

# THROUGH THE GLASS: SELFHOOD, PERCEPTION, AND THE URBAN GAZE IN WOOLF'S WORKS<sup>4</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** Since its emergence as an industrial material in the late nineteenth century, glass has transformed cityscapes, perceptions of space, and interactions with the material world. Beyond its technological role, glass acts as a metaphor for the complexities of modern urban life, serving simultaneously as both a medium and a barrier. It reflects contradictions and paradoxes, exploring the relationships between the material and immaterial, the visible and invisible, and subjects and objects. Glass functions as a frame or screen through which we perceive, understand, and develop taste. One of the defining features of urban modernity, glass also intrigued Virginia Woolf, who frequently used it in her works to explore identity, self-representation, and desire. Mirrors and windows, recurring symbols in her writing, often convey anxiety and self-doubt, particularly for female characters. Glass serves as both a medium of connection and an obstacle to understanding, representing transparency, reflectiveness, and the complexity of perception. In *Night and Day* (1919), Woolf compares window displays to women walking in the streets, examining the commodified gaze and how it shapes self-image and societal views. This essay explores how Woolf's writing reflects the metaphors of glass and how it informs her self-concept as a writer in the publishing world.

**KEY WORDS:** Woolf, glass, gaze, mirror, windows, reflection, transparency, *Night and Day*

## Introduction

Since glass became a key industrial material in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, it has reshaped our cityscapes, altered our perceptions of space, and

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transformed our interactions with the material world. Glass is not only a technological innovation with its own industrial history, but also a rich source of metaphors that reflect the complexities of modern urban life. It serves as both medium and barrier, acting as a point of intersection where narrative contradictions and paradoxes emerge. In this way, glass enables us to explore the relationships between subjects and objects, the material and the immaterial, urbanites and their environment, spectators and spectacles, consumers and commodities, as well as the visible and invisible, exterior and interior, and representation and the represented. As such, glass is a crucial substance—a frame or screen through which we view the world, construct knowledge, and cultivate taste.

As one of the defining features of urban modernity, glass also captivated Virginia Woolf's imagination. Throughout her writings, Woolf uses glass to explore themes of identity, self-representation, desire, and the altered modes of perception introduced by window displays. This essay examines Woolf's engagement with glass—both in her treatment of it as a subject and as a metaphor. Glass, in the form of mirrors and windows, frequently appears in her works as a significant trope, though its meanings are often complex and contradictory. The mirror, in particular, becomes a site of both identity formation and public scrutiny, driving Woolf's female characters into states of anxiety and self-doubt.

Woolf also writes about glass itself—its transparency, translucency, and reflectiveness. Notably, she explores the window display, a symbol of the changing modes of consumption and new ways of seeing. The window display complicates how individuals perceive themselves and others. In *Night and Day* (1919), for example, Woolf parallels the window display with the image of a woman walking down the street, highlighting the mediated gaze and the commodified nature of vision.

Finally, this essay considers how Woolf's writings function metaphorically as glass themselves. Just as glass serves as a medium for reflection and visibility, Woolf's works provide a lens through which she explores her own identity and her role as a writer in the publishing industry. Glass, in this sense, becomes both a metaphorical and literal tool for Woolf's creative imagination.

### **Mirrors, Self-Perception, and Social Judgment**

Woolf often expressed discomfort with her own reflection. In a letter to her friend Ethel Smyth, she confessed, "I hate my own face in the looking glass"

(Letters V: 38 in Skrbic 2004). She frequently associates her mirror image with feelings of shame and guilt. In *A Sketch of the Past* (1939), she emphasizes the solitary, almost forbidden nature of looking in the mirror. This unease with reflection is echoed throughout her fiction. In her short story “The New Dress” (1927), the protagonist Mabel’s encounter with a mirror exposes her discomfort and self-doubt. At a party hosted by Mrs. Dalloway, Mabel quickly realizes her dress is inadequate compared to those of the other guests. She retreats to a corner where she faces a mirror but cannot bear to fully confront the “horror” of her appearance. Feeling like “a dressmaker’s dummy,” Mabel becomes an object of public scrutiny, vulnerable to judgment and criticism. The mirror here symbolizes not only social judgment but also self-objectification, as Mabel sees herself as something to be inspected and critiqued. Her comparison to a mannequin suggests the deep entanglement of her self-image with the culture of display and commodification.

This moment in *Mrs. Dalloway* mirrors a similar scene in *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë, where Lucy, confronted by her own reflection at a ball, feels inferior to her elegant godmother and Dr. John. Both scenes delve into the anxiety tied to self-perception and the pressure of external judgment. A comparable moment unfolds in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925/2005), when Elizabeth’s governess, Miss Kilman, faces the harsh realities of her lack of feminine beauty—not at a party, but in a department store.

From the outset, Miss Kilman is portrayed as a quasi-feminist, disdainful of the feminine ideals imposed by patriarchal society and consumer culture. Woolf desexualizes Miss Kilman’s appearance, creating the illusion that she rejects everything the ideal bourgeois woman (embodied in Clarissa) represents, and is thus immune to the allure of consumer luxury. However, when Miss Kilman visits the Army and Navy Store with Elizabeth to buy a petticoat, she finds herself helplessly vulnerable. Overwhelmed by the dazzling spectacle of commodities, she feels ashamed of her inability to afford a decent petticoat. A woman who has never dressed to please is suddenly self-conscious of her homely appearance: “she could not afford to buy pretty clothes” (Woolf 2005a: 126).

In this scene, the department store, with its goods and well-dressed shoppers, acts like a mirror, forcing Miss Kilman to confront her social and physical inferiority. The display window, with its carefully curated images of femininity and wealth, reflects her sense of inadequacy. Miss Kilman, who has long tried to find self-assurance in her dignity and intelligence, is now confronted with the harsh reality of her own vulnerabilities. When Elizabeth leaves her alone, Miss Kilman’s experience becomes even more disorienting

and humiliating. Wandering through the store, she becomes lost amid the array of goods—“hams, drugs, flowers, stationery”—each a symbol of the consumer world she cannot access. In a moment of acute self-awareness, she sees herself reflected in a mirror, “blundering” with her hat askew and her face flushed, embodying her sense of failure.

