Room for Thought: Privacy and the Private Home in Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse

Johanna Koivunen
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Supervisor: Irina Rasmussen
Goloubeva
Abstract

Modernism is often connected to the public sphere due to its associations with urbanity and technological changes. But interiority and private life was as important to modernity and, in particular, in Virginia Woolf’s writing. This essay explores the protagonists’ access to and experience of privacy in Woolf’s novels To the Lighthouse (1927) and Mrs Dalloway (1925), which both centre on women in a domestic environment. The reading combines modernist reactions against Victorian domesticity, which was structured on the private/public dichotomy and which limited women’s access to privacy, and combines it with modernist views of interiority, informed, more specifically, by Freud’s model of the unconscious and the spatial features of it. Privacy and interiority are imagined with spatial metaphors, but privacy is not necessarily connected to physical place and being alone, but rather having the ability to control the social situation and to choose what one reveals about oneself. Both novels re-imagine privacy and its ties to physical as well as mental space. This essay argues that To the Lighthouse is centred on a traditional Victorian home which reflects how its protagonist experiences interior privacy, and Mrs Dalloway explores a more modern domesticity that challenges Victorian organisation of the home and in turn, women’s access to privacy and solitude. With modernity public life was made available for women to a larger extent, but just as public life is coded by power relations, so is private life, which determines what sort of life could be lived by, for example, women.

Keywords: Privacy; interiority; Victorian domesticity; space; Virginia Woolf; modernity
Introduction

The lingering Victorian notions of the division of the gender spheres clashing with the experience of the progress-seeking “outward-directed pleasures of modernity” (Gan 14) forced women in the early 20th century to navigate a space between a slow-moving domestic space and the outward-oriented space of modernity. Modernity is often thought to be of the public sphere because of its ties to urbanity, flânerie and its ambition to break with Victorian domesticity (Rosner 13). According to Lawrence E. Klein, the idea of the separate spheres, perhaps not so much invented as idealised in the 18th century, consigned the middle class woman to a home and put her in charge of household, children and domestic pleasures, while the man was destined to enter the public sphere to participate in “public” matters such as work, study and politics (97-98). In this way, both men and women were doing their job, working in their specific sphere. As Wendy Gan points out, men could then return to the home and enjoy a space of both intimacy and privacy, while women, on the other hand, had no other “sphere” to return to seek privacy, and this intimacy was more or less written in their job description (4). Despite occupying and governing the private sphere, women themselves had few means of acquiring physical privacy and solitude.

In the prime days for the ideology of the separate spheres, at the end of the 18th and in the 19th century, female authors and their heroines knew where women could find this privacy and solitude. For example, Patricia Meyer Spacks says that Jane
Austen’s heroines understood “that privacy [did] not altogether depend on physical situation” (qtd. in Gan 21) and her characters resorted to the privacy of the mind; a hidden space with no unwelcome access, where they were in full control of their secrets and thoughts. Two hundred years later, women demanded not only the vote but wanted this mental privacy to be accompanied by a material privacy. This demand for a physical space where women had control and could, if they wanted, keep someone out, eventually led to Virginia Woolf’s 1929 essay “A Room of One’s Own.” In the essay, Woolf illustrates why it was necessary for women writers to have access to a space where they could enjoy privacy and solitude on their own terms and have the means of keeping people out. This is however not the only way Woolf wrote about the public and the private sphere, or the only way Woolf has been read to write about the public and the private. Anna Snaith writes aptly that Woolf works with the terms and that “she unsettles them, moves them about—makes them work for her, refusing to be labelled by them” (11). Furthermore, Woolf protests the inherent division of the spheres, and blurs the distinction between the public and the private, especially in her feminism and pacifism (Snaith 13). Much of the research in this area, by for example Snaith, focuses on Woolf’s relationship with the public sphere and writing, publishing and how power relations within the private sphere proceed to affect the public sphere (11). But Woolf’s understanding of how the intersection of the public and private works in the private sphere also needs to be explored.

“A Room of One’s Own” is not the only text by Woolf where she writes about women and space. In Mrs Dalloway (1925), Clarissa Dalloway does go out in the city on some kind of flânerie, but she also has a room of her own, situated in the attic which in many ways challenges Victorian notions of what women’s space was. Despite the fact that Woolf was critical of all-male spaces such as the university, and demanded the right to physical space, education and earning money for women (in e.g. “A Room” and “Three Guineas”)—that is, the public sphere—Woolf’s fiction is often about women in a domestic, family-oriented, private space. In To the Lighthouse (1927), a majority of which takes place at the turn of the century, the traditional Victorian family is perhaps on the verge of being dismantled, but it is kept in place by wife and mother Mrs Ramsay. Mrs Ramsay navigates the division of the spheres and shows how women filled the private home and created privacy within it. The women in Woolf’s fiction knew how to access privacy and what they sacrificed for it. They found it in the sometimes stifling “private sphere,” or the open, public space of the London streets. The Victorian notions
of private and public spheres become reconceptualised with modernity, not only in terms of opening up access to the public sphere, but also in re-imagining the private sphere and interiority. In addition to speak of physical privacy, or solitude, one could speak of interior privacy and the possibility to explore within oneself. In this essay, I will study how the novels, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, imagine the female protagonists’ access to privacy and explore privacy in relation to mental and physical space. While physical space is relevant, they primarily locate their privacy within themselves and, thus, also realise that it does not all depend on one’s physical environment: privacy can also be found in a social setting of which they are in some measure in control. I argue that, influenced by contemporary views of the interior life as well as reacting against the control of Victorian domesticity, Woolf envisioned that privacy for women was defined by the physical environment, but ultimately it was an interior form of self-control or self-exploration.

