



# Reflection Statement

To the Darkroom: Photography and *To the Lighthouse*

Word Count: 1,462

*“Photographs of Virginia Woolf, from youth and beauty as one of the famous Stephens sisters to maturity, are inseparable from her status as a writer and her public image.”*<sup>67</sup>

My Major Work, as homage to Woolf and her artistry, explores the representation of a feminine artistic self in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. I examine how Woolf’s engagement with photography in her personal life provides the aesthetic for this construction of a feminized artistic space and subjectivity in her prose. I argue that: “it was through an association with the domestic, that Woolf feminised the amateur artistic practice of photography”<sup>68</sup> and enabled the artistic construction of her prose. My primary objective is to disseminate Woolf’s photography to unfamiliar readers and connect it to her prose, thus making an original contribution to the sphere of study surrounding Woolf’s aesthetics. The combination of such ambitions led to the formation of my Major Work’s purpose: to expose strictures placed on feminine artistic identity and thus empower females to recognise that their expression originates from everyday life, even in our modern world.

I expect that my investigation of Woolf’s literature, influenced by her own feminine artistic practice, would resonate specifically with critics of the artistic role of females within literature. Furthermore, my analysis of photographs in conjunction with Woolf’s representation of post-Impressionist painting in her novel would appeal to those interested in the conflation of literature and art. As such, the ideal mode of publication and circulation for my essay lies within the *Virginia Woolf Society* and as a part of the *Annual Conferences on Virginia Woolf*.

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<sup>67</sup> Humm, M. (2006). *Snapshots of Bloomsbury*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press. p. vii

<sup>68</sup> Major Work. (2015). *To the Darkroom: Photography and To the Lighthouse*. p.6

My Major Work journey began before the beginning of the Extension 2 course as the Preliminary and HSC English courses functioned as stimulating backdrops for the development of my thesis. My study of “Modernism” in the English Extension 1 Preliminary course ignited my curiosity in artistic influences that shape literature. This study led to my understanding that Woolf “broke with traditional forms of narrative in *To the Lighthouse*”<sup>69</sup> to disprove the statement: “women can’t paint, women can’t write”<sup>70</sup> where “the *visual* modes of photography rebounded against language in a way that reflected a new art, a new way of writing.” Moreover, the study of Morrison’s *Sula*<sup>71</sup> in my Preliminary Advanced English course also influenced this Major Work through its representation of women as landscape in a space emerging from an exclusive engagement between women. The HSC English course has helped shape my understanding of modernism through a study of T.S Eliot. His poetry revealed the modernist fascination with stream-of-consciousness and the search for truth. Through studying Woolf’s work, I have been able to ascertain that she discovered the truth of a feminine identity through her engagement in the art of literature and photography thus constructed a feminised space.

Given my desire to explore feminine and photographic theory and Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness novel, my project fell naturally in line with the medium of the critical response. My decision to utilise the essay form was influenced by Lennon’s *The Essay, In Theory*<sup>72</sup> and Adorno’s *Essay as Form*<sup>73</sup>. Both highlighted the benefits of

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<sup>69</sup> Major Work. (2015). *To the Darkroom: Photography and To the Lighthouse*. p.2

<sup>70</sup> Woolf, V. (1992). *To the Lighthouse*. Victoria: Penguin Group p. 48

<sup>71</sup> Morrison, T. (1974). *Sula*. New York: Knopf.

<sup>72</sup> Brian Lennon, (2008). The Essay, in Theory. *Diacritics*, 38(3), pp.71-92.

the essay as insightful and accessible in a critical manner. These texts proved to be my primary source of insight into the essay's form and led me to compose my own piece of literary art that was: "personal...dynamic and voluptuous."<sup>74</sup> The critical response fits such a description as a result of its capacity to interweave the personal and the critical whilst simultaneously allowing for textual analysis. This form therefore presented the opportunity to construct a dynamic analysis of Woolf and her works, and manufacture a sustained argument to empower my audience. Essays in *Young Writers Showcase 2013* influenced my understanding of structural features for critical responses and impacted my decision to separate my work using headings. Most significantly however, were Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*<sup>75</sup> and *Three Guineas*.<sup>76</sup> The latter incorporates photography into the essay's original edition which enhanced my understanding of how to combine literature with photography. *A Room of One's Own* uses a logical and chapter orientated structure. This influenced my decision to incorporate sub-heading into my Major Work and thus establish a progressive argument within a theoretical framework. These sub-headings fulfilled Lennon's brief promoting accessibility and readerly engagement. Therefore this form was best suited to my concept as it catered for a greater inclusion of theory and sophisticated presentation of my argument.

Maggie Humm's *Snapshots of Bloomsbury*<sup>77</sup> and *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures*<sup>78</sup> were pivotal texts in my research and the formulation of my thesis. From

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<sup>73</sup> T. W. Adorno, Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique: The Essay as Form* No. 32 (Spring - Summer, 1984), pp. 151-171, Published by: Duke University Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/488160>

<sup>74</sup> Brian Lennon, (2008). The Essay, in Theory. *Diacritics*, 38(3), pp.71-92.