The department store, with its displays, the shoppers, the shop girls who view her with disdain, and the mirror itself, all function symbolically as mirrors that reflect Miss Kilman’s repressed desires. In comparison to the idealized femininity around her, she sees what she is not, what she lacks, and what she cannot afford—forcing her to face unacknowledged desires and insecurities that she had not recognized until this moment of exposure in the store.

### **From Window to Window: Connections**

Woolf’s first novel, *Night and Day* (1919), set in London, follows Katharine Hilbery and her friend Mary Datchet as they grapple with the tensions between marriage and career, love and independence. The novel, as its title suggests, is structured around a series of binaries. Rachel Wetzsteon notes that while “day” represents “the comforting clarity of norm and tradition,” “night” symbolizes “the alluring murk of vision and innovation” (Wetzsteon in Woolf 2005b: xxvii). These oppositions extend to the characters’ personalities, beliefs, and tastes. Katharine, for instance, is drawn to mathematics, while Rodney prefers literature; she admires Dostoevsky, while he enjoys Alexander Pope. Their contrasting literary preferences mirror the broader thematic binaries of the novel—science and art, reason and emotion, tradition and innovation. In this sense, the novel itself embodies the conjunction in its title, “and,” exploring the complexities and challenges of reconciling opposites.

In her exploration of human connection, Woolf uses glass as both a medium and a barrier. Throughout the novel, characters are often positioned by windows, either looking out or looking in. The cityscape viewed through these windows serves as a mirror to the characters’ inner worlds, reflecting their mental and emotional states. These encounters with glass thus become pivotal moments where characters’ perceptions of themselves and their relationships to others, or to the city as a whole, are vividly expressed.

In domestic settings, the window often serves as a space for contemplation, where characters seek reassurance for the future or inspiration to escape their current circumstances. For instance, when Katharine grows weary of her relatives’ gossip about her cousin’s marriage, she turns to the window: “She stood among the folds of the curtain, pressing close to the window-pane, gaz-

ing disconsolately at the river, much like a child depressed by the meaningless talk of its elders” (Woolf 2005b: 108). In such moments, it becomes Katharine’s habit to retreat to the window, doing nothing, when she realizes that her values and thoughts are at odds with those of her mother and the other older figures in the room.

The window in *Night and Day* symbolizes the threshold between the domestic and the public spheres. Katharine’s physical position—standing by the window—mirrors her internal conflict between adhering to traditional expectations and seeking the more independent life represented by her friend Mary Datchet. In the following window scene, the titular opposition of “night and day” is both explicit and meaningful:

she looked out of the window, sternly determined to forget private misfortunes, to forget herself, to forget individual lives. With her eyes upon the dark sky, voices reached her from the room in which she was standing. She heard them as if they came from people in another world, a world antecedent to her world, a world that was the prelude, the antechamber to reality; it was as if, lately dead, she heard the living talking. The dream nature of our life had never been more apparent to her, never had life been more certainly an affair of four walls, whose objects existed only within the range of lights and fires, beyond which lay nothing, or nothing more than darkness. She seemed physically to have stepped beyond the region where the light of illusion still makes it desirable to possess, to love, to struggle. And yet her melancholy brought her no serenity. She still heard the voices within the room. She was still tormented by desires. She wished to be beyond their range. She wished inconsistently enough that she could find herself driving rapidly through the streets... (Woolf 2005b: 307)

The window offers Katharine a moment to position herself imaginatively in relation to a world filled with greater possibilities and change. Yet, it also reinforces the opposition between two separate realms: the domestic interior and the public world outside, a world of light versus a world of darkness. In this scene, Katharine acknowledges that her life is confined to the four walls of the room, which symbolize the roles imposed upon women as wives and mothers. Standing at the window, she occupies the space between night and day, darkness and light, tradition and innovation, caught between the desire for a life beyond her grasp and the reality that lies just out of reach on the other side of the window.

The way a character engages with a window scene reflects their relationship with the outside world. For Mary Datchet, a woman who finds fulfillment

in both her college education and her work for the women's rights movement, the window symbolizes a sense of control. From her office, she feels as though she could direct the flow of the world outside with a mere glance. At one point, Ralph's dismissive comment about the futility of her work unsettles her, but she quickly regains her confidence and resolve as she returns to the familiar space of her office:

She flung up the window and stood by it, looking out. The street lamps were already lit; and through the mist in the square one could see little figures hurrying across the road and along the pavement, on the farther side. In her absurd mood of lustful arrogance, Mary looked at the little figures and thought, "If I liked I could make you go in there or stop short; I could make you walk in single file or in double file; I could do what I liked with you." (Woolf 2005b: 148)

Her window scene reflects her regained confidence and self-assurance, making her feel that she "knew the ways of this world," which was a "shapely, orderly place" (2005b: 147).