**Privacy**

Both Woolf and modernism are defined by their reaction against Victorian sensibilities, where the separate spheres defined domestic life. Despite it being difficult to define precisely what made up the private sphere in Victorian England (for instance, did things such as household economy belong to the private or the public sphere? Did buying food count as a private or public activity?), it was primarily located in the home. Victoria Rosner interprets private life to entail such things as “the home, the social network of family relations, the routines of the household, and the habits of the body” (5). The Victorian domesticity idealised “peace and stability,” divisions and limits (Rosner 3, 63). The structuring of society extended to the domestic life and the house: the rooms in the house had a specific, often gendered purpose. Rosner explains that the house of a middle class Victorian family would have rooms specifically for men, such as the study and the library, that were isolated and enabled solitude and privacy. Rooms intended for women were the boudoir and the drawing-room, which were more social, open, and situated in the centre of the house. The servants were separated to another part of the house, usually at the edges of the house, the basement and the attic (63-64). Every room had its function and its particular type of social arrangement tied to them. The female-coded rooms were not for women alone—visitors and all family members could spend time there—and there was, in turn, not any room with the explicit function
to let women be isolated or private. Despite thinking of the house as part of the private and female sphere, the spaces inside were either meant to be shared or for men only. Instead, “spaces of solitary retreat and labor were seen as incompatible with women’s role at the center of family life” (Rosner 95). This is the reason women had difficulty finding privacy and solitude: their private sphere was in reality a place for families and social life, which meant it was a shared, communal place.

The word privacy derives from the Latin root “deprives,” and means being deprived of community and status (Gan 3). Disregarding momentarily its negative connotation, this means community gives privacy its significance and its privilege. In that sense, privacy can only be understood in relation to community. However, as Gan argues, an important part of privacy, especially for women, is that it is possible to remain private even in community with some control of one’s social environment (3). This is how women in Victorian domestic fiction managed their privacy: with that social control they found privacy in the silences in social situations, through introspection and in reading (Gan 20). Control of the social environment can let one be someone else which means preserving or protecting one’s private self. This kind of privacy is an interior feeling; something someone experiences within oneself and alone. Experiencing privacy in company means that the external things do not encroach so much upon one’s interiority.

In modernity, accessing privacy extends further than inner life in its link to the private home. Privacy and interiority are often described in metaphors of houses. Conceptions of what the mind looked like was in early twentieth century highly influenced by Sigmund Fred, who used these kinds of spatial metaphors in his theory of the unconscious. Freud was widely read and important in the Bloomsbury group, of which Woolf was an integral part. Woolf’s publishing house, the Hogarth Press, translated and published Freud’s works in England. Jesse Wolfe means that intellectual life after World War One was influenced by Freud, and the Bloomsbury group, located in London, was tone-setting in many respects (24-25). In an excellent interpretation of Freud’s early view of the structuring of the consciousness, Francoise Meltzer writes that since the unconscious has to be understood in terms of the conscious, or the unknown has to be understood in the known, Freud had to use “analogies, metaphors, similes, etymological play, and anecdotes” to describe it (149). One way he described consciousness and the unconscious was with metaphors of space. Based on the model of the conscious situated above the unconscious, divided by the repression barrier,
Koivunen 5

Meltzer calls them “‘topographic’ metaphors…: spatial notions of place and of ‘layers’ in the mind” (150). The unconscious is visualised as a place, but it had dynamic features. Those are described as a motion or a flow, an “energy center, active and busy, but hidden from the Subject’s conscious mind” (Meltzer 151). In order to keep the consciousness intact, the dynamic unconscious represses certain things which will manifest themselves unintentionally in daily life (Meltzer 151). Accordingly, Rosner writes that ordinary private life was important in Freudian theory: it was in the “trivialities of daily life such as dreams, jokes, or slips of the tongue” that someone’s interiority was most revealed (87). This means that in order to remain unknown to others, or be private, one has to be in control of oneself so as not to (accidentally) reveal one’s inner self. Moreover, the mind, in this model, has a spatiality to it. If in Victorian fiction the mind was mouldable and static, in modernism, influenced by Freud, it became dynamic and unknowable. Extending the model of the private house to the private mind was supported by Freud’s model of the unconscious, and embraced by modernists.

Modernists, and Woolf in particular, wanted to detach themselves from the Victorian era. Modernist notions of art and architecture that revolted against Victorian structuring and functions of domestic space, Rosner argues, find their way into the modernist novel: “The modernist novel draws a conceptual vocabulary from the lexicons of domestic architecture and interior design, elaborating a notion of psychic interiority, to take one example, that rests on specific ideas about architectural interiors” (2). Because of how art, writing, interior design and aesthetics were interconnected, particularly in the works of the Bloomsbury group, modernist interiority held a “tension between abstraction and materiality, between metaphor and literality” (Rosner 11). This takes physical space and domesticity into account when envisioning interiority. The physical space—the house—and the interior minds are linked, not least because of how Freud viewed the mind. The new modernist life, in comparison to the Victorian private life, is a “more embodied, more unstructured kind of private life” (Rosner 3), which finds echoes in the modernist aesthetics of interiority.

