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FEMINIST APPROACH TO *MRS. DALLOWAY*:
SOCIAL SPHERES, MARRIAGE AND SEXISM.

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf is considered as one of the most notorious modernist writers, as well as a leading figure, of feminism in 20th century literature. Her work *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) incorporates some of the basic concerns of feminism such as the dichotomy of social spheres, the patriarchal authority established in marriage or sexism. The aim of this essay is to explore Virginia Woolf's point of view on these aspects by analyzing the distinctive representation of men and women in *Mrs. Dalloway*. However, the analysis proves that despite the fact that in some cases the opposition between the sexes is clearly emphasized, in the majority of the cases, they behaved similarly as a result of the significant influence they received from the general conventions of their patriarchal society. Nevertheless, the analysis highlights some instances of feminist characters who managed to live against the standards of their society.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, spheres, authority, sexism, conventions.

RESUMEN

Virginia Woolf es considerada como una de las escritoras modernistas más notorias, así como una figura simbólica del feminismo de la literatura del siglo XX. Su obra *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) incorpora algunos de los aspectos principales del feminismo como la dicotomía entre las esferas sociales, la autoridad patriarcal establecida en el matrimonio o el machismo. El objetivo de este trabajo es investigar la perspectiva que tenía Virginia Woolf en cuanto a estos aspectos, mediante el análisis de la representación distintiva de hombres y mujeres en *Mrs. Dalloway*. Sin embargo, el análisis demuestra que a pesar de que en algunos casos la distinción entre géneros es indudable, principalmente, se comportaban de forma similar debido a la inmensa influencia de las convenciones de la sociedad patriarcal. No obstante, el análisis hace incapié en algunos ejemplos de personajes feministas que trataron de vivir en contra de los estándares de su sociedad.

Palabras clave: Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, esferas, autoridad, machismo, convenciones.

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1. Introduction

The present dissertation offers a feminist approach to *Mrs. Dalloway*, a modernist novel written by Virginia Woolf, one of the most notorious writers of this period. The aim of this analysis is to study the main differences and similarities between men and women, concerning some of the aspects related to feminism found in this work. I have divided the study into three main sections: 1) Theoretical background, 2) Discussion and 3) Conclusion.

The theoretical background reviews some historical and cultural milestones as well as some significant references in the development of feminism. The review of "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," an essay written by Elaine Showalter, illustrates the different perspectives we can employ to approach a text with a feminist point of view. The second part of this section centers on *The Madwomen in the Attic* (1979), by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, a work that explores the conditions in which women have lived throughout history, as well the role that women played within society, whether or not they were able to exert authority within their lives and their possibilities to write. The last section of this chapter, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) corresponds to one of the two significant essays that Virginia Woolf wrote regarding feminism. The main point of this section is to review some of the main concepts that she incorporated in her feminist explorations.

The discussion will finally center on some of the ideas Virginia Woolf introduced in her essay, which are also illustrated in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). The three main topics are the following: the dichotomy of social spheres, the portrayal of male's patriarchal authority within marriage, and finally, sexism.

Concerning the social sphere, the analysis shows how simplified the society of the beginning of the 20th century was. This society was constituted by a binary system: the public and the private sphere. The analysis shows how fragmented and separated are the roles of both men and women into active and passive. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions in which either the characters have suffered an evolution in their roles or the correspondent characters possess certain features which, presumably, are not common to their gender. Afterwards, I explore the representation of authority within marriage.

The analysis distinguishes between two central kinds of authority: the supremacy of men over women and the supremacy of women over men. At the end of this analysis,

it is going to be proved whether men are the ones who exert authority in their matrimony or it is women the ones who assume that power. Furthermore, the study discusses whether marriage was based on love or economic reasons.

However, once again, there are some characters with a different civil status other than married, that is, either unmarried or divorced. And finally, the study centers on the opposed views of sexism. This approach is going to demonstrate how sexism is centered not only on men and the objectification of women, but on women as well, as both have promoted the existence of sexism.

2. Theoretical background

This section deals with some of the most relevant concerns of feminism, taking into account three main relevant works: “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” (1981), *The Madwomen in the Attic* (1979) and *A Room of One’s Own* (1929).

2.1. “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”

Although feminism is a range of social, political and cultural movements that has run throughout history, it has not been until recently that we can talk about a proper feminist approach to culture. In “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” Elaine Showalter claims that feminism is a wide topic that can be studied from several perspectives. It is particularly difficult to construct a theoretical framework because, according to Annette Kolodny, feminism is conformed by “a set of interchangeable strategies” (qtd. in Showalter 180). It can be studied by centering on the black aesthetic, the distinction of social classes, literary history, or from the point of view of either deconstructionists or language, (Lacan, Freud). Hence, feminist criticism must be understood as a confrontation with the prejudices and the canons of the society. Showalter distinguishes two main kinds of approaches to interpret a feminist text: women regarded as readers of fiction and women depicted as writers of literary texts.

From an ideological point of view, women as feminist readers can be familiarized with several aspects that concern the figure of women; certain misunderstandings about history which have been employed, in most cases, as a tool to give prevalence to men; or to perceive the lack of information that involves them. This perspective implies a reconsideration of all the female stereotypes in literature. Therefore, in this context, Showalter aims to create a specific conceptual model with which we can approach literary study properly. However, there are some authors such as Kolodny, who resents Showalter’s idea. Showalter responds by stating that this opposition is senseless because “feminist criticism is in some sense revisionist” (Showalter 1981: 183), what implies that it questions the correctness of conceptual ideas, which have been formerly accepted, in order to reconstruct them. Hence, Showalter truly proclaims that it is necessary to revise our history so that we can detect where the inequalities are settled.

One of the clearest examples of revisionist literature is portrayed by Susan Gubar, the co-author of *The Madwoman in the Attic*. She asserted in “What Do Feminist Critics Want; or, A Postcard from the Volcano,”¹ that “feminist criticism wants to decode and demystify all the disguise questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority” (qtd. in Showalter 183). Furthermore, Showalter criticizes the feminist tendency of revising tradition in order to center the whole approach on issues such as the male critical theory. She proclaims that we must rather focus exclusively on women’s theory because tradition cannot provide new insights anymore.