However, her complacency turns into uncertainty later. Though she is secretly in love with Ralph, she refuses Ralph's proposal to marry him and feels offended, for she realizes he is actually in love with Katharine. It is heartbreaking for Mary to realize that she has just abandoned the opportunity to spend her life with the person she loves. She then contemplates the incompatibility of a woman's marriage and career ambition, and the gains and losses in her life as a woman and a suffragist. In the middle of her paperwork, Mary rests her pen on the table, and gets lost in the scene of the large hotel across the square. The window scene in her eyes dovetails to her inner feelings:

... her mind pursued its own journey among the sun-blazoned windows and the drifts of purplish smoke which formed her view. And, indeed, this background was by no means out of keeping with her thoughts. She saw to the remote spaces behind the strife of the foreground, enabled now to gaze there, since she had renounced her own demands, privileged to see the larger view, to share the vast desires and sufferings of the mass of mankind. She had been too lately and too roughly mastered by facts to take an easy pleasure in the relief of renunciation; such satisfaction as she felt came only from the discovery that, having renounced everything that made life happy, easy, splendid, individual, there remained a hard reality, unimpaired by one's personal adventures, remote as the stars, unquenchable as they are. (Woolf 2005b: 227-28)

She is looking at the scene outside as if she is looking at her own life path. Instead of fixing her gaze on the more immediate happiness and satisfaction in one's personal life, she is focusing on what lies behind: her efforts and dream to improve gender equality and lessen the suffering of the people. This bittersweet realization is represented in her gaze on the cityscape seen through her window, while she is undergoing "this curious transformation from the particular to the universal" (2005b: 228). It is the existence of the window that allows Mary to imagine her connection to the world outside and inspires her to think through her life-changing decision.

As a threshold to connect oneself to the outside world, a window appears both in the beginning and in the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the opening scene in her trip to buy flowers, Clarissa is excited to abandon herself in the London city: "What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air" (Woolf 2005a: 3). José Luís Araújo Lima argues that the window is an entrance which opens to the inside (to the vistas at Bourton, as a young Clarissa) and outside (London streets, as Mrs. Dalloway). The window, as a juncture or an intersection connecting inside and outside, the past and present, the memory and the reality, blends her separated identities, "[a]t the windows are, in fact, Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway" (Lima 2007: 111).

Clarissa's early experience at Bourbon is also an exercise of curiosity and visual extension that later forms her habit of observing the old lady across the way through her window. Once, when Clarissa is contemplating the idea of Love and Religion, she looks out the window, sees the old lady, and is enlightened by a truth that is "simply this: here was one room; there another" (Woolf 2005a: 125). At that precise moment, Clarissa realizes that human minds are like our rooms, which are separated from each other and may not be transcended by religion or love.

However, the fact that she can still see through her window to gain a vision foreshadows the ending climax of her spiritual connection with Septimus through her window watching. After she hears the news of this stranger's suicide, Clarissa falls into a deep contemplation. Her thoughts on Septimus' death parallel and intertwine with, like a montage, her vision of the old woman's ending of the day:

It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to

bed. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! The old lady had put out her light! The whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun... She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself... she must assemble. (Woolf 2005a: 181-82)

The window scene, where an old lady prepares for bed and extinguishes her light, reflects Clarissa's fragmented thoughts as she tries to understand her inexplicable connection to the stranger who has just committed suicide. The possibility that the old lady might return Clarissa's gaze suggests that it is not only Clarissa who observes others' lives (or "rooms"). Standing by the window, Clarissa, too, might be seen by someone looking in her direction. This moment hints at a subtle, almost intangible bond between Clarissa and the old lady across the two spaces divided by the window.

The old lady's action of putting out her candle and going to bed symbolizes the end of her day, mirroring the death of Septimus, which marks the end of his life. This parallel links Clarissa to Septimus's death, deepening her sense of connection and prompting a shift in her own understanding of life. The window, in this sense, offers Clarissa a partial yet revelatory glimpse into something beyond herself—what is foreign, unseen, and not within her immediate reach. While the physical window in her room allows her to observe the lives of her neighbors, the metaphorical window created by her connection with the old lady offers a spiritual and mysterious link to someone she will never meet. Through these overlapping windows—though the connection is indirect and fragmented—a bond is established.

In *To the Lighthouse* (1927/1989), Woolf reinforces this image of the human mind as a windowed chamber and the attempt for potential connection and understanding through a window. In this novel, the window is an essential setting as well as an important trope in the main characters' interactions. The first section, "The Window," ends with a scene when Mrs. Ramsay stands by the window under her husband's gaze, after she realizes that she is unable to fulfill her husband's unquenchable longing for the straightforward expression of her love. In her attempt to take a break, Mrs. Ramsay turns to the sight outside the window: "Getting up, she stood at the window with the reddish-brown stocking in her hands, partly to turn away from him, partly because she remembered how beautiful it often is—the sea at night" (Woolf 1989: 123). While she is looking out, she is aware of her position as the object of her husband's gaze. Later, she gently returns his gaze as a gesture of under-



standing and love. At the moment the Ramsays achieve mutual understanding, and their previous conflict is naturally balanced, if not entirely resolved:

And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness)—

“Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow. You won’t be able to go.” And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew. (Woolf 1989: 124)

Similar to the window scene in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this ending scene occurs at the end of the day, giving a sense of closure. Both for Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, a possible human connection is established, or a resolution to a previous conflict is achieved. Like chambers with windows, human minds are not completely sealed to one another.

However, it would be an oversimplification to argue that Woolf believes that one’s mind is like one’s room, and one can simply get a glimpse into another mind by peeping into its window. In her writings, Woolf often suggests that human minds are by nature unfathomable. In *To the Lighthouse*, for example, Lily Briscoe’s metaphor of human minds as sealed hives engages intensely in a dialectical debate with Mrs. Ramsay’s mental “window” through which connection is not impossible. Throughout the novel, Lily, an unmarried female artist, shares a bittersweet relationship with Mrs. Ramsay. She adores and loves Mrs. Ramsay in a complicated way. She feels perplexed about how she can see the “sacred inscription” of Mrs. Ramsay’s heart:

she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? (Woolf 1989: 51)

Again, in Lily’s imagination, Mrs. Ramsay’s mind is spatial; it is a room, a “secret chamber,” only it is sealed, without a window where one can peep into. The art of knowing Mrs. Ramsay’s mind eludes Lily, but the longing never leaves her:

How, then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people. (Woolf 1989: 51)

In this metaphor, Lily envisions human minds as inaccessible, suggesting that the best one can do is linger on the periphery, like a bee around a hive, listening to the murmurs and stirrings that hint at the vibrant life within. The contrasting attitudes of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily toward approaching another person's mind reflect Woolf's exploration of epistemological knowledge, comparing the human mind both to a windowed room and to a secret chamber.