<sup>75</sup> Woolf, V, 1928. *A Room of One's Own*. 1st ed. London: Penguin Modern Classics.

<sup>76</sup> Woolf, V. 1938, *Three Guineas*, Hogarth, London.

<sup>77</sup> Humm, M. (2006). *Snapshots of Bloomsbury*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>78</sup> Humm, M. (2002). *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

them I garnered knowledge about the existence of Woolf's photographs as a significant part of her life. Humm's works were pivotal in informing me of Woolf's personal aesthetics and thus allowed me to recognise and establish the significant contributions offered by Woolf's photographic albums. One quotation from Sontag's *On Photography* mirrored an idea presented by Humm: "photography [was] the only major art in which amateurs [could] excel."<sup>79</sup> Through my Major Work, I attributed this notion of the "amateur" to Woolf's photography, revealing that her success within this practice influenced the construction and success of her prose and her subsequent artistic identity. Woolf states: "What one means by integrity, in the case of the novelist, is the conviction that he gives one that this truth is the truth."<sup>80</sup> These two hypotheses sparked my idea that women, as "amateurs," engaged in the lower art of novels and photography and thus, constructed their own feminine artistic identity away from masculine domains. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* raises questions regarding perceptions of women; supporting the notion that Woolf acted as a woman observing and commenting on women. His view that the human eye penetrates reality creating a "reality freed from...boundaries of time and place"<sup>81</sup> influenced my understanding of photography. I was able to link this to *To the Lighthouse* through engaging with the novel's structure and how it specifically dealt with notions of the past, present, future and reality.

Texts commenting on capturing reality through photographs have been integral in developing my perceptions concerning Woolf's ability to "write" a creative space for

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<sup>79</sup> Sontag, S. (1977). *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

<sup>80</sup> Woolf, V, 1928. *A Room of One's Own*. 1st ed. London: Penguin Modern Classics.

<sup>81</sup> Berger, J. (1973). *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corp

women. Regarding photographic theory, Cartier-Bresson's *The Decisive Moment*<sup>82</sup> spoke to my Major Work as it highlights the photographer's role in capturing and presenting their reality through the "fusion of the human eye with the camera's lens."<sup>83</sup> This is a powerful action and Woolf's conscious engagement with it allowed me to develop my concept as it illuminated her "feminine power to perceive beyond the traditional horizon...into a secluded world available only to amateur visual representation."

Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*<sup>84</sup> cultivated a more nuanced understanding of photography which influenced my understanding of Lily's painting in *To the Lighthouse*. Barthes' exploration of photography as an immortalizing technology influenced a significant portion of my Major Work and its discussion on the ability of literature to preserve and immortalise the past each time the text is read. I applied Barthes' discussion of photography in relation to his mother with my analysis of *To the Lighthouse* and the role of Woolf's mother within this novel and her albums. It was this that influenced my understanding of Woolf's immortal legacy constructed through her artistic engagement with, and representation of literature.

In time, I became confused by the number of potential directions with which to interpret *To the Lighthouse*. It was a long and complex research procedure to discover how photography had influenced its construction and Woolf's subsequent artistic identity. Initially, my Major focused broadly on feminine identity however, after

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<sup>82</sup> Cartier-Bresson, H., Matisse, H. and Tériade, E. (1952). *The Decisive Moment*. New York: Published by Simon and Schuster in collaboration with Éditions Verve of Paris

<sup>83</sup> Major Work. (2015). *To the Darkroom: Photography and To the Lighthouse*. p.5

<sup>84</sup> Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang.

reading Cunningham's *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century*<sup>85</sup> in conjunction with re-reading *A Room of One's Own*,<sup>86</sup> I consolidated my understanding of photography as an art form. I decided it was more effective to analyse the emerging construct of female as artist in possession of an artistic identity that contained many insinuations and connections to visual modality and the visual arts. The notion of the female artistic space governed by photography is one that I found to be peculiar and characterised by unbound creative possibilities; "moments demarcated by photographic aesthetics and visual modality that were supported by Woolf's sister Bell."<sup>87</sup> Through defining such a concept and establishing that Woolf's engagement with the "timelessness of the past" enabled me to develop a more targeted and sophisticated response.

I can conclude that it was only through a grueling process of researching and writing that I realised the creation of my Major Work and achieved tribute to Woolf and her creative abilities. The extensive effort demanded by the project has provided me a strong work ethic and a pride in my finished product. Although I discovered weaknesses in my area of literary analysis, feedback from others enabled me to cultivate an appreciation for my strengths and deliver a conceptually rigorous reading of *To the Lighthouse* honoring Woolf's legacy and genius.

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<sup>85</sup> Cunningham, D., Fisher, A. and Mays, S. (2005). *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars

<sup>86</sup> Woolf, V. (1957). *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich

<sup>87</sup> Major Work. (2015). *To the Darkroom: Photography and To the Lighthouse*. p.3