, Peter is a male object for whom Clarissa substitutes her first male Object a before the symbolic order, her father. Because of the castration and repression of incestuous feeling, the redirection of desire from father to another adult man, Peter is also compulsory. However, Peter is not a good substitute for her father, and because the attraction is borne from desire, it will not last for long. Her attentions must be directed onto another man more like her father: Richard Dalloway. With Richard she gains a measure of independence, and a promise of social success. Peter, on the other hand, was a serious threat to her subjectivity. Of course, although Peter and Clarissa break up, their romance is far from over. They continue to attract and fascinate each other, but none of them is able to express their emotions; to me, the most climactic moment of the novel is the final line of the novel, through which we get access to Peter's actual connection to Clarissa. During their relationship, they were not able to express their emotions to each other properly, and real communication had not occurred between them. At the end of the novel, Peter's approach and access to the same wordless language, which connects Clarissa to Sally and Septimus, finally establishes a choric connection and communication between him and Clarissa. The language, which stands in sharp contrast to symbolic language, does not use words as means of communication, but physical presence. Physical presence leaves no room for using linguistic language: the presence of the loved one removes the distance between the signifier and the signified, and creates Woolf's concept of the thing-in-itself. The final effect is that of the experience of 'moment' or 'ecstasy', which is not reducible to language at all. At the end of the novel, Peter asks himself: "What is this terror? What is this ecstasy?...What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? 'It is Clarissa,' he said. For there she was" (141).

### **A Plural System of Signification through the Dialectic Relation of the Symbolic and the Semiotic**

As I argued above, Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* employs a plural system of signification to inscribe the semiotic, and to depict the reality of characters and things because symbolic language is not able to render, and even distorts reality. This plural signification can assume different forms, and includes wordless moments, ecstasy, physical touch, scent, sight, colours, music and silence. When Clarissa and Sally kiss each other, for instance, their lips speak together and produce a unique and exquisite language in which signifier and signified overlap. Such a language, which attempts not to use words as its signifiers, stems from characters' original desires for the maternal space where there was no language, no lack or identity whatsoever.

Woolf's subversive use of epiphanic moments to portray female homoeroticism and desire could be considered



an attempt to construct maternal space within the constraints of the symbolic order. When two female lips speak together in an exquisite way within the restrictive domain of the symbolic, this introduces rupture into the patriarchal language.

Desire is always implicated through language, and the growing desire for the maternal space in characters like Clarissa and Septimus is indicated through an especial system of signification, which is quite different from symbolic language.

Throughout the novel, Clarissa is either depicted in social scenes like her party, or in solitude, such as when she is in her attic room. While she is portrayed as a social figure in the prisonlike order of the symbolic, she speaks a predetermined patriarchal language; in her solitude, however, her language begins to resemble *écriture féminine* through her rupturing stream-of-consciousness, which subverts and circumvents her social self. As Moriconi argues, “In her moments of solitude throughout the day, Clarissa seeks out the submerged and muted ‘I’ that exists on the other side of her social identity” (42). Later, when Sally attends the party, Clarissa is again filled and charged with the feelings that previously arose in her “moments” with Sally—which stretches to eternity and is not erasable. When Clarissa hears and then sees Sally, she notes that: “To think of her under this roof, under this roof!...Kindling all over with pleasure at the thought of the past” (*Mrs Dalloway*, 124-5). These words are the exact echoes of her memory with Sally long ago, when Clarissa was “standing in her bedroom at the top of the house holding the hot-water can in her hands and saying aloud, ‘She is beneath this roof...She is beneath this roof!’” (26).

The symbolic seems to bar the possibility of Clarissa’s desire for an immediate language of the body. The novel suggests that the borders between a feminine language and a masculine language, between what is usually thought to be the “pre-symbolic” and the symbolic, are fluid and flexible. Taylor notes that:

Over-investing in neither the semiotic nor the symbolic, Kristeva suggests that women negotiate a space in between. They should identify with the father just enough to gain entry into language, culture, time, and history, but they should refuse to adopt fixed roles within this realm or to invest fully in an alienating imago; they should play with identities and never forget the semiotic music which they have (partially) left behind. (59-60)

Woolf’s text in *Mrs Dalloway* operates between a fragmentary, feminine language of the body, which basically attempts to reduce the distance between signifier and signified, and a linear, sequential and masculine language of the mind. Clarissa and Septimus search for a language that combines the immediacy of feminine language with masculine language. Woolf’s aesthetics and feminist outlook allow for the possibility of merging masculine and feminine languages. Woolf’s new writing practice is only possible through the merging of masculine and feminine languages which is accomplished through Septimus and Clarissa’s somehow conscious act of awakening their latent longings and desires for maternal space.