### Window as a Wall

Septimus and Clarissa, the twin figures in *Mrs. Dalloway*, never meet, yet both grapple with the (im)possibility of human connection. At pivotal moments, both characters reference glass, though with very different outcomes. Once an idealistic and promising poet, Septimus returns from World War I suffering from shell shock. His traumatic experiences in the war have left him disillusioned and repulsed by the society he was once called to protect. As a result of his shell shock, he withdraws from the physical world, retreating further into his own troubled mind.

One day, his wife Rezia brings him out to a hat shop. There he struggles to make sense of what he sees, but fails to "feel": "As he opened the door of the room where the Italian girls sat making hats, he could see them... they were rubbing wires among coloured beads in saucers; they were turning buckram shapes this way and that... but something failed him; he could not feel" (Woolf 2005a: 85). Septimus's traumatic sense of detachment marks a contrast with his wife's fascination of window display in front of them: "And there were shops—hat shops, dress shops, shops with leather bags in the window, where she would stand staring" (2005a: 87). Later Rezia makes an exclamation when a French lady is descending from her carriage in her beautiful clothes and jewelry. Her enthusiastic reaction to the scene re-confirms Septimus' loss of connection with outside world: "'Beautiful!' she would murmur, nudging Septimus, that he might see. But beauty was *behind a pane of glass*" (Woolf 2005a: 85, italics added). The scene is seen through shop windows, so it is literally "behind a pane of glass." However, symbolically speaking, even if Septimus is not standing behind a literal window, the scene of beauty in his eyes will probably still look as if it were placed behind a pane of glass, because in his special

state of mind, he can see, but he can *only* see. Glass offers transparency at the expense of other senses. Richard Sennett once comments that plate glass gives an experience that, “Fully apprehending the outside from within, yet feeling neither cold nor wind nor moisture, is a modern sensation” (Sennett in Friedberg 2009: 117). Seeing without hearing, touch, and feeling increases the sense that what is inside is inaccessible. The following passage shows Septimus’s feeling of detachment and aloofness as it deepens: “He looked at people outside; happy they seemed, collecting in the middle of the street, shouting, laughing, squabbling over nothing. But he could not taste, he could not feel” (Woolf 2005a: 86). Septimus at this moment moves about in the city as if he is imprisoned in an invisible box of glass. The urban images incessantly, fleetingly, and transiently come before him, but he cannot *feel* them.

At times glass in Woolf’s writings appears in the form of transparent wall between the spectator and the urban spectacle. In *Night and Day*, glass is further developed as a device of “fatal attraction” in the visual domain. When Ralph finally comes to realize that he loves Katharine and feels an impulse to share this strong feeling, he wanders around the street and sits on the Embankment for a short rest, where there is a drunken old man mumbling about his misfortune and failure. Feeling afflicted and anger, Ralph thinks about his own life, and suddenly comes up with an image of a lighthouse and lost birds:

And when the elderly man refused to listen and mumbled on, an odd image came to his mind of a lighthouse besieged by the flying bodies of lost birds, who were dashed senseless, by the gale, against the glass. He had a strange sensation that he was both lighthouse and bird; he was steadfast and brilliant; and at the same time he was whirled, with all other things, senseless against the glass. (Woolf 2005b: 342)

Again, as an echo to the novel’s title *Night and Day*, the brightness of the lighthouse here forms a sharp contrast with the darkness of senselessness and death. While the light draws birds dashed by the strong wind, glass is neglected, an invisible barrier which is not felt until the violent clash occurs.

This image is later elaborated on and extended in a specific scene when Ralph goes to Katharine’s house and fixes his gaze on her windows. The following passage compares Ralph’s gaze on Katharine’s window with the bird’s dashing to the lighthouse:

Lights burnt in the three long windows of the drawing-room. The space of the room behind became, in Ralph’s vision, the center of the dark, flying wilderness of the world; the justification for the welter of confusion surrounding it; the steady light

which cast its beams, like those of a lighthouse, with searching composure over the trackless waste.... His thoughts lingered over Mrs. Hilbery and Cassandra; and then he turned to Rodney and Mr. Hilbery. Physically, he saw them bathed in that steady flow of yellow light which filled the long oblongs of the windows; in their movements they were beautiful; and in their speech he figured a reserve of meaning, unspoken, but understood. At length, after all this half-conscious selection and arrangement, he allowed himself to approach the figure of Katharine herself; and instantly the scene was flooded with excitement. He did not see her in the body; he seemed curiously to see her as a shape of light, the light itself; he seemed, simplified and exhausted as he was, to be like one of those lost birds fascinated by the lighthouse and held to the glass by the splendor of the blaze. (Woolf 2005b: 344)

Like the lost birds which suicidally fly toward the lighthouse, Ralph is fascinated and overwhelmed by Katharine's silhouette of light emitting from the other side of the window. However, this tendency to disembody Katharine to "the light itself" suggests Ralph's inability to approach and connect with Katharine directly. The metaphor of lost birds and the lighthouse also indicates that the image one tries to comprehend and capture is always elusive and insubstantial, to the extent that it can only be represented or approached as projections or reflections. In other words, these objects of the gaze are always mediated, in this case, through the windowpane. Though Ralph subordinates his gaze to the fascination with the light from Katharine's house, the impending danger and threat implied in this allegory (whether he will, like a lost bird, hit glass) heighten intensity and anxiety to his vision. Urban images and signs that the spectators confront are the light of a lighthouse that attracts lost birds. This allegory seems to also suggest that this tragic clash is one mindless and unintentional mistake, for the lighthouse is originally designed to guide lost ships, and its use of glass is necessary to emit light. The allegory seems to address the fundamental structure of seeing in urban space, which is full of mirroring and reflection, the transient and the fleeting.

