Throughout history, the opinions, desires, and perceptions of women have been treated as nonsensical and unwarranted in the male-dominated world. In fact, these features have been predetermined by strict societies that tell women what they will do, what they will think, and who they will be, and denying women a singular human experience; rather, it is split into two separate parts, an exterior and an interior. The exterior, as demanded by the world, includes composure, femininity, and contentedness with life. Conversely, the interior contains everything that the world sees as unacceptable qualities in women, including the aforementioned opinions, desires, and perceptions, which are all indicative of independent thought. Virginia Woolf exhibits a keen focus on women’s self expression and their struggle to achieve it in her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, as well as in her essay, *A Room of One’s Own*. In her novels, Woolf presents the characters, Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Briscoe, as women who experience a surface which satisfies strict gender codes, but creates disconnection, and an internal world into which their true selves are filtered, but suppressed. However, Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Briscoe both bridge the gap that divides their interiors and exteriors by expressing themselves through their respective art forms. Thus, they serve as model examples of Woolf’s argument in *A Room of One’s Own* in that they are ultimately in control of their self expression and reconnecting the fragmented pieces of themselves by their giving voices a lasting position in the world through their creations.
The authoritative male voice in *Mrs. Dalloway* is a primary reason for the separation between Clarissa’s interior and exterior, and is represented by Clarissa Dalloway’s husband, Richard. Clarissa, although knowledgeable of her goal to throw an extravagant party, she is met with resistance from Richard when it comes to knowing what is best for her, and this interferes with her goal. Richard uses his marital superiority to dictate to Clarissa how she will spend her time. Woolf describes him bringing Clarissa a pillow and a quilt, ordering her to “an hour’s complete rest after luncheon,” to which she abides (117). Richard sees Clarissa as fragile and incapable of being in tune with her own health and well-being, and although she complies with his demand, she is left feeling terribly unhappy, which exposes her dichotomy, because she is aware of her husband’s criticisms and objections about what she does. Woolf highlights the fact that, “Richard thought it foolish of her to like excitement when she knew it was bad for her heart” and calls it “childish” (118). Through Richard’s condescending attitude about the enjoyment Clarissa gets out of her parties, it is clear that he doubts her overall ability to successfully make decisions, and infantilizes her sensibilities, removing the validity of her choices and desires. Iraj Montashery, author of “A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*,” explains how this domestic dynamic is a result of social construction and argues that, “patriarchal society, such as the society in which Clarissa lives, consciously or unconsciously tends to assume and advance a view of the masculine as a natural source of power and authority, and of the feminine as the natural opposite,” identifying men with “reason and activity” and women with “emotion and passivity” (126). Due to the societal framework depicted in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Richard and Clarissa are products of their environment, as they have both been prescribed specific roles to fulfill. However, this environment has created an authoritative husband for Clarissa who attempts to prohibit her from truly expressing herself, and limits her
ability to step outside the realm of expectations, and thereby proves himself to be the prime cause of the separation within Clarissa.

In Woolf’s novel, *To the Lighthouse*, a similar authoritative male presence exists, and is experienced by Lily Briscoe, a younger, unmarried friend of the Ramsay family who is attempting to complete a painting. Mr. Tansley, another friend of the Ramsays, insults Lily’s ability to create based on her gender while she is painting and deters her from accomplishing her goal. While Lily is at her easel, Mr. Tansley whispers in her ear, “Women can’t paint, women can’t write…” (Woolf 51). Not only does this remark insinuate that he believes women are not, or should not be, allowed to partake in the acts of painting and writing, but it also demonstrates the male belief system that women are essentially incapable of self-expression. Much like Richard Dalloway, Mr. Tansley’s attempt to mute the female voice is a result of the social constructs of Woolf’s novel, which Ernest Veyu calls a “phallocratic milieu” (12). Women are to marry, have children, identify themselves and their thoughts only in relation to men, and teach their daughters to do the same. However, Lily is blatantly threatening the accepted social order in an open space for all to see. In her article, “Lily Briscoe’s Vision: The Articulation of Silence,” Theresa L. Crater points out that Lily is “directly expressing female subjectivity” and “establishing new cultural alternatives” by creating a painting that is representative of individual perception (121). Lily’s creation is her vision of the world around her and defies the expectation of women to remain silent about how they perceive their surroundings, unless their perceptions are in agreement with those of their male counterparts, which is why men such as Mr. Tansley and Richard Dalloway deem it necessary to remind women of their prescribed limitations, and thus, the gap is formed and the female identity is split into fragments. They are then left to balance their silent surface images that show everyone around them what they want to see with
their vibrant inner streams of consciousness that contain their most sincere, yet suppressed, thoughts and feelings.