Because of how the division of gender roles and power relations changed within the domestic space, Rosner, comprehensively supported, claims that Woolf “locates modernism’s origins squarely in the space of private life” (3-4). In accordance with a modernist tradition, Woolf explored inner life and subjectivity within from a domestic point of view. In “A Room of One’s Own,” Woolf writes about what it means to a writer
having access to a room like a study, the study being the perfect space of privacy. In the Victorian-structured household, this room was where the man of the house could maintain power even if the domestic sphere was governed by the woman. Gan contends that for this reason there was a problem when women wanted a study; it implied demanding the power that imbued the space when men controlled it (41). But it also implies what private space was and could be; a place of secrets and keeping something within, as well as a place of exclusion and keeping something out, and, most importantly, being able to control this. Rosner argues that the modernists’ critique of the separate spheres and the Victorians’ domesticity does not extend to the study—which is still coded as male and situated at the top of the house (93). Those women who do access the study do so as men and maintain the study’s exclusion, isolation and power (Rosner 93-94). Woolf, in “A Room of One’s Own,” accepts the study as a masculine space, and that women writers in it must “write as women by writing like men” (Rosner 124). However, as Wendy Gan argues, Woolf never names the room in the essay as a study, but rather a room and by doing so, she creates a new neutral room in contrast to the gendered study (45-46). Moreover, in this essay, Woolf envisions the mind of the writer. It is not a mind divided and structured, like the Victorian house was, to be either male or female. The problem with an all-male writer is that “his feelings no longer communicated; his mind seemed separated into different chambers; not a sound carried from one to the other” (“A Room” 100). The best writer’s mind was one without divisions, instead “the whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness” (103). No space in the mind, or room in the house, is coded as either male or female, but allowing free movement. This also shows how interiority and creativity are imagined as a domestic space, but explicitly not as it was constructed in the Victorian household.

Unable to disregard Victorian domesticity completely even as a modern writer, Woolf’s writing reimagines it. Therefore, an understanding of the distinctions between private and public life in the Victorian tradition gives further understanding of Woolf’s writing. Mrs Dalloway and To The Lighthouse, both taking place in a domestic space and being centred on female characters reflecting on privacy, reimagine private life in the domestic space. Using To the Lighthouse as a starting point, I will study how the Victorian household was structured and how the novel renegotiates privacy in relation to the public sphere. Then, I will examine how Mrs Dalloway shows a more modern and urban household, taking place several years later, arguing that interior privacy can
extend beyond the home, that it rather depends on one’s role in the physical setting, and that it is influenced by the organisation of the home.

*To the Lighthouse: The Privacy of the Private Home*

If privacy was physically located, it would be in the home, particularly in the Victorian home. This is considered a space that is not part of the public, shared world outside. Physical privacy may not be the same as the interior feeling of privacy, however, which makes the location of privacy important as well as of the home as that location. The house often functions as a metaphor for the mind and the soul, and for the private part of the self. It is within the home that the woman has had difficulty to be private. It is in the home that she needs a room of her own. *To the Lighthouse* is a novel about a house as much as it is about the woman in it—Mrs Ramsay—since the woman, the head of the house, is so directly connected with it and its doors, its rooms, and its dwellers. In the part of the novel where she is present, “The Window”—the window being the thing that frames her and fixes her as an object (to Lily painting her) in much of it—Mrs Ramsay is predominantly in the house, primarily in one of its rooms, except for a brief walk in the garden (which is an extension of the house, considering that the garden belonged to the woman’s domain) and a walk to the town to visit the home of a friend. Mrs Ramsay, head of the household, wife and mother, gets to represent the privacy of the house and the source of safety it is. Moreover, Mrs Ramsay, modelled after her mother, represented the sort of Victorian domesticity Woolf wanted to break with. In *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf reimagines the role of the Victorian housewife, by showing the depth of Mrs Ramsay, and exploring what privacy is in relation to the house.

Mrs Ramsay does not only embody the traditional role of the wife and mistress of the house, she also works to maintain and protect it. Compared to the rest of the house’s occupants, Mrs Ramsay is someone grounded in the concrete. Her husband and the other men, dwell in the abstract and philosophical, her children in the future and in the lighthouse, and Lily Briscoe in another visual, abstract land (although, she is perhaps a bridge between the abstract and the tangible in the way she paints). Mrs Ramsay organises dinners, keeps track of where everyone is, is concerned about the doors and windows and the sand that is brought in, and uses every free moment to knit. Mrs Ramsay inhabits the home and makes the privacy of it tangible and possible, by evocatively keeping the doors closed, while the outside is calling with its ever-present
sea and the lighthouse trip on the horizon. She creates a home of separate spaces; of shut doors and open windows allowing controlled exchanges of air. In it, it is possible to study how privacy is formed.