The elusive nature of the image and its representation through glass is significant in another short story by Woolf, "A Haunted House" (1921). The language of this uncanny story is artfully vague, describing a ghostly couple who haunts a house in search for their "buried treasure." The couple's existence is felt only through traces, sounds, hints, and reflections. One can never see this ghostly couple, and what one can see is always mediated by glass: "The window-panes reflected apples, reflected roses; all the leaves were green in the glass" (Woolf 1967: 122). Elusive and ambiguous words such as "it" or "here" which resist proper recognition and coherence dominate the narrative. The

purposeful abstraction and concealment of the object of the gaze in Woolf's writing are made possible by glass, as a symbol of the obstacle to knowledge.

This exploration on an epistemological (im)possibility is highlighted by Woolf's connection with glass and death:

A moment later the light had faded. Out in the garden then? But the trees spun darkness for a wandering beam of sun. So fine, so rare, coolly sunk beneath the surface the beam I sought always burnt behind the glass. Death was the glass; death was between us; coming to the woman first, hundreds of years ago, leaving the house, sealing all the windows, the rooms were darkened. (Woolf 1967: 123)

Woolf is once again drawn to the contrast and blurred boundary between light and darkness, life and death. While she attempts to expose these murky areas, she ultimately fails to fully penetrate them. Instead, she makes a concerted effort to look through something that is inherently invisible or unknowable. In this context, glass acts as both a barrier and a medium—separating the representation from the represented, while also serving as a tool to explore the possibility of representing the fundamentally unfathomable. This tension between representation and the limits of knowing is a recurring theme in Woolf's work, particularly in her short story "The Lady in the Looking-glass: Reflection" (1929), which I will discuss later.

### **Street Haunting and Window Shopping**

In urban space, the relationship between the inanimate and the animate undergoes drastic changes. Marx illuminates that in modern capitalism, human relations are mediated by materials, and Benjamin notices that, walking in a world composed of ubiquitous display and commodities, the *flâneur* himself, unable to resist the strong whirl of capitalism and commodification, becomes merchandise, too. Woolf is quite aware of this prevalent standard to evaluate things based on their "commodity value." In her essay "The Docks of London" (1932), she describes, "Oddities, beauties, rarities may occur, but if so, they are instantly tested for their mercantile value" (Woolf 2006: 11), and "every commodity in the world has been examined and graded according to its use and value" (2006: 12). The city of London is characterized by this juxtaposition and montage of colorful signs, transparent show windows, and carefully composed window displays. In "Oxford Street Tide" (1932), London is not a city to be preserved eternally, but to be enjoyed for its very transient quality: "The charm of modern London is that it is not built to last; it is built to pass. Its glassiness, its transparency, its surging waves of coloured plaster give

a different pleasure and achieve a different end from that which was desired and attempted by the old builders and their patrons, the nobility of England” (Woolf 2006: 24).

The acts of window dressing and window shopping are prevalent in Woolf’s novels. In her flower-buying trip, Mrs. Dalloway observes that “the shopkeepers were fidgeting in their windows with their paste and diamonds, their lovely old sea-green brooches in eighteenth-century settings to tempt Americans.” Mrs. Dalloway identifies herself with the other window shoppers and needs to remind herself to refrain from impulse-buying: “(but one must economise, not buy things rashly for Elizabeth)” (Woolf 2005a: 5).

Unlike Clarissa, who seems to still side with the customer, Mary Datchet in *Night and Day* keeps her distance from the window display as a critical observer:

Now and then she would pause and look into the window of some bookseller or flower shop, where, at this early hour, the goods were being arranged, and empty gaps behind the plate glass revealed a state of undress. Mary felt kindly disposed towards the shopkeepers, and hoped that they would trick the midday public into purchasing, for at this hour of the morning she ranged herself entirely on the side of the shopkeepers and bank clerks, and regarded all who slept late and had money to spend as her enemy and natural prey. (Woolf 2005b: 67)

While she is observing the show window being decorated and arranged, Mary is conscious that these goods are presented in order to attract passersby to go inside, take money out of their pockets, and buy the commodity. Mary is not like the overwhelmed female shoppers who lose their minds in front of window displays, partly because the scene she sees at the moment is not a completed work. Mary, as a woman who has her own job, understands that window-dressing is part of the shop-keeper’s “work.” Her working experience and knowledge allow her to see beyond her range of vision. Mary identifies the act of window-dressing as a strategy of advertisement, as part of commercialism.

Woolf is well aware of the fact that the constantly changing cityscape results in an urgent need for modern people to adjust our ways of seeing. In her “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (1927), Woolf offers us a new angle to rethink urban spectatorship. First, she celebrates the delight of “street haunting,” embracing the crowd, joining the anonymous army on the street, the pleasure of being a passerby: “As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is

so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room" (Woolf 1970: 20-21). In this space of display and spectacle, the visual is privileged to the extent that the female narrator becomes "a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye" (1970: 22). Miraculously, under her gaze, the London street in the winter evening is "at once revealed and obscured" (1970: 22), probably under the working of ubiquitous glass.