We can also study women as writers, following Showalter. Women could not devote their lives entirely to writing because they were oppressed. Unfortunately, they found themselves bound to hide their passion of writing and perform it secretly, as we can see, for example, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Therefore, it is important to study the themes, the style and the different genres they used sometimes in the privacy of their room. In fact, it is particularly interesting to compare the figure of women as provided by men and the perspective of how women portray themselves, how they perceive the same experiences and stories from their different points of view. Showalter has called this study “gynocritics”, as there is not a specific term to designate this sort of discourse. It approaches both women as a group and the main characteristics that distinguish their writing. Indeed, Showalter believes that Patricia Meyer Spacks was probably the first academic who “notice this shift from androcentric to a gynocentric feminist criticism,” (Showalter 1981: 185).

Hence, feminist criticism is managing to determine a specific terminology that avoids the misconception of female gender taken as the inferior sex. Then, it is necessary to study the correlation between women to literary culture. There are four theories to account for the differential style of women’s writing: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. At some point, all of them overlap and can be encompassed within the cultural view.

Regarding the biological view, we can study both the textual anatomy and the authority of the text. During the Victorian period, it was believed that women were

¹ Sandra M. Gilbert, revises the Western culture in “What Do Feminist Critics Want? A Postcard from the Volcano.” 1980. In *The New Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. London: Virago, 1986. pp. 29-45.

intellectually inferior to men because of some patent biological differences produced between them. Usually, we find these differences reflected in literary metaphors. For instance, the metaphor of the authority of a text, which both Gilbert and Gubar include in their volume, *The Madwomen in the Attic* (1979). It is highly important that we rethink the symbolism and the implicit meaning of these metaphors in order to redefine the biological stereotypes and prejudices, concerning the body of both men and, particularly, women to avoid the male prevalence. Therefore, we must be aware that the biological difference is connected to anatomy, but also, with some other social and linguistic aspects.

When it comes to the linguistic view, it holds the notion of language as oppressive and gendered. According to this perspective, women have been bound to use a language that discriminates them. Then, some writers such as Annie Leclerc claims that it is necessary to reinvent a new language which is not oppressive, a female language. This notion comes from ancient times, as it can be found in both myths and folklore. Indeed, in some cultures, women even created a secret language to fight against the censorship. Woolf also protested against this imposition of silence by comparing herself with Joyce.

Nevertheless, the main problem is not only set on language itself, but on the impossibility that women speak their minds and on their lack of access to literature. Woolf shows us her frustration in those regards in her essay *A Room Of One's Own* where she exposes the impossibility to have access to a library in London only because she is a woman. Hence, Showalter concludes that, "women's literature is still haunted by the ghosts of repressed language, and until we have exorcised those ghosts, it ought not to be in language that we base our theory of difference." (1981: 193). She encourages us to work for a widening of language so that women are also truly incorporated within it.

In connection to this view, the psychoanalytic perspective is centered on the self or the author's psyche. This view shows us how women were considered as tainted or mad in order to justify that they should not attempt the pen to write fiction. This can be clearly portrayed in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where John, the husband of the woman who narrates this short story, manages to corrupt her sanity. With the help of some other members of the family such as John's sister, Jennie, they control both her health and all her movements, thus keeping her theoretically protected. However, the narrator recognizes somehow that she would like to have more freedom to devote her life to

writing, and also, more recognition: “I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me. But I find I get pretty tired when I try. It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work” (Perkins Gilman 1892: 4). In fact, we can clearly notice how Jennie does not approve of seeing her writing. This can be understood as a symbol of the real situation of many women at that time and even throughout history. Women had to hide their abilities, as we can perceive with the narrator’s view: “There comes John’s sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing” (Perkins Gilman 1892: 4).

As a final theory, we find the cultural view, which is the most complete approach to deal with the difference of woman’s writing. It involves all the previous perspectives; however, it interprets them according to the specific context in which the subject of gender is being treated. It also emphasizes the idea that history should include a feminist view instead of been male-centered in order to widen the range of vision. What we actually have is a lacking history that cannot be considered as a completely accurate source because there is an important absence of information concerning women in all their aspects. To define the female culture, we can perceive how there was a division of roles between men and woman into social spheres, where always prevailed the male dominance. This notion can also be represented by Ardener’s diagram, where it is portrayed the supremacy of men over women by the distinction of the dominant group, which corresponds to men, and the mute group, that is, women. In fact, it also proves how women’s and men’s writing are two traditions, coexisting altogether.

To conclude, Showalter exposes that feminist critics must focus on the production of women’s writing that we actually possess, rather than paying attention to what they should write. As she states at very end of her essay:

We may never reach the promised land at all; for when feminist critics see our task as the study of women’s writing, we realize that the land promised to us is not the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuous and intriguing wilderness of difference itself (Showalter 1981: 205).

With this final quote, she implies that feminist critics have misunderstood the main aim of feminist criticism, because instead of aiming to study the distinctive features that characterize women’s writing, they seem to be interest in obtaining a mere

acknowledge of its relevance within the patriarchy. Consequently, it may cause that we never reach the total equality among the sexes; we may never reach the promise land at all.

2.2. Feminist stereotypes according to *The Madwoman in the Attic*

Similarly to *A Room of One's Own*, which will be discussed later, the present book was inspired by a course in literature that both Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar delivered in Indiana University in 1974. The title of this volume is an allusion to Charlotte Brontë's work *Jane Eyre* (1847). It symbolizes the imprisonment that Bertha Mason has to suffer on the behalf of her husband Mr. Rochester, because of her madness. This incarceration suggests that she is subjected to her husband due to her mental illness. In fact, it is also interesting to notice the parallelism that exists between this work and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This latter work "was written as a response to *Jane Eyre* in 1966", (Mericle 2012: 236), what explains why Antoinette Cosway represents the equivalent angelic character of Bertha Manson.