Ann Banfield finds that the room is used by Woolf as the base for perspectives of how things are perceived (110). Several examples show this link between the room and the mind. “The room is both the perspective and what houses it …” (Banfield 11). In *To the Lighthouse*, the rooms of the house are “the chambers of the mind and heart” (44). For example, the table that is Lily’s symbol for Mr Ramsay’s work is literally an idea made into something tangible, connected with the domestic scene, “a scrubbed kitchen table” (*TTL* 22). There is an exchange of meaning between the rooms of the house and the rooms of the mind. The private room is then used metaphorically for the private mind, and the private mind can imbue the private room with certain characteristics and vice versa. However, the private home is to the wife and mother not a private place, as it is both her office and her family’s place for leisure. It lacks the solitude offered to men, and keeps the woman within. On the other hand, it puts a woman in the perfect place for thinking, contemplating and controlling her mind, because she is already the skilful mistress of the household. This lack of control and simultaneous control is embraced by Mrs Ramsay in her attempt to control the house and its exchanges. If she can protect the privacy of the house, she can protect the privacy of the mind.

Against the private space of the home stands the outside, which is disorderly, almost dangerous, like the sea, a figure that re-emerges in *The Waves*: “Outside the undifferentiated forces roar; inside we are very private, very explicit …” (*The Waves* 213); inside allows a centre for self and privacy. To be safe, this interior space has to be controlled. Mrs Ramsay wants the doors closed to stop an uncontrolled exchange of outside and inside. Banfield argues that this lets Mrs Dalloway decide who comes and goes in the house (179), or at least be aware of the movements of its inhabitants. In addition, the house is full of people seeking privacy. After dinner, the eight sons and daughters of Mr and Mrs Ramsay sought their bedrooms, their fastnesses in a house where there was no other privacy to debate anything, everything…; while the sun poured into those attics, which a plank alone separated from each other so that every footstep could be plainly heard … 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. (*TTL* 11)
Everyone, in the big and crowded house, craves their own privacy. It is not complete, as someone will always be heard through the thin walls, but the closed doors create a semblance of privacy. And all the time the sun is working its way around those walls. Things dragged in by the comings and goings of everyone in the house—sand, salt, weeds, animal parts, shells and stones—threaten to have the house be reclaimed by the outside and by nature. Unimpeded, the empty house is invaded by nature and it goes to “rack and ruin” (113). An aspect of the private space, both mental and physical, is that “if every door in a house is left perpetually open … things must spoil” (25-26). Mrs Ramsay is able to keep “the reign of chaos subdued” (41). The outside will force its way inside and let things deteriorate and no longer be a home, which is what eventually happens, when the house is left alone and Mrs Ramsay dies. No longer able to keep the outside out, the inside becomes just as unorganised and taken over by nature, as the outside.

Another aspect of separate spheres is that they are separate; as Snaith says, the idea of separating the public and the private sphere confines women to the home, and the home should be impermeable: outside, or public, worries should not enter into the home (17), which Mrs Ramsay agrees with and tries to halt. Snaith also emphasises “the link between materiality, the physicality, of the house and [Mrs Ramsay’s] existence” (18). Mrs Ramsay fills the room and she has “the rooms of the house made full of life—the drawing-room; behind the drawing-room the kitchen; above the kitchen the bedrooms; and beyond them the nurseries; they must be furnished, they must be filled with life” (TTL 33). It is her abilities and her job to furnish the house with life, both literally and metaphorically. She “created drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow” (33-34). Mrs Ramsay gives the rooms of the house life, but left alone,

Mrs Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, … so that she had only strength enough to move her finger, in exquisite abandonment to exhaustion, … while there throbbed through her, like the pulse in a spring which has expanded to its full width and not gently ceases to beat, the rapture of successful creation. (34)

It suggests that what she does when furnishing the house is dissolving herself, because after she must “fold herself together.” Snaith argues that “the domestic literally diffuses Mrs Ramsay’s sense of her own identity” (18). However, it does not mean it has to be unpleasant, because Mrs Ramsay describes it as “exquisite abandonment to exhaustion,” since it is exhaustion from a “successful creation.” Mrs Ramsay is the
creator of life within the home which she gives to the home itself. Even if she almost dissolves in the process, she creates the private sphere.

However, unlike what Mrs Ramsay and the notion of the separate spheres claims, that these are separate and impermeable, they do operate on each other and an exchange is possible. The condition is that it has to be a controlled exchange, which Mrs Ramsay stands for. The throbbing pulse, of “successful creation,” encloses her with her husband “to give to each that solace which two different notes, one high, one low, struck together, seem to give each other as they combine” (TTL 34). Mrs Ramsay does it for her husband, and he complements it with his own note, which combined, finishes the creation. It is true that Mrs Ramsay is the creator within this private home, but it requires the addition of what her husband adds to it and that he needs her to do it. Similarly, the scrubbed kitchen table that Lily imagines shows that she at least sees Mr Ramsay’s philosophic creation not only as a domestic item, a creation which has been generated in the private sphere, but also one that has been scrubbed and taken care of, which is what Mrs Ramsay would oversee and arrange. The private sphere of Mrs Ramsay has effects in the public sphere through Mr Ramsay. And just as the public creation needs the private, the home and the private sphere are not impermeable. The home needs to be supplemented with something from the public sphere in order to be “full of life,” as long as it goes through Mrs Ramsay who regulates the comings and goings and controls the exchange of outside and inside.