It is also notable that not only shop windows, but also domestic windows, entice the passerby to a scene for display:

Here vaguely one can trace symmetrical straight avenues of doors and windows; here under the lamps are floating islands of pale light through which pass quickly bright men and women, who, for all their poverty and shabbiness, wear a certain look of unreality, an air of triumph, as if they had given life the slip, so that life, deceived of her prey, blunders on without them. (Woolf 1970: 22)

Each man and woman, rich or poor, young or old, even "the humped, the twisted, the deformed," invariably join the series of signs and images on the street to form a unique spectacle mysteriously tinged with beauty. It is admirable to see how Woolf, as if presenting her dreamlike reverie, aesthetically represents "this maimed company of the halt and the blind" as a grotesque group that is fused into the world of commerce and display:

They lie close to those shop windows where commerce offers to a world of old women laid on doorsteps, of blind men, of hobbling dwarfs, sofas which are supported by the gilt necks of proud swans; tables inlaid with baskets of many coloured fruit; sideboards paved with green marble the better to support the weight of boars' heads; and carpets so softened with age that their carnations have almost vanished in a pale green sea. (Woolf 1970: 26-27)

Woolf's blending of natural images (swans, fruit, sea) to compare a city street with an ocean reminds us of the opening passage of Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926), in which he describes the intoxicated gaze as he strolls through the "aquariums" into which the Passage de l'*Opéra* is transformed (Woolf 1970: 14). Similar to what Woolf's female stroller sees, in Aragon's narrator's eyes, the ordinariness in everyday life is a work of art. Attracted to a window display of a cane shop, the narrator is astonished to see the window "was bathed in a greenish, almost submarine light, the source of which remained invisible." He continues, "it was the same kind of phosphorescence that, I remember, emanated from the fish I watched, as a child..." and he hears a sort of noise from the shop, which "was the same voice of the seashells that has never ceased to

amaze poets and film-stars” (1970: 22). The commodities, the canes, “floated gently like seaweed” (1970: 22). He apprehends the marvelous suffusing of everyday existence, celebrates the mundane glories in an anti-elitist gaze, and eulogizes the ordinary to spell out a utopia in which everyone is an artist.

In “Street Haunting,” the narrator’s gaze is moderate and non-penetrative. It should follow a flow and there is no need to focus on one thing too deeply or for too long. No matter how curious one may be, one should rest one’s gaze on the surface only: “The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks” (Woolf 1970: 22). Though Woolf also recognizes that curiosity and a desire for complete knowledge is human nature, she still finds it necessary to moderate her gaze carefully:

But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins and trumpets in response; the army of human beings may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities. Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only—the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses; the carnal splendour of the butchers’ shops with their yellow flanks and purple steaks; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists’ windows. (Woolf 1970: 23)

In order not to immerse oneself too deeply or too sentimentally in the thought aroused by “oddities, suffering, and sordidities,” the observer turns her gaze to the omnibuses, the steaks, the flowers, the things people can really make use of or consume. This unwillingness to dwell in the contemplation or reflection of the scene too long and a conscious shift of one’s gaze to the display are also observable in *Night and Day*.

The moment occurs when Ralph realizes with surprise and uneasiness that Mary is not just his loyal friend, but a woman who is secretly in love with him. In order to calm himself, Ralph disciplines his chaotic thoughts and emotions by resting his gaze on the signs and spectacles outside the window:

In his agitation Ralph rose, turned his back upon Mary, and looked out of the window. The people in the street seemed to him only a dissolving and combining pattern of black particles; which, for the moment, represented very well the involuntary procession of feelings and thoughts which formed and dissolved in rapid succession in his own mind. At one moment he exulted in the thought that Mary loved him; at the next, it seemed that he was without feeling for her; her love was repulsive to him.



Now he felt urged to marry her at once; now to disappear and never see her again. In order to control this disorderly race of thought he forced himself to read the name on the chemist's shop directly opposite him; then to examine the objects in the shop windows, and then to focus his eyes exactly upon a little group of women looking in at the great windows of a large draper's shop. This discipline having given him at least a superficial control of himself. (Woolf 2005b: 201)

The observer consciously embraces the display and spectacle to indulge in the superficial scene the city offers, to focus on the fleeting, the transient, and the fragmentary, in an attempt not to “dig” too deep or too long. Like the narrator in “Street Haunting,” we should not see or explore more than the eye or the mind approves. To shift one's attention from the internal chaos to the external spectacle seems to be a mechanism of defense developed by urban dwellers.

Woolf's celebration of a seemingly superficial yet creative gaze appears to be a critical response to the materialism and commercialization in urban society and consumer culture. In the beginning, the narrator claims that her pretext to go for a walk is to buy a pencil. This trivial purchase is more of an “invented” legitimate excuse than a necessity. Woolf feels dissatisfied that one has to be producing or consuming something in order to move around in urban space. Through the text of “Street Haunting,” Woolf shows an alternative to harmlessly “consume” the urban scene by exercising the art of “just looking.” This also seems to be a perfect and safe way to interact with the urban images and signs: “With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances” (Woolf 1970: 27).

In “Street Haunting,” Woolf suggests that in a society that invites, encourages, or even compels consumption, one must master the art of window shopping—the art of “just looking.” This idea can be seen as a critical response to her earlier metaphor of a lost bird crashing into the window of a lighthouse. The seemingly superficial yet self-satisfied act of spectatorship, embodied by the female stroller in “Street Haunting,” offers a new perspective on how one can observe the display behind a pane of glass with ease, avoiding the dangerous clash between desire and reality.

### **The Consuming Gaze**

The emergent window display changes the shopping environment and cityscapes, as well as people's ways of seeing. In *Night and Day*, Woolf parallels the commodities on display with the female figures walking on the street in London in 1910 (the year after Selfridges's opening). One afternoon, while Ralph is walking on the Strand for an interview with a lawyer, he sees Katha-

rine by chance. As a keen consumer, Ralph pictures the figure of Katharine on the street in parallel with the commodities on display behind shop windows on both sides:

The afternoon light was almost over, and already streams of greenish and yellowish artificial light were being poured into an atmosphere which, in country lanes, would now have been soft with the smoke of wood fires; and on both sides of the road the shop windows were full of sparkling chains and highly polished leather cases, which stood upon shelves made of thick plate-glass. None of these different objects was seen separately by Denham, but from all of them he drew an impression of stir and cheerfulness. Thus it came about that he saw Katharine Hilbery coming towards him, and looked straight at her, as if she were only an illustration of the argument that was going forward in his mind. In this spirit he noticed the rather set expression in her eyes, and the slight, half-conscious movement of her lips, which, together with her height and the distinction of her dress, made her look as if the scurrying crowd impeded her, and her direction were different from theirs. (Woolf 2005b: 114)

Katharine here seems to emerge directly from Ralph's window shopping, above the crowd. As Elizabeth Outka rightly points out, "The very qualities that make up Katharine's distinction in dress and appearance are what might be suggested, reproduced, and sold behind a shop window" (2005b: 138). Here Katharine is seen as a mobile commodity, an animated store mannequin, which Ralph consumes visually without actually purchasing.

