Silence, as Bernard Dauenhauer has written, is indeed a positive phenomenon rather than, as many would assume, absence of meaning. Poets and mystics, early and late, both east and west, have long recognized the importance of silence. Dauenhauer’s effort to examine and establish the ontological status of silence is a notable exception to the fact that systematic philosophical discussion has lagged behind artists’ efforts to relate the importance of the elusive phenomenon of silence. As one of the great experimenters of Modernist literature, Virginia Woolf was a pioneer in contemporary treatment of silence by literary artists. And, as one of the twentieth century’s most philosophical writers, Woolf’s deployment of silence is also some of the most complex and interesting. Silence holds Woolf’s attention from the beginning of her career with The Voyage Out, in which one character, a young, aspiring writer wishes to write a novel about “what people don’t say. A novel of silence”, through to her last work Between the Acts whose very title hints at the importance of a silent in between. Influenced by Dauenhauer’s work on silence, I want to examine how Virginia Woolf conceived of silence as part of the interplay between the individual and his world, the “dyad” made up of the ‘determinate’ (humankind) and the ‘nondeterminate’ (world), which, while forming a synthesis, cannot be resolved into a finished whole. Woof’s use of silence is freighted with significance because it helps relate three of the her major concerns: the ambiguous and interrogatory nature of human existence, the achievement in writing of offering a more profound depiction of human existence, and her ability to convey her unique vision of life in a way that the “common reader” would find revealing.

One way Woolf writes silence is in the form of peripheral characters that help express her philosophical ideas about the man-world dyad in which the nature of that relationship is revealed as fundamentally interrogative. Further, her silent figures signal an approach to creativity that emphasizes the ontological and epistemological significance of silence to life. Such representations bring into focus silence as deeply relevant to the gap of understanding between the perceiving subject and the world, a gap that, for Woolf, it is the artist’s job to bridge. Considered in this context, Woolf’s silent, ethereal images are an attempt to connect her
readers with that silent but powerful and meaning-full gap between the propositional mode of language, our primary, but limited, way of communicating, and the latent meaning of the world of Being that is part of what Woolf hopes to convey. The role of the author as artist, Woolf implies, is to be the intermediary between self and world, to build a bridge between the silent world of meaning that surrounds us and our desire to find meaning. But, that is not to say that the search for meaning ends with a fixed and necessarily positive answer. Woolf’s silent images in her central texts, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, are sites of interrogation, a vector for the human position of a perceiving and thus perpetually questioning subject in confrontation with the world. As such, they represent not easy or complete answers, but rather the silent interrogatory ‘space’ in our experience. Hence they are peripheral in nature, neither fully in nor fully out the text, neither entirely present, nor entirely absent, but nonetheless critically important.

Silent figures such as the old poet Carmichael in *To the Lighthouse* and the woman writing in *The Waves*, at key points in Woolf’s major texts, represent a kind of portal to the silent world, which exists on the edge of the so-called solid world of things, the crucial point where questioning of what we know and what can be known is most intense. Perhaps this is the “zone of silence” that Woolf felt artists live in. They serve as Woolf’s dramatic expression of Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “The meaning of what the artist is going to say is nowhere, neither in things nor in his non-formulated life. It calls attention away from a fully constituted reason in which ‘cultivated men’ enclose themselves, to another which would contain its own origins” But, Woolf’s silent characters are not just an idiosyncratic element of style. They become a significant vehicle in Woolf’s attempt to share with the reader a penetrating sense of the tension inherent in the man-world relationship which, while it can never be resolved, carries actual significance. In this respect, Woolf appears to share Dauenhauer’s thesis that “Both man and world are syntheses of two irreducible, but non-self-standing, components which are not contraries of one another. Being is the interplay of the play of these two components in man on the one hand and world on the other.” Through her silent characters Woolf, as Dauenhauer does, questions the Platonic doctrine of the dyad and ultimately rejects the notion that it can be resolved into the One. Meaning is found in the very questioning itself and art is often its agent.

Questioning then is fundamental to the human quest to understand our place in the world. As Merleau-Ponty has said, the interrogative is