When she is absolutely alone and unobserved, Mrs Ramsay can experience privacy in its fullest. Most distinct is when James has gone to bed and Lily has put away the canvas and walked away with Mr Bankes, and Mrs Ramsay thinks she is both alone and unobserved:

For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. (52)

From having thought of everyone in the house and kept track of their whereabouts, even as she is reading to James, she can let that go and think of nothing. This is only achieved when she is completely alone and only then can she be herself. The person she is when someone is watching is someone worth watching, someone “expansive” and “glittering.” Being alone means that she does not have to be an object for others to see:
her own self has “shrunk” and is “invisible.” While it is with solemnity Mrs Ramsay shrinks to herself, it is also with a sense of relief and rest. She does not have to think of others, or think at all, and she does not have to be glittering and vocal. Furthermore, it is not only the things she has to do that she is relieved from, it is what she is as well. When she is completely alone she is able to do nothing for others and also be nothing for others, which is the same as “being oneself” (52).

The key ingredient in this scene is that Mrs Ramsay is unobserved, which means she can be invisible. This allows privacy: not being observed or disturbed. For one, not being seen is not being defined or limited. “This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it” (53). Within herself there is something unknown that is not fixed where she is physically. Not having to be this expansive, glittering person in body, this self “was free for the strangest adventures” (52-53). This something within herself is not only unknown to others, but open for exploration and adventures by herself. Secondly, she is able to go on these “adventures” because she has momentarily escaped from a position where she is supposed to be or do other things, for others. “Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles), but as a wedge of darkness” (53). This wedge of darkness is not limited to material musts and expectations. The person she is when she is observed is always expected to do something and can never rest. Even when she is sitting down and passing time to wait for dinner, she has to be knitting. The wedge of darkness, the invisible self, is even free from trivial activities. This state is something pleasant, something she indulges in. “Always, Mrs Ramsay felt, one helped oneself out of solitude reluctantly by laying hold of some little odd or end, some sound, some sight” (emphasis added, 54). She cannot stay there for a longer time and has to be helped by the outside manifesting itself with its sounds and sights. But since this state gives Mrs Ramsay both freedom and peace and lets her “[rest] on a platform of stability” (53), she does not want to give it up. She has to force herself to take the rest of the world in and expand again. Notably, since this relies on Mrs Ramsay being unobserved and alone, she is disturbed when she finds out she has been observed, when Mr Ramsay says he did not like to see her so sad. “Had she known that he was looking at her, she thought, she would not have let herself sit there, thinking” (57). Being as private and as introspective as Mrs Ramsay in this scene, is possible because she is alone and not observed and, therefore, does not feel the need to always do something.
Mrs Ramsay’s access to full privacy is possible on certain conditions because it is brief moments of alone time, always in full view and approachability if anyone wanted to see her. It was possible for her to explore within herself, but only in these moments she sets up for herself, under the excuse of knitting and obviously still doing her job. Not having access to her own physical solitude, she creates her private moments out of a control of the home’s organisations and an awareness of the dweller’s movements. Within, if the doors are closed and the windows are open, if she can control this, then what is inside and what is created there is not dangerous or bad. In the same way she gives life to the home, she finds that within herself is her life source and it allows a state in which she can rest. Just as she is able to explore her interior self because of the control she has of the what is around her, her creations on the outside, in the home, are made possible because she has this “platform of stability” (53). The important part is the divide between the outside and the inside, between the public and the private, between what others can see and what others cannot see—that which is truly private. This is where the Victorian domesticity is protected and maintained by Mrs Ramsay, but where the private home has added layers of depth and unknowability.

Mrs Dalloway: Privacy as Self-Preservation

While Mrs Ramsay was a more traditional Victorian woman with a traditional, large family, but who partakes in modern understanding of relating to one’s access of privacy, Mrs Dalloway lives a few years later, after the war, and has features of a more modern woman. She has had a different kind of youth and her family is smaller. Thus she is not the matriarch of a big family, but an important city hostess. The location and the construction of her family define her access to privacy, which is greater than Mrs Ramsay’s, but also dependent on control and regulation of exchange and company. If the uncontrolled invasion of the public and the outside was the main threat to Mrs Ramsay, it is the Victorian attempt to control everything inside, including thoughts—through, for example, religion and love—that is the threat to Clarissa Dalloway, to whom privacy and keeping herself protected is of utmost importance.