Like a spell, Katharine's image mesmerizes Ralph, making him desire more of her image so that he keeps looking:

Where should he go? To walk through the streets of London until he came to Katharine's house, to look up at the windows and fancy her within, seemed to him possible for a moment; and then he rejected the plan almost with a blush as, with a curious division of consciousness, one plucks a flower sentimentally and throws it away, with a blush, when it is actually picked. (Woolf 2005b: 115)

Ralph's commodification of Katharine's body is evident in his desire to fancy Katharine outside her window, as if this was an extension to his window shopping on the Strand, as though Katharine in her own room was an elegant mannequin in a store window.

Later, a similar moment takes place when Ralph accidentally casts a glimpse of Katharine walking on the street through a restaurant window. He fails to recognize Katharine as a human figure before he visually fragmentizes her, fixing his gaze on her gloves:

... he was about to turn and ask the waiter to bring the bill, when his eye was caught by a tall figure walking quickly along the opposite pavement—a tall figure, upright, dark, and commanding, much detached from her surroundings. She held her gloves in her left hand, and the left hand was bare. All this Ralph noticed and enumerated and recognized before he put a name to the whole—Katharine Hilbery... This sudden apparition had an extraordinary effect upon him. (Woolf 2005b: 201-202)

Like a would-be shopper experiences in front of a shop window, Ralph is tantalized by Katharine's image, an extension to his window shopping, looking at display with a dreamy, enchanting, and apparitional quality. These images are made more desirable because they are at once seemingly approachable and yet out of reach.

This male gaze that commodifies a female figure also appears in *Mrs. Dalloway*, when Peter Walsh follows an unknown woman on the street. Like Baudelaire's poem "To a Passerby" (1861), it is an urban romance of "love at last sight." The woman in Peter's eyes is not totally indistinguishable from the commodities displayed in both shop windows. At one moment he even wonders if the woman is literally a commodity herself (a prostitute):

Was she, he wondered, respectable?... But other people got between them in the street, obstructing him, blotting her out. He pursued; she changed. There was colour in her cheeks, mockery in her eyes; he was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring, indeed (landed as he was last night from India) a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned proprieties, yellow dressing-gowns, pipes, fishing-rods, in the shop windows; and respectability and evening parties and spruced old men wearing white slips beneath their waistcoats. He was a buccaneer. On and on she went, across Piccadilly, and up Regent Street, ahead of him, her cloak, her gloves, her shoulders combining with the fringes and the laces and the feather boas in the windows to make the spirit of finery and whimsy which dwindled out of the shops on to the pavement, as the light of a lamp goes wavering at night over hedges in the darkness. (Woolf 2005a: 52-53)

Peter's wild imagination, similar to Ralph's, intertwines the unknown woman's image into the spectacle of commodities. The interaction between the male gaze and the object of the gaze (the female body) parallels that between the window shopper and the window display. The distance is essential in forming both relations, and the viewer's desire is sustained and created by the ever-changing quality of the object: "he pursued; she changed." Woolf vividly

grasps a related pattern of romance and gazing inspired and mediated by window displays in modern urban life.

### **Glass and Writing**

In Woolf's imagination, the act of writing and a writer's relation with readers and public opinion are also related to a window image, though she includes her contempt and complaints about her lack of freedom as a writer under public scrutiny and about the commodification of literature. To Woolf, a writer in the glare of publicity is just "like a trouser mender in Oxford Street, with a horde of reviewers pressing their noses to glass and commenting to a curious crowd upon each stitch" ("Reviewing," Woolf 1967: 213). While expressing her disapproval of the limitations imposed by reviewers and the reading public on the writer's creativity, Woolf's comparison of a writer to a trouser mender illuminates the distance between the representation and the represented, maintained by a pane of glass. It is notable that she imagines a writer as a "trouser mender," instead of a "tailor," so as to imply that a writer is adding or working on some piece of cloth that already exists, rather than making a new one. A writer's creativity is based on something real, something ready to be used. In addition, the readers or reviewers have to press their noses "against the window" in order to see what happens inside.

Woolf's metaphor of a writer as a trouser mender working behind a window also foregrounds novel writing as a process of producing commodities. The writer is placed behind the window, and, in a sense, she is forced to display what she produces. Books were among the earliest commodities circulating around the world, and the novel is said to be a commodity-form of literature. Novels are like other commodities not only in their objective status as saleable goods, but also in the novel experiences they promise (Bowly 1985: 14). This is why Woolf cannot hide her anxiety and uneasiness about her status as a producer of cultural commodities under close critical scrutiny.

Glass also sheds new light on Woolf's thoughts on the conjunction of modernist aesthetics and consumer culture. For example, "Street Haunting" is not merely a *flânerie* about a special mode of gaze which is creative but not overly penetrative, but also a symbol of writing itself, the act and the process of creating. (There are many symbols of writing in "Street Haunting." The narrator is going out to buy a "pencil," the tool one needs to write. The shops the narrator enters are a bookstore [the work of art] and a stationary, which also highlight the fact that one of Woolf's aims in this story is to explore the connection between walking and writing.) The female narrator takes her freedom

to make stories out of each chance encounter she has on this urban journey, to playfully yet harmlessly become someone else for a little while:

Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could become a washerwoman, a publican, a street singer. And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men? (Woolf 1970: 36)

With no intension of penetrative scrutiny, she constantly changes her focus and stays only on the surface. At times, she may want to “dally a little longer,” but she makes it clear that her gaze should not dig “deeper than he eye approves” and should “be content still with surfaces only” (Woolf 1970: 23). This is a story of window shopping *par excellence*, a *flâneuse’s* gaze, and the city both as a setting for wandering and inspiration for story-making.