While Septimus and Clarissa’s identities are built upon the linear and narrative language of the symbolic, it is simultaneously and constantly questioned and dissipated and dissolved by the non-linear and fragmentary language of the semiotic. Septimus’ speech already resembles the fragmentary language of the emotions and the body: thoughts are described through pure bodily sensations. Throughout the novel, Woolf renders Septimus’ thought in this way: “Septimus cried”; “Septimus muttered”; “Septimus stammered,” etc. It becomes clear that he is not able to speak articulately, and his language comes close to Woolf’s description of lovers’ ‘little language’ in *The Waves*. Septimus attempts to communicate his message, but is unable to do so, since symbolic language cannot contain his message; worded differently, his message becomes utterly inexpressible in the sequential language of the symbolic order. For this very reason, he attempts to express his message somehow through his antisequential language: “Love, trees, there is no crime—what was his message? He could not remember it. ‘I—I—,’ Septimus stammered.” (*Mrs Dalloway* 73) As noted above, he mutters “Communication is health; communication is happiness” (69) in one instance, and finally his genuine message is expressed through a different language: the choraic return to the lost mother through committing suicide. His desire for the maternal space is what that could not be expressed through symbolic language. At least Septimus is finally successful in embracing the Mother in death.

While living, Septimus had already shown his ability to merge with things and escape the symbolic language which distances characters from the real things:

To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them; and the flies rising and falling; and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper; and now and again some chime (it might be a motor horn) tinkling divinely on the grass stalks—all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere. (52)

Minow-Pinkney states that “In this state Septimus enjoys colours, rhythms, sounds with extreme intensity as the thetic subject is dissolved into the semiotic *chora* it had formerly so severely repressed” (106). Here Septimus attempts to escape the artificial language of the symbolic order, with its unending play of signifiers, which in turn distance characters from the reality of things—or in Woolf’s own terms, the things-in-themselves. Septimus approaches the things-in-themselves not through language, but through merging with external stimuli. But even before this, Septimus had already discovered a “new religion”—which obliterated all traces of the symbolic language and aimed at merging with the things-in-themselves. It is quite possible to witness his gradual animosity with symbolic language and his growing love for semiotic language, as in this instance:

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibers with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and the blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds...All taken together meant the birth of a new religion. (17)

The point here is that while Septimus gradually becomes disdainful of symbolic language, he approaches the semiotic, and it becomes hard for him to maintain the equilibrium between these two orders, which drives him towards a suicidal disposition. On the other hand, Clarissa is capable of both the semiotic language of the body and the analytic language of the symbolic; she is combining and mingling words of one syllable and narrative language.

As I argued earlier, Clarissa is divided between her socially constructed identity in the symbolic order, and her more subversive longings for the maternal and selfless state she once shared with her mother. While she is within the confines of her social and symbolic identity, she is depicted as a mother to her daughter Elizabeth, wife to Richard, and hostess in her parties to her guests; and in all of the abovementioned roles, Clarissa is portrayed in a social context, since these are the roles which society imposes to its subjects to offer them some predetermined positions. But when Clarissa is shown as a figure who desires maternal space, she is then depicted as an isolated being—consequently, her language moves away from the rigid language of the symbolic language towards fluid language of the semiotic through her stream-of-consciousness, which comes closer to the French feminists’ concept of *écriture féminine*. While Clarissa dips into her past memories, she is portrayed as an ‘asymbolic’ figure. Moriconi argues that:

When Sally Seton and Peter Walsh, two figures of her young adulthood, surface in Clarissa’s stream-of-consciousness, Clarissa points out the sounds, sights and gestures of the wordless intimacy that she shared with them spill over the boundaries of symbolic language. Her feminist sisterhood with Sally creates a strange merging between Clarissa’s semiotic and symbolic expression, as if they exist beyond symbolic language. (32)

As Kristeva notes, desiring maternal space is a constant force that introduces “ruptures, blank spaces and holes” into Clarissa’s symbolic and social identity (“Oscillation” 165). It is self-explanatory that Clarissa and Septimus are connected to each other in the outside world through certain images and events, such as the car backfiring, and the airplane’s sky-writing. The wordless and unspoken connection which develops between them throughout the novel is heightened in their mutual attitudes towards death. It is arguable that both of them desire to return to a state of wholeness they once experienced in the *chora*. But to approach the *chora* entails some dangerous consequences:

Their return to the *chora* places them on the brink of death; as they burst the boundaries of the subject, they create the threat that they will be unable to reinstate the limitations of their social identities. Septimus and his shell-shocked madness bring this threat to the forefront. As madness becomes the feature of his social estrangement, Clarissa’s estranged other identity, the self that she explored at Bourton, also becomes a threat to her return to social role. The threat of this terrifying collapse culminates at the end of the novel when the image of Septimus’s dead and tangled body enters the cave behind Clarissa at her party and illuminates how close Clarissa has been to such a terrifying end. (Moriconi 34)

As I noted earlier, the use of stream-of-consciousness, monologues, transcribing intrusive memory fragments, sudden shifts of perspective, silences, moments of ecstasy, a nonlinear plot, flashbacks and flashforwards, as well as impressionist and poetical language (approaching the ideal of *écriture féminine*) enable Woolf to break away from the conventional linear narrative, and conventional language.