Living in London after the war, Clarissa Dalloway participates in the public, urban life to a greater extent than her Victorian sisters, which allows new ways of experiencing privacy as well. To Clarissa, the city allows a sense of privacy, albeit not perfect. In one way, she loves it: “In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in
the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, … was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June” (*MD* 2). She revels in its life and movement and its noises. But all the time she is walking through London, she experiences an edge of loneliness and isolation: “She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on” (6). On the one hand she is part of it, walking with everyone else, hearing what they hear, and noticing things with everyone else: a genuine social, collective experience. On the other hand, her position is a distant one where she is a spectator. Furthermore, she too has to be observed and appear “in people’s eyes” (2). Therefore, it is not an interactive social experience; rather she and those she sees are looking at the same thing and at one another, but not interacting. Walking in the city, while you are with others, you are also looking at others who are not you or anyone you know. Despite this, the city has a special capacity for being a private space. Gan argues that it can provide a “bubble of mobile private space” (48). When being outside in a public space as the city is, a woman would not be so set in the role she has at home. Ideally, the crowd of the city allows a woman to be anonymous and thereby have her privacy. But because anonymity of the city is still gendered, this is not entirely possible. Judith A. Garber points out that women in public are often approached and commented on “in part because they are assumed to have (and do have) less ‘ownership’ of public space” (32). If women are “unable to regulate their interactions with male strangers in public places, [they] are robbed of an important privilege of urban life: their anonymity” (Weisman qtd. in Garber 32). In contrast, Peter Walsh, a male character in a similar position to Clarissa’s, rather presumptuously follows a strange woman to her home. It is first at her doorstep that he meets any sort of barrier that stops him following her. While Clarissa, in the city, can experience the anonymity of it by being part of the crowd, it is not a perfect private space as she cannot control it: “She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxicabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day” (*MD* 6). It is an isolating feeling because it lacks the possibility of connecting and community. Privacy is partly possible due to this distance, but not perfect since she cannot control this social situation and how she is perceived in it. However, as women did have access to the public sphere to a much larger extent, and in it found new forms of solitude outside the home, it contributed to new ways of experiencing privacy in relation to space.

Clarissa did not only experience the public in positive and negative ways, she also found the private home complicated; a combination of being isolated and being
needed. When she returns home after buying flowers, she notes that “the hall of the house was cool as a vault,” and she “felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions” (27). Coming home is like entering a vault after the life and movement of the city. Her role at home shrouds her like a habit. Her role as a wife and as Mrs Dalloway is like that of a devoted nun. Her responsibilities are devotions. But what is she devoted to? Who does she serve? Who is her god?

It was her life, and, bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, … not for a moment did she believe in God; but all the more, she thought, taking up the pad, must one repay in daily life to servants, yes, to dogs and canaries, above all to Richards her husband, … one must pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments, she thought … (27-28)

Her god is her home, her servants, her husband and the life she controls within the walls of the house. Despite not being as animated and free as she was outside, she is reverent towards her role inside. This exact moment when she comes in is holy. She feels blessed and purified by her life and what her purpose in it is. But it is a double-edged purpose, like the vault her home is. The buds on the tree of life are flowers of darkness. If outside she manages to be one in the crowd, anonymous and free, she is also able to be just Clarissa Dalloway. Inside, behind her veils, she is isolated and surrounded by the objects of her devotions, but is also needed. This influence—her purpose—is given to her and she must give something back to her husband, to her servants; to the ones who give her this meaning. She finds meaning and gratitude in her home even if it is an isolating feeling.

“Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went, upstairs, paused at the window, came to the bathroom” (29). The two similes that take Clarissa upstairs further show her missed feelings toward the space inside and her role. She has her own room in the attic where she sleeps, dresses and reads. Her husband insists that she must not be disturbed because he works late and she has heart problems. This does not seem to help much because she spends her nights awake and reading anyway. When she leaves the vault-like hallway, Woolf captures this with another metaphor of her. She is the nun retreating further inside, deeper into silence. This indicates that the house has several layers. First she is withdrawing from the world when she enters the house, then she is withdrawing to her room, to a more private space. The second metaphor,
however, prevents you from seeing her merely as a retreating nun; instead it is the picture of a child eagerly climbing the stairs to explore. Her room is a tower, with all its fairy-tale connotations; being tall, isolated, hard to reach, and full of secrets waiting to be explored. Clarissa’s eagerness is that of a child embarking on an unknown world even though upstairs there is nothing special, only a narrow bed. Because she is first a nun withdrawing, it appears as if she should be seen as doing her duty and being unwilling to leave this place of worship. However, she turns around or turns inward, eagerly, to explore the part of the house where there is the least movement. It is in this room she remembers Sally Seton, her close friend in her teenage years, and their kiss. She admits her indifference to men, but also dwells on her sense of lacking something essential: “It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together” (30). Returning, in the attic, to some sort of childhood, she explores an unknown space within herself, and seeks to understand herself, voicing her most secret thoughts.

Her independence of the mind is so important to Clarissa that she did not marry who she loved because she knew everything had to be shared. She preferred the distant, almost-cold marriage to Richard because they gave each other “a little licence, a little independence” (5). Clarissa is always preserving herself and she is generous enough to preserve others as well (she knew Peter would be unhappy as well). When Clarissa at one point watches her neighbour through the window, thinking she was “quite unconscious that she was being watched. There was something solemn in it—but love and religion would destroy that, whatever it was, the privacy of the soul” (128). Love (represented by Peter Walsh, Clarissa’s old lover) and religion (represented by Ms Kilman, her daughter’s deeply religious teacher) are both dangerous to that self-hood, that privacy of the soul, that hidden depth. This is why she never married Peter; why Richard and she never pry into each other. “And the supreme mystery … was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?” (MD 129). Clarissa is always judged for acting certain ways in order to preserve her self-hood and her privacy. But she considers her own method of preserving her privacy unselfish compared to Peter Walsh’ and Ms Kilman’s, both of whom want to force others to their way of connecting. Clarissa means that if they will be isolated anyway, might she not at least preserve her privacy. As Wolfe points out, in the end, “no Dalloway sinks,
‘water-logged,’ into the will of another” (163). The Dalloway’s get to keep their integrity and individuality.