The aim of this book is to give us a detailed analysis of the development of nineteenth-century writers. It is basically centered on two main sections: the social status of women during this period and both the style and the type of writing they carried out.

Both Gilbert and Gubar introduce to us the relevance of the notion of authority concerning a work. From ancient times, women have been considered as intruders, attempting to write while, technically, they did not possess a specific tool to perform such action. As I have previously mentioned, this view was based on the biological difference that exists between men and women. It has to do with the metaphor of the pen: the penis represents an instrument to write. Since women do not possess an external organ, it is believed that they are not able to write because they are physically different to men. Hence, while men do possess a pen to write, women lack it.

This biological difference has been employed over the years as a mere excuse so that the patriarchal supremacy could prevail. Consequently, men are going to own as well the content of the text, no matter which topic is been discussed, what endorses that the figure of women becomes the male's product. Hence, men become the boundary to the free expression of the female genius.

Some writers such as Anne Finch have written about this limitation and the frustration that resulted from been considered as incapable to perform. In fact, in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817), there is a dialogue between Captain Harville and Anne in which he assures her that he could find at least fifty quotes, which prove that even history is against women. Anne replies that, unfortunately, that is possible because of the lack of access they possess to writing. Of course, she is being sarcastic to emphasize that men are the ones who have contributed to such unfair circumstances.

Then, we can observe how women are considered as mere objects or even as male properties, insomuch as they are not allowed to freely express their minds out of the supervision of men. As a consequence, this becomes crucial for literature because instead of obtaining powerful fiction, there is a huge lack of knowledge as the female sex has been avoided. Indeed, this implies a psychological issue as women were imprisoned in two ways: socially and intellectually. This can be depicted in the famous novel *Through the Looking Glass* when Humpty Dumpty tells Alice that "the "master" of words, utterances, phrases, literary properties, "can manage the whole lot of them!" (qtd. in Gilber and Gubar 13). In this case, he means that if patriarchy is the master that controls literature, every depiction that we obtain is going to be perceived from this narrow perspective. Woolf reacts to this statement by rejecting any possible perspective, stereotype or product intended to represent women who have been shaped by men.

According to Coleridge's conception, when a woman is daring enough to look through the looking-glass, her reaction is a combination of anger and sadness to realize that everything she can see in this world belongs to men or forms part of his hegemony. Furthermore, Aurora Leigh, an essential character created by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, represents and illustrates two perspectives of women, which became a stereotype of society: the monster and the angel in the house. The roots of these concepts are set during the middle ages, a period highly determined by Christian symbols and images. During the 15th century, the Virgin represented a significant role in the morality of most of the population and so did Eve. Each one of them represented the goodness and badness of life, respectively. The devotion towards purity developed into the notion of the angel in the house: it maintained the idealistic concept of women held as pure, soft and perfect, always remaining at home, taking care of both the domestic issues and children. For instance, this connotation can be perfectly portrayed in one description that Milton dedicates to his wife in which he describes her as "pure" or

“love sweetness goodness, in her person shined” (qted. in Gilber and Gubar 21) or in the way Goethe’s *Faust* illustrated the transformation of prostitutes into angels.

Nevertheless, Woolf completely rejects this binary conception of angel-monster as she establishes that “the ‘angel in the house’ is the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed upon literary women” (qted. in Gilber and Gubar 20). In fact, as we can see in “Professions for Women”, she metaphorically kills it and justifies herself by stating: “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (Woolf 1942: 3). This led to the aesthetic cult, which established that women are forced and conditioned to turn themselves into art objects and constantly seek perfection.

In opposition to this conception, there is the notion of women conceived as monsters. This concept had to do with every woman who possessed a defined personality, who was willing enough to make her own decisions and impose her own ideas, or merely, a woman who behaved in the same way as a man would. Consequently, she was associated with some connotations such as “witch” or “monster” because she refused to succumb to the canons that society held as appropriate for her.

This misogynist view was mostly promoted during the eighteenth-century by some authors such as Pope or Gay. In fact, a quite peculiar example is depicted in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, where Gulliver expresses how he prefers to remain in the stable with some horses rather than be accompanied by his wife.

Hence, these opposed perceptions have run throughout history. Unfortunately, we can still notice some instances of these insights nowadays despite their different contemporary connotations. In one of the most common grounds where we can detect this dichotomy of angel-monster is within fairy tales. Fortunately, nowadays the media is managing to select more cautiously the information that is transmitted to the underage audience, as can be seen with stories such as *Brave*, or more recently, *Frozen* or *Moana*, which are tales of independent girls that manage to survive rather than be idealistic love stories.

To conclude, I would like to briefly mention the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir concerning the authority of a work. She concludes that women represent the male incapacity to obtain the true essence of womanhood: “it is the horror of his own carnal contingency which [man] projects upon [women]” (qted. in Gilber and Gubar

34). It implies that men failed in two ways: as writers of fiction and trying to represent an accurate representation of the figure of women in literature.

2.3. *A Room of One's Own*

A Room of One's Own must be acknowledged as one of the most influential essays regarding feminism during the twentieth century. The title that hides behind this work is "Women and Fiction" as this essay is intended to be a lecture based on that topic. Virginia Woolf employs an immediate tone that manages to encourage the reader to keep imbuing herself with the learnings of this essay.² Despite the fact that she has been severely criticized for the use of such approachable style, I think that it is easier to empathize with her in this way.

This essay can be divided into two main sections, as mentioned above: women regarded as writers and the fiction itself that they created.

Woolf introduces us to some marginalization and inequalities that women had to face only as a reason of their different sex. First, she enounces the memory of one afternoon in which she aims to enter the library of London. However, unexpectedly, a beadle denies her entrance and tells her that she requires the company of a male presence or she is not allowed to have access there. As a consequence of this event, we can sense Woolf's mixed feelings of both anger and frustration as she is not able to comprehend such nonsense. Furthermore, she emphasizes that even in terms of having parties or the kind of food that we usually eat, men and women behave completely different.