The authority that men have, or at least believe that they have, in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, is also present in A Room of One’s Own. Just as men have informed Clarissa and Lily of their incapacities and limitations in Woolf’s novels, they guard the line which separates and categorizes men and women in her essay, which keeps men superior and women inferior. Men do not even need to use words to remind women of their place in this text; they do this simply with their presence and facial expressions. Woolf recalls walking on a turf path through a university campus. However, the turf path is reserved for the feet of men, and a woman’s designated walking place is on the gravel. She then describes a man looking at her, his face expressing “horror and indignation” because “he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path,” and “Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me” (6). The primary functions of a Beadle, or bedel, include management, security, and keeping order. So, this Beadle glaring at Woolf is no random man passing by; he is purposely placed on the campus to keep the paths of men and women separate. If men and women share the same walking path, it presupposes a level of equality; however, this does not exist, and so segregation must be ensured. The turf is reserved for the men, and on a university campus in the time when Woolf wrote her essay, men was synonymous with Fellow and Scholar. These are words that indicate high intellect and esteem, attributes which women are not seen to possess, similar to how Clarissa cannot be seen as competent when it comes to her health, and how Lily cannot be seen as a painter or a writer.

In Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa’s silent surface is a space that is overflowing with emptiness and incomplete relationships with other people. Since this external area is a forum in which
everything honest is left unsaid and avoided, this is where Clarissa essentially masks her true identity and portrays the identity of someone whom she is not. Resulting from this portrayal are harsh and shallow opinions of Clarissa from the same individuals who pressure her to adhere to their standards of what an acceptable woman of society should live up to. Descriptions of Clarissa’s external identity from the viewpoint of others, including her husband and supposed closest friends, include “perfect hostess” (7), “Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (10), “pointed; dartlike; definite” (36), “cold” (48), “timid; hard; arrogant; unimaginative; prudish” (58) and “perfect manners” (61). These descriptions of Clarissa are all based on superficial verbal exchanges which contain no substantial communication. In his article, “Mrs Dalloway: Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Woman,” Jacob Littleton asserts his case that, “Woolf criticizes conceptions of character bound by the exterior forms of life,” which “fixes every person firmly in the world of business and power relationships” (36). Clarissa’s entire personal and social existences take place on an exterior platform, and therefore, she is not able to be correctly understood, because her role in society, her friendships, and even in her own marriage is scripted. The outcome of these mechanical relationships is that others’ perceptions of her do not represent any sort of reality because reality is not where those perceptions are rooted.

Much like Clarissa, Lily Briscoe experiences a surface world consisting of empty interactions and void of people who communicate truthful thoughts and feelings in To the Lighthouse. The individuals who surround Lily live on a surface plain that operates like pageantry, and there is no tolerance when it comes to showing others what they do not wish to see, which causes endless tension in others’ lives. Lily tries to avoid existing on the same level as everyone else; however, she is unable to escape it. When Lily experiences the superficial world that she lives in, she is described as “half out of the picture, looking, a little dazedly, as if at
unreal things” (181). This is an environment where she simply does not fit, because she knows that on this level, reality is silenced, and people are not themselves. Rather, they are imitations of authentic people, and so the reality of what she sees is not present, only illusions, which are in opposition to what she is attempting to depict on the canvas in front of her. In his article, “Only Relations: Vision and Achievemen in To the Lighthouse, Thomas G. Matro argues that “virtual juxtapositions or contradictions” are all Lily encounters in the surface world (212). Sally Minogue, author of, “Was it a Vision? Structuring Emptiness in To the Lighthouse,” refers to the outer layer in which the characters in the novel live as a “multiplicity of voices which render a highly uncertain world” (289). Every character in To the Lighthouse who avoids communicating what they truly mean or feel is denying themselves and others the chance to know them completely. With every depthless encounter, with every word that is left unsaid, and with every emotion left hidden, more confusion is added to the already overflowing space that separates the inner and outer worlds.

Woolf also discusses women’s surface images in A Room of One’s Own, which she believes exists solely outside of the world of pages that make up fiction literature. To Woolf, the representations of women in literature written by men do not reflect how men actually see women; rather, the women that men write about are “very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater” (43). These adjectives are most certainly not indicative of the true position of women in the eyes of men, since women were not seen as weak, gentle, boring, and absolutely not equal to men, at least in Woolf’s time. In fact, Woolf discusses the created identity of women, saying, “if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the upmost importance” (43) She contrasts this with the actual identity of a woman, and says, “in
real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband” (43).