A third danger to the soul’s integrity is Sir Bradshaw. Clarissa attempts to determine what it is that makes him unlikable when she sees him at her party and can only decide that one would not “like Sir William to see one unhappy” (MD 186). But then Bradshaw has brought another uninvited guest to the party; death. When she hears of one of Bradshaw’s patients, Septimus Warren Smith’s suicide she realises why she cannot stand Bradshaw. He is also one who forces the soul and the mind. At this point, she sees Septimus’ death as a success in a way; a successful communication. He has managed to preserve that unnamed centre everyone else evades. Bradshaw, who is “without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it” (188), he has sent Septimus to death with his impressiveness and soul-forcing. This attempt to pin down the soul, has made Septimus react, Clarissa thinks, because “death was defiance” (187). About to be trapped by Bradshaw, the only way to escape the forcing of the soul is death. It shows how far Clarissa is or would be willing to go, in order to preserve the private, inner self.

Natania Rosenfeld argues that Woolf was an individualist and that she meant that empathy depends on recognising and respecting each other’s boundaries (175). According to her, it is realised in Mrs Dalloway. But while Clarissa is careful about her boundaries and those of others, it is not clear whether she manages to pass meaningful communication. Instead, she sacrifices this communication for her individuality. The people who knew her best, Sally and Peter, were the two friends she let closest. But because of their open communication, she felt that they took something from her, asking them, “why always take, never give?” (MD 170). Richard lets her be, but in exchange, they never manage to say what they want to each other. The whole novel seems to emphasise this: the way the narrative voices converge when they think or feel or hear the same thing: converging momentarily into one voice. Septimus’ death is communication to her, because she imagines that she has been there. Wolfe finds a rare moment of understanding between Richard and Clarissa (158-59), when Richard gives an opinion about Bradshaw which confirms Clarissa’s instinctual feeling about Bradshaw: Richard “‘didn’t like his taste, didn’t like his smell’” (MD 186). When it mattered they shared an opinion without Clarissa giving something up of herself. It is not on the two sides of the boundaries and difference she communicated, but when this difference is gone.
Clarissa wants to bring people together. It is her “offering” as a hostess, the purpose for her party: that people “could be brought together” (123). But people can never meet completely. She thinks “there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf” (121). But for Clarissa, this gulf is dignity which permits independence and self-respect. The distance between people is necessary to preserve their individuality. The unknowability of other people is necessary in order to be a person. It is “something, after all, priceless” (121). The idea of not knowing someone else, or even oneself and one’s hidden depth is not something negative. It is the unknowability that makes people individuals, and that makes her herself. Clarissa wants to bridge people, let them come together, but preserve their individuality. In this the city, despite being pools of isolation, is a perfect place, because city dwellers are both physically close but also isolated. They are a mass of people becoming indistinguishable in their anonymity, which at the same time ensures them they are also individuals.

Being a modern, urban-living woman, Clarissa can extend her feeling of privacy to new spaces. Her experience depends on her role in each space. In the urban modernity women are able to move more freely outside in the city which allows a new sort of anonymity outside the home. Being part of the city crowd she is not singled out but also isolated. Inside her home, as a hostess, she is in control of her situation, even if her role is decided for her. While it is confining, it is also, like her marriage with her husband, preferable to be in a social setting where she can decide what she shows and not. Pointed out by Jesse Wolfe, her marriage is a traditional one, not the would-be progressive one with Peter or her impossible relationship with Sally, but one with limits she can adjust (163). Finally, when she is alone in her attic room, she is neither invisible in a crowd, nor typecast in a role as wife and hostess. She has no role other than being Clarissa, and her purpose is herself. In her room, she puts herself under scrutiny. Here she excels in control and self-knowledge. She dares to challenge herself, think of herself and drag up the thoughts that are possibly disagreeable. Her role in each space, and what spaces are available to her, more varying because modernity has opened up both public and private life, affects how she experiences privacy.
The Head and the House

Two significant features of the structuring of the house is revealed in *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*. One is how the Victorian home relied on divisions to create stability, which is exemplified by Mrs Ramsay, and how the private space of the home could only come to fruition in relation to the public world outside. The other is how the rooms of the house were structured after who used them, women or men, and if they were for solitude or community. *Mrs Dalloway* includes a reorganisation of this Victorian structure, in Clarissa Dalloway’s room. What both these novels make evident is that while the access to physical privacy was difficult for these women to attain, interior privacy was still possible.