Then, she starts to revise the past in order to find any explanation to this problem. She wonders what women were doing and why they did not react towards that situation. In fact, she does not understand what is the role of women in that kind of society as they did not leave any wealth nor writing to their female descendants. Nevertheless, she answers her rhetorical question by stating: "it is equally useless to ask what might have happened (...), because, to earn money was impossible for them, (...) the law denied them the rights to possess what money they earned" (Woolf 1929: 18).

² It is important to take into account that this essay was a transcription of a talk given for the Arts Society in Newnham and Girton. It was delivered in the autumn of October, 1928.

As she establishes in her other relevant essay *Three Guineas*, women had not enough facilities to earn money and manage it as their proper possession. For them, until 1919 it was not possible to earn a sixpenny:

For to help women to earn their livings in the professions is to help them to possess that weapon of independent opinion (...). It is to help them to have a mind of their own and a will of their own with which to help you to prevent war (Woolf 1938: 156).

Once again, we can perceive the male supremacy over women, as they had to own and distribute their money, because women were regarded as incapable of doing so. Still, there was the patriarchal mentality that asserted that women should remain in the household, taking care of their children while their husbands earned the living to maintain the family. In this moment, she expresses her concern as she feels imprisoned within her own society because no one seems to be aware of the poverty of mind that this society is promoting with the constant exclusion of women from the social, economic and cultural realms “how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and (...) how it is worse perhaps to be locked in” (Woolf 1929: 19).

Woolf also claims that women have not written as much as men because, historically, men were the only ones allowed to have a decent education. In fact, in some cases they even had the opportunity to attend college whereas women could not receive any kind of education. The only ones who could study were those who belonged to a wealthy family and provided their daughters with either a private teacher or a governess, as it was the case of Virginia Woolf herself. Consequently, as men were thought to be intellectually superior to women, they could write novels, short stories or any other kinds of literature whereas women could only spread their thoughts in either letters or diaries. For instance, Samuel Richardson depicted this fact in his epistolary novel called *Pamela* as the female protagonist possesses some private letters, which are intended to be destined for her parents. She describes all her private thoughts and feelings as a way of relieving herself from all that she is going through. However, some critics believe that her letters are in truth a diary because they are never sent to their addressees.

Hence, what surprises Woolf is how frequently women are used as the object of men’s writing and the way they depict women, mostly, as idealized figures rather than

as real humans. Another issue that she mentioned was the fact that as women have barely written anything, we are not able to determine how women represented themselves, since the female point of view is non-existent. As a consequence, this reduces the general range of perspective, ending up in a male-centered point of view.

After enumerating some of the facts that make men and women differ from each other, Woolf becomes aware of two evidences: women are conceived as the second sex, the inferior one, and this is caused by the patriarchal society where she lives. Men possess both greater power and authority but, what is worse, “women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf 1929: 29). This is a problem that comes from ancient times as relevant figures such as Juvenal, Napoleon or Mussolini insisted on the fact that the more ignorant women become, the better for society; for if women had enough culture or awareness about their inferior situation, they could opt to rebel against the system, ending up with the misogynist society.

Woolf explains that fighting for equality is difficult and controversial as both men and women ideally should contribute to change the situation. “I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me. So imperceptibly I found myself adopting a new attitude towards the other half of the human race. It was absurd to blame any class or any sex, as a whole. Great bodies of people are never responsible for what they do” (Woolf 1929: 31). Definitely, it is not only a women’s issue because it affects the whole society.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, one of the most recent, influential feminist writers, also reinforces this idea of how difficult it is to fight for equal rights within patriarchy but how worthy would be for everyone if we could make it possible. In her masterpiece, *We Should All Be Feminists*, she ends up her work by asserting: “My own definition is a feminist is a man or a woman who says, yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better. All of us, women and men, must do better” (2017: 55). Feminism does not imply a movement to hate men, but a movement to fight for equal rights. In order to change the situation it is required tolerance and a correspondent recognition of the value of both sexes on an equal scale.

Furthermore, Woolf states that women are as skillful as men to apply for a job and it should be a matter of vocation and their own judgement to choose the job they want to dedicate their lives to, instead of a matter of social criteria. Similarly, she makes a harsh

critique to concerted marriages as they were based on money rather than love and, in the majority of the cases, women were not able to freely choose their partner in love, as it was previously selected by their parents. In fact, Woolf also expresses her rejection towards gender violence. She cannot stand how women could be denigrated in such a way by their husbands and the fact that they could not react nor protest against such aberration.

On the other hand, Woolf finds deplorable that during the Elizabethan period we cannot find any relevant female writer speaking up about the situation they lived nor any writing. It will not be until the middle of the eighteen-century that we will be able to find some significant authors such as Aphra Behn, who is regarded as the first female writer who earned her living by devoting her life to writing, or other relevant women such as the poet Charlotte Lennox or Sarah Fielding. This gives us sight of the real marginalization that women had to suffer when it comes to devoting their lives to the art of writing.

In order to solve this matter, Woolf recreates this scenario by making up a character called Judith that represents the sister of Shakespeare despite the fact that “it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any women to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare” (1929: 38-39). The summary of this story would be the following: even though Judith would be raised in the same way as her brother, with the same skills and the same vocation towards theatre, she would be denied the possibility of attending any school and her only option to get in contact with culture would be the books of her brother. In addition, she would be bound to marry any men of her neighborhood even if she did want to remain unmarried without any kind of compromise. She would not have any possibility to perform as an actress only because of her gender and men would have mocked her for even believing herself to be capable of doing so. Finally, she would have committed suicide as she could not cope with her life any longer. This briefly explains what would have been the destiny of a woman during those days.

Woolf also asserts that it was impossible to conceive that any woman could have the same genius as Shakespeare, as women were not allowed to receive any sort of education. In fact, she is convinced that if there was any exception, this woman would have committed suicide, or at least, she would have tried to end her life somehow because of the hard criticism society would have imposed on her.