This superficial but creative gaze, which I previously argue to be a possible resolution to avoid the dangerous clash (to be excessively attracted to the object of gaze, or the image behind glass) that Woolf worries about, also spells out the essential core of Woolf’s beliefs and views on literature itself. In her “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), Woolf makes a distinction between the writing style of “the Edwardians” (Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy) and that of “the Georgians” (Joyce, Forster, Lawrence, Eliot, Strachey). Woolf disputes the former groups to be realists, whose works tend to be meticulously over-detailed. In another essay “Modern Fiction” (1925), Woolf categorizes “Edwardians” as “materialists” who obsessively observe the object, which she regards as counterproductive and unnecessary.

Alex Zwerdling (1986: 16) clarifies that the reason why Woolf dismisses Edwardians’ over attention to material details and circumstantial facts is not because she asks for an “‘insight’—the ability to see into the inner nature of things.” Rather, what she finds distasteful is Bennett’s unselective vision which, for Woolf, is exhausting, laborious, and emotionless. Woolf believes that an evasive image stirs more creative imagination than a lucid vision (and to her a lucid vision is either illusory or impossible). These inspired thoughts, interesting though fragmentary, could sparkle like a diligent ant. In her words, “How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it” (CSF 83). The work of art is precisely created during this interplay of lifting and leaving. This sug-

gests Woolf's lack of interest or belief in attaining a complete and exhaustive understanding of the outside world. Aesthetically Woolf values obscurity or translucency more than pure transparency.

Woolf again relies on glass to highlight the paradoxical nature of represented reality.

"The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" (1929) is a *tour de force* in which Woolf deals with a self-conscious pursuit of an unfathomable character and the unreliability of a mirror, an instrument which, ironically, is designed to be a neutral medium of revelation. The story begins with a somewhat provocative statement: "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime" (Woolf 1985: 221). The narrator then reveals that she is observing an old lady named Isabella Tyson's room in its reflected form: "One could see reflected in the Italian glass not only the marble-topped table opposite, but a stretch of the garden beyond. One could see a long grass path leading between banks of tall flowers until, slicing off an angle, the gold rim cut it off" (1985: 221). The view is sliced off by the gilt rim of the mirror, like a picture that grasps a transient moment; yet unlike a picture, the mirror scene is constantly changing: "nothing stayed the same for two seconds together" (1985: 221). The owner of this room may appear in the narrator's vision a moment and then quickly vanishes. Sometimes the reflected image can be entirely altered by unexpected and unidentifiable intrusion: "Suddenly these reflections were ended violently—and yet without a sound. A large black form loomed in to the looking-glass; blotted out everything, strewed the table with a packet of marble tablets veined with pink and grey, and was gone. But the picture was entirely altered" (Woolf 1985: 223). The intrusion of "a large black form" is later known as a pile of mail, which the narrator imagines to be invitations to dinners and parties.

The mirror offers no lasting truth, only a fleeting reflection. In reading this constantly shifting image, one must quickly infer what kind of person Isabelle is and what her life might be like. As seen in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf often imagines the human mind as a room; here, the narrator draws a parallel between Isabella's mind and her room:

Her mind was like her room, in which lights advanced and retreated, came pirouetting and stepping delicately, spread their tails, pecked their way; and then her whole being was suffused, like the room again, with a cloud of some profound knowledge, some unspoken regret, and then she was full of locked drawers, stuffed with letters, like her cabinets. To talk of "prizing her open" as if she were an oyster, to use any but

the finest and subtlest and most pliable tools upon her was impious and absurd. One must imagine—here was she in the looking glass. (Woolf 1985: 225)

Woolf is not interested in penetrative knowledge of the old lady, for to attempt to “prize her open” would be both “impious and absurd.” Instead, the voyeuristic narrator relies on her imagination to make sense of the mirror scene, turning the unknown into something creative and accessible. At the same time, Woolf emphasizes the limitations of this gaze—her vision is always constrained by the rim of the mirror, and the shifting, elusive nature of Isabella’s inner self is mirrored by the ever-dancing pattern of light.

Woolf chooses the mirror as a metaphor for the process of storytelling because she understands that what she can reveal to the reader is, at best, only a “reflection.” In this story of storytelling, she dramatizes her belief that the world cannot be fully known or represented. Thus, what remains for us is a fragmented narrative, a montage of opaque images. Woolf makes it clear that modern art demands we engage with “the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure” (CE 337). Since her vision of Isabella is limited and framed by the mirror, Woolf chooses not to write directly about her, but to write “around” her, using the medium of glass to represent the difficulty and necessity of partial knowledge.

## Conclusions

Glass in Virginia Woolf’s works serves as a potent metaphor that encapsulates the complexities of perception, identity, and societal roles in modern urban life. By drawing on the dual nature of glass as both a medium and a barrier, Woolf explores the tensions between visibility and invisibility, connection and isolation, as her characters navigate the challenges of self-representation and social expectations. The recurrent motifs of mirrors and windows in her writing reflect the ways in which individuals, particularly women, confront the limitations and contradictions of their inner and outer worlds. Woolf uses glass not only to represent the fluidity and uncertainty of modern existence but also to critique the pressures of societal norms and the often-impermeable boundaries between self and others. Ultimately, the metaphor of glass enables Woolf to explore the tension between transparency and opacity in human experience, revealing how perception shapes our understanding of both the world and ourselves. Through this lens, glass reflects not only the material realities of urban modernity but also Woolf’s evolving self-concept as a writer navigating the complexities of representation in a fragmented world.

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