Both Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Dalloway are excellent creators of private space. Mrs Ramsay’s solitude is valued by her but limited, as she never feels unobserved. She does not have time for leisure and is always tense, watchful for any disturbance in the social environment around her. When everything remained calm, she could let go, be private and “be herself, by herself” (*TTL* 52). Similarly, Clarissa Dalloway, also a coordinator of people, but less so as a mother and wife and more as a hostess, has a very social role, and this enables her to create moments of company and solitude. Furthermore, Mrs Ramsay brings the private room into being in the home. During the dinner, the family and the guests are brought together when the candles are lit “for the night was now shut off by panes of glass … that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land” (*TTL* 79-80). Mrs Ramsay “felt her uneasiness changed to expectation” when the outside is held out (80). Mrs Dalloway, too, creates this room for privacy in her marriage with her husband. She can reveal what she wants and nothing else. But while Mrs Ramsay believes people can only come together in a room within, with clear limits and protection from the outside, Mrs Dalloway believes it has more to do with recognising one another, finding common ground, and letting everyone be their own person in the meantime.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the structuring of the home is revealed to be a construction, more or less created and maintained by Mrs Ramsay herself. As Mrs Ramsay is a protector of Victorian ideals, she needs this division of rooms to be maintained. The problem with the family leaving the doors of the house open is the lack of respect for “the boundaries of the domestic space” (Rosner 164). But if she does want to keep the divisions of the Victorian house, a house of boundaries and thresholds, she
does so because she considers it necessary. When she is able to regulate the flow of the house’s inhabitants and their exchange, she can successfully create the unity and life inside which becomes difficult to maintain when she is no longer there. She recognised the destructive forces of the public life outside and the uniting forces of the domestic space within. Additionally, when Mrs Ramsay experiences privacy she is noticeably unseen by others. Imagining privacy of the self as a secret place within oneself, unseen by others and perhaps even by oneself, but more importantly, struggling to regulate and control it is a significant feature of the unconscious, and a reflection of the ideal private home.

Mrs Ramsay’s own moment of solitude is possible when the children has gone to bed and the surroundings are momentarily forgotten. She is watching the lighthouse, “hypnotized,” whose light, at night, is “stroking the floor,” and now is “stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain,” and “it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly” until “waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough!” (TTL 54-55). The literally lighting up of her mind, of the floor of her mind, is both ecstatic and delightful, but also painful—to be so lit up, so open and visible. This exquisite moment is possible only when the rest is cut off and the single light is on her like a spotlight. But too much light will give her too much ecstasy, like an overcharge of emotion. Seeing herself is possible but not something she can indulge in. In accordance with how she views the private home, her mind can only be met and seen when there is no threat from the outside. Similarly, only delighting in the private home and not having the exchange with the outside, will be too much. The public is needed to create this private space. The Victorian home lets the private home be private enough and not more.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the physical structure of Clarissa Dalloway’s life and her home shows the assimilation of the Victorian private rooms within the home, then coded as male, and a modernist imagination of private space as a sort of physically imagined interiority. Given that Clarissa has a room of her own, it is important that the novel does not imagine this room as a study, or a proper bedroom, which she would share with her husband, nor a traditionally female room such as the boudoir or the sitting room, but as a private room. Furthermore, this room is situated at the top of the house. As Rosner notes, the study was often located at the edges of the family space, between the family and the servants’ quarters, sometimes in the servants’ quarters (63-64). Clarissa’s room is not where traditionally the women’s rooms were, where the female
space of the house was: in the centre of the house. It is at the edge, and its inaccessibility makes it even more private. This re-imagination of the private room, the female room, and the study is combined with Clarissa’s thoughts in this room. The room is made to be a very inaccessible and private room but it is significantly not situated in the basement, but in the head of the house. It is Clarissa’s room and not her husband’s study which is the “mind” of the house. The way she reaches her room, “as if she … stood alone, a single figure against the appalling night” (MD 29) suggests that the room takes on dimensions more serious than simply a place to sleep. It is reminiscent of the vision of the unconscious as layered where her room is the most innermost part of one’s access to the unconscious. This is not a place of altogether good things: she thinks of it as a nun’s room and a tomb, “narrower and narrowed would her bed be” (MD 29). But it is important for her to know herself. Clarissa’s room gets to mirror the importance of interiority and expressing truth of one’s self only to oneself, when she reveals and thinks of for example her feelings towards men and Sally Seton. But these concepts—Victorian domesticity, its deciding factor over women and space, interiority and spatial metaphors of the mind—are envisioned, negotiated and synthesised in Clarissa and her attic room.

Vision of the mind as well as the use of space within the home changed with modernity. Woolf uses these contemporary influences and ideas of what the human mind looked like and how it worked—which at the time consisted primarily of Freud’s theory of the unconscious—by recreating domestic space and re-evaluate mental space. Mrs Ramsay’s “core of darkness could go anywhere” (TTL 53), and Clarissa is a child exploring a tower. They could explore within themselves and delight in it. Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Dalloway also show how Woolf questioned the Victorian division of the spheres, even when she wrote of them, but that she realised women were not completely subjected to their rules. Privacy, often taken from women because they were meant to be social and caring, was necessary to these women, whose main profession was wife and mother. They were not allowed a study of their own but salvaged the spaces they had, and used their power as head of the domestic space to control the spaces as much as they could and thereby created their private moments. In addition, an important part of experiencing privacy, is being able to explore oneself: which both Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay do only when at their most private. Furthermore, Woolf, along with other modernist artists, developed new ways of presenting interiority and of women in
particular. The way in which interiority was imagined in spatial metaphors and not something one-dimensional, provided excellent material to write of women and privacy in a domestic setting. Woolf, by using the traditional symbol of the Victorian wife also re-evaluates privacy and shows that modernity, for women, was not only concerned with participating in and accessing public life, but also with exploring and accessing private life. This is significant because it reminds one of how space is coded by power and how it affects the perceived agency of its occupants, and that the private space is a place where the conceptions of power relations are worth studying.
Works Cited