Another possibility would have been that her writings were misled or twisted. “For a women, (...) to have a room of her own, (...) was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteen century” (Woolf 1929: 43). Thus, society would have managed to disapprove rather than encourage the works of those women, even until the beginning of the nineteenth-century. Therefore, we must express our gratitude to the courage of Aphra Behn because she was the pioneer who made possible for women to write. Without her, we might not have significant novels such as *Emma* or *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë or *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, among others.

Nevertheless, in the case of Jane Austen, Woolf has complained that her style suggests that she represses herself when she expresses emotions rather than being authentic. In fact, most of her characters behave in this way as we can perceive, for instance, in the character of either Emma, (*Emma*) or Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Woolf also incorporates an allusion to a lesbian relationship as an innovation in literature. Ironically, she compares the relationship between Chloe and Olivia with a hypothetical made up Cleopatra and Octavia’s affair to make the point that it would be unbelievable to conceive a sort of relation between two women during the sixteenth century. In fact, there is a lot of controversy concerning the sexual identity of Woolf herself. Despite the fact that we actually know that throughout her life she had several affairs with women, remarkably we know about two main women who marked her life: Vita Sackville-West, in terms of her career as a writer and Violet Dickinson, when it comes to her personal life. However, we also know that she was married to Leonard Woolf until the end of her days. Then, it is presented to us the unclear debate of which the sexual identity of Woolf is, what explains why critics still disagree on this concern and have not come to a precise conclusion yet.

According to Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, Radcliffe Hall was both a writer and a poet, who performed the first lesbian experience that became visible before the 1920s. In her essay called “Sexual Identity and A Room of One’s Own”, she makes clear how this event highly influenced Woolf’s life, as it was the first lesbian instance publicly produced. Nonetheless, the way Hall and Woolf conceived their sexual identity was completely different. Hall openly showed herself as a lesbian, which means, she had no problem in acknowledging that her sexual condition was different than what it was imposed by the social standards. However, Woolf rejected this position as she

conceived her sexuality as "an expansion rather than definition" (Bayuk Rosenman 1989: 643). In fact, in one of her letters, Woolf asserted that she enjoyed having an "exquisite pleasure from contact with either male or female body" (qtd. in Bayuk Rosenman 644). Consequently, this sort of affirmation has led to the debate of her sexual condition, which provides us with several different sort of hypotheses. While some critics believe that she was bisexual as she did not recognize herself as a lesbian nor as a heterosexual, other critics opt to think that she was asexual. This latter premise is based on the notion of the androgynous mind that she took from Coleridge. Indeed, she even incorporated this belief in most of her works as we can see in the present essay, as well as in *Orlando*, *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To The Lighthouse*.

Woolf claimed the openness of sexual identity and denied the possibility of imposing any label to sexual freedom. She defended that we must think with an androgynous mind so that we can reach the climax of both happiness and pleasure because "the normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating" (Woolf 1929: 84). In fact, this reinforced her feminist position, which claims that when we possess an androgynous mind, as we think neutrally and we do not base our thoughts only on the point of view of one sex, the perspective that we will achieve is more egalitarian rather than if we merely think with a common unisex mind. Indeed, one of the most favorable advantages of this perspective is that it does not marginalize men nor women as it incorporates both at the same level.

Therefore, Woolf encourages us to take a look back to some past authors which she considers as androgynous such as Shakespeare, Keats, Sterne or Coleridge, among others. In her view, authors should write without giving hints of whether or not they are men or women. Consequently, relevance would be set in the plot rather than the author as she intended to do: "She wrote as a women, but as a women who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual which comes only when sex is unconscious to itself" (Woolf 1929: 80). She also claims that it is necessary to have intellectual freedom in order to write and, as a result of its lack, women could not attempt the pen to write poetry at all.

To conclude, Woolf employs an encouraging tone to make people aware, particularly women, that we have to fight for the construction of a better world, a more egalitarian one. However, if we truly want to have results, we need to make some

drastic changes. We need to cooperate with each other instead of promoting the idea of a superior sex that prevails over the other. Also, she insists on the idea that women must become independent, curious and imbue themselves with knowledge. Women must try to achieve a room of their own, a place to write their own literature so that they can speak their minds because if they do not provide their personal views, the situation will never change.

3. Feminist approach to *Mrs. Dalloway*

In the present analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway*, I am going to explore the main aspects that are directly connected to feminism, focusing particularly on the main characters of this work, which are the following: Dalloway's, Smith's, Whitbread's, Peter Walsh, Sally Seton, Lady Bruton and Doris Kilman. I am going to center this approach on three main topics: the social sphere, the authority exerted in marriage and the different kinds of sexism between men and women.

In this work, Virginia Woolf portrays the conventional society of the beginning of the 20th century, incorporating some peculiar aspects that create a certain ambiguity when it comes to the standards of that period. There can be two social scopes plainly differentiated: the public sphere and the private sphere. We find that the majority of men belong to the public sphere, as all of them possess an active role within their society. Nevertheless, most of women belong to the private sphere, as they are the ones bound to take care of the household or some domestic issues such as sewing, teaching manners and taking care of their children. However, there are some characters, which have suffered a transformation and, as a consequence, their role in their society has changed from active into passive or vice versa.

Septimus Warren Smith, an ex-officer who fought in World War I, illustrates these circumstances. He is depicted as the prototypical man who went to war in order to defend his country. Despite the fact that he belongs to the public sphere, we can see how his active role evolves into a passive one as a result of the post-traumatic experience of war. He develops a mental illness, that is, the urge of committing suicide because he can no longer cope with his life and, consequently, we notice how Lucrezia Smith, who is his wife, suffers as well an evolution, as she is now bound to take some new responsibilities and power, which were previously owned by her husband. Although she keeps belonging to the private sphere due to the mentality of her society, now, she must undertake a more active role in her matrimony because she has to take care of both her husband and the household.

On the other hand, we can also find how some women hold a significantly active role in their lives, rather than a passive one, even though they should still be placed within the private sphere. This is the case of Lady Bruton, Sally Seton or Doris Kilman. They are cultivated women who devote their lives to either politics, fighting for

women's rights or teaching modern history, respectively. In fact, all of them have a pronounced interest in reading, what denotes that they have a manifest concern for imbuing themselves with knowledge. Hence, Woolf is characterizing common women with concerns that are thought to be only a male hegemony, in order to emphasize her feminist point of view, which implies that women are as equally capable of performing such roles despite of their female gender.