In truth, the women that existed on the pages of books really did exist in real life, but their surface images, which included illiteracy and subservience, were who they were forced to be. Women were not given the chance to be strong, independent, or even paradoxical as men wrote them to be, so these attributes stayed on the pages, while they maintained their silent external identities.

Clarissa Dalloway’s interiority is home to all of the aspects of her that her façade is missing. This is where her happiness, her awareness of her actual needs and desires, and her true value of unity are all tightly packed away from public view. The evidence of Clarissa’s inner self is seen in her stream of consciousness, which reveals her value of simplicity and affection for the same sex. Clarissa remembers the days of her youth and “the most exquisite moment of her whole life,” when her friend, Sally Seton, “kissed her on the lips,” which makes everyone around her disappear, and Sally tells Clarissa “just to keep it” like a precious gift, “wrapped up” (Woolf 35). This intimate moment between Clarissa and Sally is one of beauty and simplicity because no expectations or requirements are attached to it, and it cannot be taken away from them. However, to refer to this kiss as a wrapped up gift insinuates its forbidden nature. Clarissa must keep it hidden just for herself, away from the rest of the world, as a kiss between two women as more than a tea-time greeting is viewed as unquestionably inappropriate. O.P. Sharma, who conducted a feminist study of *Mrs. Dalloway*, describes this interior level of Clarissa’s existence as an “exclusive sanctuary, which puts her under a “hypnotic spell” (66). She is able to use her interior as a place to escape the mundane and restricting society that strangles her with pressure, yet when Clarissa is in touch with this part of herself, she is taken so far away from what is expected
of her that she is mesmerized, illustrating the difficulty of balancing the two sides of her life as a woman.

Similarly, in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe must filter her true emotions into a space of interiority. She does this so that they remain unnoticed, and therefore, cannot be judged by those who watch her every action with scrutinizing eyes. Lily explores her own yearning for harmony through her constant observations and affection for Mrs. Ramsay, which, much like Clarissa, is shown in her stream of consciousness. Lily admits that it was “unity that she desired”, as she leans on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee, and wonders, “Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one?” but understands that the unity which this connection would bring is something that could “never be offered openly, never made public” (Woolf 54). Lily’s examination of her intimate feelings toward Mrs. Ramsay not only exposes her attraction to someone of the same sex, but it also alludes to Lily’s knowledge that their connection cannot come to fruition in the physical world. Sharon Wood Proudfit, who analyzes Lily Briscoe’s relationships in her article, notes that Lily “desires a more permanent union with her, one that will open the mind and heart of Mrs. Ramsay to Lily” (31). This analysis gives insight to the reasoning behind Lily’s refusal to marry; she wants from Mrs. Ramsay what she believes no man is capable of giving her. However, this is something that Lily cannot openly communicate to others, and so it becomes one of the silenced, and filtered, aspects of her that gets locked away, inside of her.

The element of hidden interiority, where a woman must keep her thoughts and ideas out of sight, also exists in *A Room of One’s Own*. To strengthen her essay’s argument that women are not believed to have the capabilities to express themselves, she uses William Shakespeare’s hypothetical sister, whom she believes would not have been a successful writer like her brother,
William. When describing William’s sister, Woolf writes, “She may have picked up a book now and then, one of her brother’s perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers,” and that “Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them” (47). Judith knows that the world in which she lives will not accepting or welcoming of her writings, because it is not a woman’s place to communicate her thoughts, feelings, or ideas, written or otherwise. So, she does it far away from the view of others, and her understanding that women’s self-expression is useless and unwarranted is so engrained into her being that she feels nothing but shame. As a result, Judith hides them or ruins them, and therefore, they remain nonexistent from the world and, as with Clarissa and Lily, it is locked in the interior part of her, and unseen by the world. However, Woolf has a positive outlook on the fate of what remains internal and does not believe that all of the aspects of women that become suppressed internally stop existing. Rather, she is cognizant that these aspects, such as creativity, knowledge, and individuality, are very much alive. When talking about women poets, Woolf says, “She lives in you and me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives…” (112).