Septimus is only able to move away from the rigid boundaries of the symbolic order by his obsessive preoccupation with death. Dying is an art for Septimus, since it transfers him from the symbolic to the semiotic, to the pre-Oedipal mother. He is no longer able to tolerate the restrictive pressures of society, and for this reason, he decides to escape it. Septimus’ escape from the symbolic order entails his return to the *chora*, and consequently, his loss of self. Kristeva too connects the desire for the mother and death (*About Chinese Women*, 157). Septimus’ desire for maternal space and thus for death comes as a result of his disillusionment with

language as symbolic representation as well as with identity, both constructions that separate the child from the mother. For this reason, Septimus decides to dissolve his self and return to the state of rapture and *jouissance* he once enjoyed in the maternal space. As Holden states:

By circumventing the restrictions and limits that a single identity and symbolic language represent, Septimus exemplifies the dangerous excessiveness of a complete return to the *chora*. Clarissa, alternatively, serves as a performance of Kristevan ideals, in that she is sympathetic to Septimus' plight, and does not deny that his vision of self-lessness is Real, but she remains within the symbolic structure that moderates and subdues the raw violence that Septimus cannot contain. (71)

Clarissa is fully aware of the fact that it is possible to capture the semiotic realm of the maternal space and evade the rigid boundaries of the symbolic order through her constant positive reflections on death; but on the other hand, she witnesses Septimus' plight in fully plunging oneself in the wordless realm of the semiotic through madness and suicide. Septimus' suicide influences Clarissa tremendously, and causes her to contemplate on the nature of death more seriously than before:

They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop everyday in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death (134).

This scene, which shows Clarissa adroitly juxtaposing her conception of life and death, clearly reveals her celebration of death. As Waugh notes,

Clarissa is haunted by a sense of loss, a longing for a wholeness which she associates with Bourton and with the kiss of the Sally Seton, pure, untainted, outside the constraints and repressions of the world of sexual codes and morals. (118)

All day, she has been thinking of her pleasurable life in Bourton which no longer exists.

The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity of her feeling for Sally. It was not like one's feeling for a man. It was completely disinterested, and besides it had a quality which could only exist between women, between women just grown up. It was protective, on her side, sprung from a sense of being in league together, a presentiment of something that was bound to part them (they spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe). (*Mrs Dalloway*, 25)

To defy this present state and revolt against it, she calls death "defiance." It becomes obvious that after Septimus' suicide and Clarissa's serious contemplation of death, she decides to defy the symbolic structures that have usurped her "most exquisite moment[s] of her life" and repressed her lesbian feelings. She then 'chooses life' by returning to Bourton, in the hope of repeating those "moments." Her contemplation on Septimus' suicide, which she views positively, brings her the experience of another 'moment' similar to her Bourton moments: her remembrance of Sally and Peter, and connecting that to Septimus' death. She worries that the beauty of her Bourton friends will fade away and for this reason she calls death an act of "defiance" against aging. It is a moment of happiness which "no pleasure could equal" (134). Also, Shakespeare's association of death to pleasure in *Cymbeline*, like that of Lacan's *jouissance*, comes to Clarissa's mind: she will "fear no more the heat of the sun" (135).

## Conclusion

*Mrs Dalloway* has been divided into an opposition between the symbolic and the semiotic: sequence, identity, and linear time are on the side of the symbolic, while fragmentation, discontinuity and the moment are on the side of the semiotic. But why is this feminine state of anonymity—the body, the unconscious, non-identity—valorised and privileged in the novel? I have argued so far that identity is a result of signifying practices. The symbolic with its promise of a unified identity lures characters to engage in these practices for a well-defined identity; but after entering this realm, characters tend to become frustrated and disillusioned, because they come to the understanding that a well-defined identity is fictional, and that the main reason behind this impossibility is language. Though subjects are constructed in and through language, it is the arbitrary, unstable and illusive nature of language which at the same time unsettles and disturbs the formation of a unified identity.

Woolf's fiction inscribes characters' desire for maternal space to free them from the rigid boundaries of the symbolic realm. By desiring and approaching maternal space, characters both avoid dominant patriarchal structures, and at the same time, gain a specific language to reconstruct the maternal space within the symbolic order. As Clarissa moves more and more towards the maternal space, her sense of the unstable and fragmentary nature of identity grows, and her belief in the stability and wholeness of identity collapses. The novel does locate the forces that disintegrate identity, as well as those that fragment sequential narrative.

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