Independently of the social sphere to which they belonged, both men and women are conditioned to end up achieving a life in matrimony. It is necessary, then, to take a close look at the correlation between marriage and authority. There can be distinguished two main kinds of supremacy: the authority of men over women or the female authority over the male one. I am going to study this connection between the three main couples of this novel, which are the subsequent ones: Dalloway's, Smith's and Whitbred's. Nevertheless, there are also some other derivations of marriage, which are peculiar as well to study such as the unmarried Lady Bruton and Doris Kilman, the unexpected marriage of Sally Seton or Peter Walsh's divorced situation.

In the case of Dalloway's couple, by means of the stream of consciousness, we can get to know thanks to Clarissa's thoughts that they conform a liberal couple who does not oppress their correspondent partner by imposing useless boundaries to each other. However, they are not illustrated as a relationship based on love; instead, it seems that the mere reason why they remain together is marriage, as a social bond that inevitably joins them. In fact, it can be sensed a certain degree of hypocrisy in the statements of Clarissa, when it comes to this presumed freedom between Richard and her, because there are produced some events in the story, which in a common liberal couple would not be problematic but, in her case, it is.

For instance, at the beginning of the novel, Clarissa is told that her husband is going to attend a meeting with Lady Bruton. Instinctively, she feels a tremendous loneliness and disgust about it: "there was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room" (Woolf 1925: 33). However, she does not express it openly to Richard; she rather cares for her reputation and gets nostalgic about her past. She remembers her youth, because it was the time when she was truly free and, presumably, she even had an affair with Sally Seton. Nonetheless, there is a lot of disagreement concerning whether or not Clarissa and Sally were lovers or just friends. Some critics believe that they were only best friends and they loved each other so much because of their mutual complicity and

trust. However, the way in which Clarissa portrays the intensity of her feelings as “a kind of ecstasy” and the devotion that she processes for her, suggests that they had something more than mere friendship: “But this question of love (...), this falling in love with women. Take Sally Seton” (Woolf 1925: 35). Then, what cannot be denied is that Sally Seton is the only person with which she can truly feel what freedom and pleasure means whereas Richard represents for her the prison that society has imposed on her, her lack of affection and disinterest and the convention of her life. In fact, according to Butler’s view, which is introduced in the essay, “A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway”, her heterosexuality may be understood as “an unquestioned and forced social contract, or in Butler’s term, melancholic heterosexuality” (qtd. in Montashery 26).

Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice that Richard somehow feels proud of Clarissa, but he also feels her distance towards him. This is depicted when Richard states that: “he never gave Clarissa presents, except a bracelet two or three years ago, which had not been a success. She never wore it” (Woolf 1925: 125). This fact deceives him and makes him feel her apathy and indifference towards him. What he does not know is that Clarissa prefers roses rather than jewelry. Consequently, this denotes the lack of communication that exists between them and the great ignorance that they possess about both the delights and the opinions of the other.

Hence, in this couple, we can notice that there is a clear prevalence of male authority. Although it may resemble that they are carefree on their decisions and they openly respect the way in which the other behaves, even when we do know that interiorly they do not approve it in most of the cases, Richard is the one who always has the authority, the power to decide what is approved, and what is not. While sometimes it appears implicitly, in other cases we can see it explicitly, as it happens with the parties of Clarissa, to which he is in command to give the correspondent approval to organize such parties.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the authority that they have towards Elizabeth Dalloway, their daughter, both care for her equally. During that period, the mother was in charge of teaching good manners to their daughters whereas the husband had no kind of indoctrination towards their daughter because of her female gender. It can be illustrated by the thoughts of Richard when he states that: “if he’d had a boy he’d said, Work, work. But he had his Elizabeth; he adored his Elizabeth” (Woolf 1925: 124).

This quote implies that as Elizabeth is a woman, she cannot work as men would, but at least, her father acknowledges her with love. As a woman, she is only allowed to know how to behave and socialize as her mother does, what implies, that all the education she received was centered towards marriage.

In a secondary place, we can find the Smith's couple. They represent a conservative matrimony of the beginning of the 20th century, which is concerted, as suggested by the great difference of age between them. Septimus Warren Smith is a conventional officer that devotes his life to the army in order to prepare to fight for the British country's behalf. Unfortunately, when he is fighting in World War I, he witnesses how Evans, both his friend and companion of war, is killed. As a consequence, Septimus develops a mental illness provoked by this traumatic experience.

By means of the stream of consciousness, Woolf allows us to perceive how Septimus can no longer keep maintaining a common life because he is constantly haunted by Evans' presence. In fact, he marries Lucrezia as a desperate escape from his depressing feelings rather than marrying for love, because he is convinced that it may solve his problem. However, his uneasiness increases, as he perceives how Lucrezia and the other people feel comfortably in places where he cannot help but feeling displaced.

Therefore, we find a couple made up of a common lady who, suddenly, has to take care of both the household and her husband's sanity. Despite the adversities and the fact that their marriage is concerted, she is comfortable with the role that has been assigned to her and she does not doubt to fulfil her active role of caring for her husband. In fact, Lucrezia is depicted as a devoted woman who loves her husband deeply and she is even completely submitted to him. For instance, this can be illustrated when Sir William Bradshaw tells her that her husband must be sent to a home because he has lost his "sense of proportion" and she reacts to this news by thinking that "no one could separate them" (Woolf 1925: 163).