Although Clarissa is depicted as a woman who is essentially separated into two, disconnected identities, she is able to connect them through self-expression in the parties she gives to the citizens of high society. Clarissa’s party that she prepares for throughout the novel represents the culmination of the narrative, as well as her chance to leave an imprint of her internal self on the external world. Clarissa thinks that her parties are a place where “everyone was unreal in one way; much more real in another,” since they are “taken out of their ordinary ways,” and she loves that her parties can “go much deeper” (Woolf 166). This environment in
which the division between reality and illusion is challenged is Clarissa’s ultimate creation. It conveys her visualization of life, as well as everyone’s place in it, including her own. Vereen M. Bell, author of “Misreading Mrs. Dalloway,” agrees that Clarissa uses her parties to connect everyone to who she truly is, and states that Clarissa wishes to “cultivate” her party guests, which gives the imagery of planting a seed and allowing it to grow and come into the light. Through this cultivation, Clarissa is shifting and developing inaccurate and incomplete views of her to ones of completeness, which allow them to see “her woodenness all warmed through” (Bell 97; Woolf 170). By getting the guests at her party to see the side of her that is typically suppressed in other situations, and which causes their mistaken views of her, Clarissa ultimately creates an experience for herself that unites her dual existence, and those around her can look at her, and see her not as Mrs. Richard Dalloway, not as a party hostess, but simply as Clarissa, and think, “There she was” (Woolf 190).

Lily Briscoe’s completed painting also serves as an example of a woman connecting her separated existences through self-expression and solidifying a place in life for her voice to be recognized. Her painting says everything that she is unable to verbally communicate, which, similar to Clarissa, includes her perceptions of life, her own place within that life, and also where others are placed. As she thinks about the structure of her painting, it is evident that unity is what Lily most desires to create, not only in her art, but also in life. When contemplating the construction of her painting, Lily wonders “how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left” and decides that she “shall put the tree further in the middle” to “avoid that awkward space” (Woolf 56 & 87). This blank space in her painting represents the way she is affected in life by the space in the Ramsay family, both of which parallel the other for over a decade. When she experiences the connection in life that she has been waiting for, Lily is able to translate it
into her artwork, putting her internal perceptions into the external world, and rejoicing, “I have had my vision” (Woolf 211). She is finally able to paint life as she sees it, which transports her interior self to the silent surface, onto the canvas. Ozlem Uzundemir, an examiner of gender roles in Woolf’s novels, also argues that Lily is concerned with her view of life being actualized through her art, saying that, “Lily’s act of creation is very individualistic; she paints to express herself” (9). If Lily does not express her own vision, no one else will do it for her. Furthermore, Lily does not paint to please the eyes of those who look at what she creates; rather, she paints to make the statement that, in a society and world where the female voice is disregarded, her voice exists.

Women’s achievement of self-expression and their connection of their true identities to the world are the driving forces behind Woolf’s call to action for women in *A Room of One’s Own*. She adamantly urges women to break free from their traditional roles which limit them and hold them hostage in their own homes and families through writing. Woolf says that women have the power to give themselves a voice, “if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality” (112). When women are seen only in relation to others, they are simplified to the roles of wife, mother, and lady. The reality is that every woman is a human being, and every human being is an individual. Therefore, every individual should see, and should be seen by, others as individuals. Woolf advises women, “So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say” (Woolf 105). The importance of self-expression to Woolf is that it is originated from an independent perspective, without any influences, and that as
long as women’s interiors come into the real world through, even for a split second, then they are one with reality.

Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Briscoe are fictional literary characters employed by Virginia Woolf; however, they achieve what Woolf wants implores of women in *A Room of One’s Own*. Clarissa and Lily are able to defy superficial gender codes and bridge the gap that separates their interior and exterior and un-mute their internal identities in the external, male-driven world, where their own thoughts, desires, and voices are forced into silence. Woolf capitalizes on this idea by applying it to the real lives of women in her essay, Clarissa’s parties and Lily’s painting expose who they truly are by allowing them to express what they see around them from their own points of view, and in turn, how it affects them. When someone is forced to deny aspects of their identity to meet the criteria of the world in which they live, that person becomes a partial version of themselves, and they are no longer living for themselves, but for others. Through forced silence, the completeness and unity of a person is completely lost, because they are passively wandering through life as though they are not even a part of it, not living it, just existing in it. It is unacceptable to treat other human beings as though their primary purpose is to show only the parts of themselves that are convenient to see. This strips them of their true value as a human being because it compartmentalizes them. It then becomes a goal to attempt to create a sense of connection within themselves, and in their lives, and this is something that should not have to occur. There should be no interior where the realities of our identities are hidden, and there should be no exterior where silence causes disconnection between individuals. Voices should be heard, not suppressed, life should be lived, not merely existed in; and the human identity should not be broken into pieces; it should be one, consistent, and complete.
works cited