Consequently, once again, we find that in this couple it prevails a male dominance. In this case, despite the fact that it resembles that Lucrezia is the one who exerts the authority in her matrimony, I consider that, in reality, Septimus still possesses the whole control over her. As he requires an incessant supervision in order to keep him from killing himself, Lucrezia is submitted to him because she cannot do anything but overseeing him. Similarly to Clarissa, she is imprisoned within her marriage because she is constrained by the marital bond that joins them together and, in her particular

case, she also has to help her husband to reach the mental balance of his sanity. In fact, the tough adversities that Lucrezia has to go through are more pronounced if we compare her with any other woman of her age; for instance, Elizabeth Dalloway. We can notice how as a consequence of being a married woman, Lucrezia has been denied the opportunity to have some sort of education, whereas Elizabeth can have access to it by means of her personal governess, Doris Kilman. It is not going to be until the end of the novel, when Septimus ends up committing suicide as an escape of Dr. Holmes, that she is going to be completely free. In my opinion, this is the real moment in which Lucrezia realizes that she is, for the first time, truly free: “It seemed to her as she drank the sweet stuff that she was opening long windows, stepping out into some garden” (Woolf 1925: 164).

The final couple that we can find is the Whitbreds. They represent the most conventional matrimony in this novel because the few information that we possess about them tells us that they belong to the highest social class and, possibly, that suggests that their marriage was concerted as happened with the previous couples. Although their role within the novel comes in a second place, we can also distinguish the workings of the male patriarchal authority between them when Hugh Whitbred, accompanied by Richard Dalloway, attends a meeting with Lady Bruton in order to talk about significant topics such as politics, without asking for the approval of her wife.

Lady Bruton figures among some of the most peculiar characters of this novel. She is an unmarried woman who is represented as sensible and cultivated rather than a woman who stands out for her exuberant beauty. She is highly keen on history and politics, what denotes that she holds some common male concerns. It was unusual that a woman had such interests and influence on people as they were exclusively taught the basic accomplishments in order to marry, as we have previously seen with the instance of Elizabeth Dalloway. Therefore, Lady Bruton represents one of the most feminist characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* as she breaks with the standards of her society by remaining unmarried, and also, by either organizing or taking part in some meetings that concern topics of such extent, which are usually merely connected with men. In fact, she does not have to comply with any male boundary at all, as she possesses the whole authority of her life.

Doris Kilman, who is the governess of Elizabeth Dalloway, is another character that resembles Lady Bruton in her feminist attitude. It seems that she is an unmarried

woman as well, who is fond of modern history. Despite the fact that she does not organize nor attend meetings with men, as Lady Bruton does, she also holds the total authority of her life and has an actual job, that is, teaching Elizabeth Dalloway about some cultural aspects.

Moreover, we can also find Sally Seton, one of the most significant characters of this novel. Apparently, she represents one of the most feminist characters because she is depicted as free, jovial and courageous. Indeed, she represents the most reckless years of youth of Clarissa because both behaved well beyond the standards of the society of the 20th century. The plainest example is the close relationship that they had which, as previously stated, it is unclear whether they were in love or not. In addition, the fact that they smoke cigarettes when alone or go out completely naked in one occasion, are some other instances of their wild and thoughtless behavior. Certainly, the fact that she gets pregnant without having got married highlights this wild aspect of her. Nevertheless, even though all of these events suggest that she was one of the most liberal characters of *Mrs. Dalloway*, she ends up marrying her master because of her pregnancy. This event reminds us of the case of *Pamela*, Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel, as she also represented the role of the housemaid and she married her master as well.

Hence, in the end, Sally Seton falls within the conventions of her society in the same way as the other characters do, even though apparently they are more conservative than her. We cannot determine whether she has the authority over her husband or not because Woolf does not provide us enough with information about their marriage; however, it seems that she has a certain freedom in her matrimony, as she has not asked for permission nor approval of her husband to attend Clarissa's party.

The last character that I am going to mention is Peter Walsh. He is Clarissa Dalloway's best friend, and he keeps respecting her, even after she rejects him when he reveals her his love. We know that he is a divorced man who has returned to his childhood location by the thoughts of Clarissa, who feels sorry about him and his bad luck in love: "What a waste! What a folly! All his life long Peter had been fooled like that; first getting sent down from Oxford; next marrying the girl on the boat going out to India; now the wife of a Major" (Woolf 1925: 50). As we can see, he is portrayed as a sensitive man who leads his life by his passions rather than his reason. In fact, this obsessive behavior can be understood as a necessity to marry in order to fill the void of solitude he possesses. He behaves as a conservative man who needs to marry to achieve

a happy life, instead of breaking with those conventions and manage to be happy on his own. In fact, even though, supposedly, he has no wife who can impose on him some pressure or authority, he has lived most of his life submitted to Clarissa's behavior, and he still does, somehow. He always cares about both, her feelings and her opinions, rather than thinking of his own benefit and what is best for him.

Therefore, Peter Walsh may be understood as a feminist character in the sense that he is divorced and he has violated the conventions of marriage established by his society. However, in reality, he is still submitted to those conventions, as he is not able to accomplish a blissful life without being committed to a woman. Hence, although he seems to be the main authority of his life, his passions as Clarissa asserts, lead him to follow social conventions and to be constantly psychologically submitted to women.

In conclusion, in the majority of circumstances, the male supremacy prevails over the female, which refracts the real situation of the 20th century.

As a consequence of this patriarchal society, we can find how some characters, either male or female, make some sexist comments. The fact that even some women can appear within this section is not surprising at all, because we must take into account how both genders have been, since ancient times, highly influenced by this patriarchal mentality. We can see how men treat women as mere objects, while women, in a similar way, criticize other women.

The first character that makes relevant objectifications of women is Peter Walsh. As we have previously seen with marriage, he uses Daisy Simmons, the Indian woman he intends to marry, as a mere object to fulfil his preconceived idea of marriage. This must be understood as a sort of benevolent form of sexism because even though he is not explicitly objectifying Daisy Simmons, it is a way of using her as his mere complement. Although it may appear that this connotation is positive because Daisy may represent his "complement of life," it is a completely sexist attitude.

Moreover, in the novel there is a scene in which Peter behaves as a stalker of a strange girl, who is walking down the street. Although he does not know her, he does not hesitate and pursues her with desire and a sort of instantaneous infatuation. He sexualizes the girl on his mind, wondering what he would tell her so as to get to know her. Indeed, he calls himself "a romantic buccaneer" and we can sense while he follows her how his imagination even ends up believing that the girl likes him too and is unmarried: "But she's not married; she's young, quite young, thought Peter, the red

carnation he had seen her wear as she came across Trafalgar Square burning again in his eyes and making her lips red” (Woolf 1925: 58). This specific event emphasizes the desperation that Peter felt to find a woman to marry. However, this scene is particularly interesting because, later on, he states that “every one if they were honest would say the same; one doesn’t want people after fifty; one doesn’t want to go on telling women they are pretty; that’s what most people of fifty would say” (Woolf 1925: 87). As we can perceive, this assertion is completely contradictory with the previous scene in which he actually did what he criticizes, that is, sexualize women.

Secondly, I am going to focus on Hugh Whitbred, who appears sexualizing both Miss Brush and Sally Seton. As the traditional and prototypical character of his society, Hugh makes several comments concerning Miss Brush that make her feel uncomfortable. The most denigrating aspect is not only that his attitude towards her is deplorable because he disturbs her with such sexist comments such as “‘Wouldn’t they look charming against your lace?’ Miss Brush resented this familiarity intensely. She thought him an underbred fellow“ (Woolf 1925: 115); rather the main thing is that he is already married to Evelyn Whitbred and he does not avoid flirting with other women.

On the other hand, he also objectifies Sally Seton by seemingly inventing that he has kissed her in order to justify her disgust towards him. They have had an argument about the rights of women and Sally accused him of being “responsible for the state of ‘those poor girls in Piccadilly’” (Woolf 1925: 80); she cannot control her aversion toward such “perfect specimen of the public school type” (Woolf 1925: 80).

Finally, I am going to explain the cases of Richard Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. Both commit a benevolent form of sexism towards their respective wives. They marry in order to follow the conventions of their society, instead of doing it for love. In the case of Richard Dalloway, he only cares for Clarissa in the same way as she cares for him, as a mere role that they have to fulfil. They only expect that their partner maintains the composure in front of people so as to confirm the good status of their relationship. Hence, in this case both objectify each other. When it comes to Septimus, he objectifies her as he uses Lucrezia as a sort of remedy for his problem; however, by marrying her he does not solve his mental illness. He marries her even when he knows that he does not love her and he is significantly older than she is. However, he only cares about his own benefit and, as a result, he somehow feels that he is going to die because of the mischievous way in which he has behaved: “how he had

married his wife without loving her; had lied to her; seduced her (...). The verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death” (Woolf 1925: 100).

The sexism between women is mostly portrayed by Clarissa Dalloway. She constantly criticizes other women, the way they dress, their behavior and she always compares them to her, particularly, both Lady Bruton and Doris Kilman. In reality, as they are cultivated women who are devoted to their passion for reading and politics, she feels inferior to them, although she is not able to recognize it. In fact, the main problem that Clarissa has with Lady Bruton is that her husband meets with her, instead of passing time with her actual wife. Similarly, she compares to Doris Kilman and highly criticizes her because she passes a lot of time with her daughter Elizabeth. She describes her with some attributes such as the following: “hot, hypocritical, corrupt, with all that power; Elizabeth’s seducer” (Woolf 1925: 191). In fact, both Clarissa and Doris Kilman are engaged in a kind of constant argument for obtaining the affection of Elizabeth.

With such behavior, unconsciously, they objectify Elizabeth because they make their lives a competition for gaining her, as if she symbolized a prize to be won. This competition is highly symbolic because, in my opinion, Virginia Woolf is criticizing the attitude of those women who waste their time in devaluing the worth of others rather than trying to empower each other. In fact, in this case, if Clarissa and Doris Kilman promoted an atmosphere of sisterhood instead of rivalry, paradoxically, Elizabeth would obtain a better moral and intellectual education.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the main intention of Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* is to offer a highly detailed depiction of the society of the beginning of the 20th century. With the aid and the use of the stream of consciousness, she manages to recreate a complete day by interspersing the thoughts of several characters. As she does not introduce separate chapters to divide the story, the novel resembles Joyce's *Ulysses*. Despite the fact that in some cases the reading of the novel may be challenging, I think that her decision of creating a plot without any kind of interruptions makes it easier for the reader to capture the sense of realism that she intends to transmit. As a consequence, we are able to see the different opinions that each character possesses about the others and even to contrast them, a peculiar aspect of the story which noticeably enriches the plot. In fact, she incorporates a great diversity of characters that represent the good aspects and some characteristic defects such as sexism or the objectification of women, which were conceived during that period as conventionalisms and proper standards rather than intolerable and improper ways of behaving. Nevertheless, it is interesting to remark that Woolf constantly establishes several implicit critiques of both genders, men and women, equally. This fact suggests that she wrote her work with an androgynous mind, as her style is completely neutral. Consequently, we can perceive how clearly divided was the society of the beginning of the 20th century in a dichotomy conformed by the public and private spheres that corresponds to men and women, respectively. Indeed, we notice the great differences between the rights they possessed, as a result of their gender difference. We can see how men were destined to the army with the only aim of becoming great officers to fight on behalf of their society, whereas women had to remain at home, taking care of their children and other domestic issues. Furthermore, Woolf emphasizes the misconception of marriage as a social chain rather than either being a possibility, or at least, marrying with someone they truly love. Once again, she presents a variety of such as married, unmarried or divorced. We can conclude that most of the couples were dominated by the male, which implies that women were submitted somehow to their husbands and limited to the household. However, the only ones who truly hold their whole authority without being bound to face any kind of social constraint were the unmarried women such as Doris Kilman or Lady Bruton. In addition, Woolf criticizes how marriage made people unhappy and imposed on them

boundaries that psychologically oppressed them, and even in some cases, led them to commit suicide, as was the case with Septimus.

On the other hand, she also implicitly highlights that not only men promote the existence of sexism because, unfortunately, in some cases women also promote this kind of issue as we can see, essentially, with the senseless competition between Clarissa and Doris Kilman. The novel presents a significantly realistic contrast of feminism and sexism, which makes it particularly interesting.

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