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Virginia Woolf and the War of Self-Expression: The Great War and the Space-time Continuum in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse

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Abstract

While many consider Virginia Woolf to be one of the leading Modernist writers in the English artistic avant-garde movement, few take into consideration the challenges which she faced as she created some of her most critically acclaimed work. In this study I investigate the manifestation of both the Great War and an advanced understanding of the space-time continuum in Virginia Woolf's personal understanding of the struggle with self-expression. I chose these two subjects of study because the destructiveness of the Great War forced an entire culture to face the inhumanity of mankind while an advanced understanding of space and time dictated that the teleological notion of immutable space time be abandoned to the discontinuous and chaotic nature of quantum theory. I examine Woolf's diaries, letters, and two of her post-war novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, in an effort to explore the method she found by which one can overcome the alienation incurred by the inexpressible nature of the self and the unknowability of the other, both of which have been exacerbated by the fragmentation of the Modern era. Through the triumphant moments of self-expression of three of her characters and the desperate suicide of one, Virginia Woolf illustrates how the search for any grand meaning in life is futile; however, if one is able to notice minor daily miracles, the ultimately insignificant battles one faces are made more worthwhile, and one may still be able to find beauty in something as arduous as life.

Keywords

Virginia Woolf, Great War, Space-time Continuum, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, Modernist writer

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English Honors Thesis

Virginia Woolf and the War of Self-Expression: The Great War and the Space-time
Continuum in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*

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Honors Thesis
Class of 2014
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Abstract: *While many consider Virginia Woolf to be one of the leading Modernist writers in the English artistic avant-garde movement, few take into consideration the challenges which she faced as she created some of her most critically acclaimed work. In this study I investigate the manifestation of both the Great War and an advanced understanding of the space-time continuum in Virginia Woolf's personal understanding of the struggle with self-expression. I chose these two subjects of study because the destructiveness of the Great War forced an entire culture to face the inhumanity of mankind while an advanced understanding of space and time dictated that the teleological notion of immutable space time be abandoned to the discontinuous and chaotic nature of quantum theory. I examine Woolf's diaries, letters, and two of her post-war novels, Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, in an effort to explore the method she found by which one can overcome the alienation incurred by the inexpressible nature of the self and the unknowability of the other, both of which have been exacerbated by the fragmentation of the Modern era. Through the triumphant moments of self-expression of three of her characters and the desperate suicide of one, Virginia Woolf illustrates how the search for any grand meaning in life is futile; however, if one is able to notice minor daily miracles, the ultimately insignificant battles one faces are made more worthwhile, and one may still be able to find beauty in something as arduous as life.*

Virginia Woolf is thought by many to be one of the foremost figures of the Modernist movement in literature. Despite her prominent position in English literature, Virginia Woolf also experienced some crippling lows in her life. Periodically suffering from mental breakdowns, which are now finally recognized as symptoms of manic-depressive disorder, Woolf was often bed-bound, suffering from extreme emotional and psychological duress. She was able to fight through her bouts with illness however and write a plethora of critically acclaimed essays and novels and earn her place among Britain's artistic avant-garde. Even though she was able to lead a full and fruitful life, Woolf finally succumbed to her illness in 1941. Having written a heartfelt letter to her husband Leonard, in which she expressed to him the beauty that he had brought into her life, Virginia Woolf filled her coat pockets with stones and walked into the River Ousa.

Over the course of her lifetime, Virginia Woolf witnessed a world forever altered by both the Great War and changing understandings of space and time. The Great War, ingrained in the culture in which Woolf was writing and consequently ingrained in Woolf's worldview, weaves a path through her writing. Even though they are set after the Great War had ended and a sense of

normality had begun to seep back into English culture, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) resonate with the aftershocks of the war still rippling out from the battlefields. While the Great War echoes throughout these novels, changing understandings of space and time are integral to the composition of some of the key characters in each novel. Advancements in science dictated that previously held notions of universal time and the absolute now must yield to the realization that one's own personal sense of past, present, and future allows one to orient oneself in an individualized space and time. Through her emphasis on memory in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf explored her own understanding of the individual's navigation through his or her own personal space time.

In the midst of a culture shattered by war and altered by contested views of space and time, Virginia Woolf sought to understand how the individual can relate to others in the throes of such chaos. In order to connect with the other and bridge the gap of alienation dividing them, the individual must first understand the self and express this self to the other. Given the bedlam of the post-war period, the individual was faced with far more challenges in expressing the self than was the individual in the pre-war era. Woolf was aware of the impossibility of the wholeness of high-culture in a world so fragmented by war. Facing her own challenges in self-expression, Woolf examined these very real struggles through her characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

Out of the four key characters in these two novels, three are able to triumph in their own battles with self-expression while one finds his only relief in death. *Mrs. Dalloway* follows for one day the socialite Clarissa Dalloway and the shell-shocked soldier Septimus Smith. Able to connect with those around her, Clarissa experiences a moment of triumph. Septimus, on the

other hand, is faced with failure. Steeped in the inadequacy of his own words and forced to live in a world not willing to listen, Septimus finds in death his only escape from the harsh judgements of the world around him and from the chaos of his own mind.

Like Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe form a dichotomy in *To the Lighthouse*. This dichotomy is between a female embodiment of Victorian ideologies and a single, female, modern artist. Mrs. Ramsay is able to bring both family and friends together at her dinner party while Lily Briscoe has suffered throughout the novel with her own frustration over her inability to express herself in her painting. Although she is socially stigmatized because she is a female artist, Lily is able to break through the difficulties washing across her existence and complete her painting.

In order to canvas three triumphs and one failure in her characters' battles with self-expression, Virginia Woolf drew on her own intimate awareness of the struggle. Having experienced the destruction of the Great War and the chaos of the upheaval of the scientific world, Woolf was faced with further challenges to the pursuit of a completeness in her own art. In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf examines what it means both to succeed and to fail in self-expression and how changes in culture have exacerbated these everyday battles. What she found is that one must recognize that one can indeed win these battles, but the war will continue until the day one dies. Triumph in these battles will only be met by brief moments rather than sustained revelations; if one searches for these grandiose epiphanies of life, one will be met by only disappointment. In overlooking all the daily miracles that constitute the human existence, one will simply exist rather than live.

Through Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, and Septimus Smith, Virginia Woolf considers this differentiation between living through daily miracles and existing solely for the ultimate awakening that will never come. The former three characters find these miraculous moments in their triumphant self-expression. Septimus, however, is incapable of noticing these daily miracles. Psychologically shattered by the inhumanity witnessed during the war and caught in a past which he has been unable to leave, Septimus sees his only salvation in some decisive revelation. This awakening never arrives; Septimus cannot make himself understood to the world around him, the same world that is so intent upon ignoring what a broken man has to say. Septimus' world remains dark, and he is unable to truly live in the present or hope for any future. Rather than struggle in a world without light, without passion, without life, Septimus commits suicide.

Although he throws himself to his own death, Septimus Smith is not a failure. Like Septimus, Virginia Woolf lived through the Great War and had seen scientific ideas turn the world upside-down, and was therefore well-aware of the impact of a broken world, devoid of any sense of completeness, upon the human psyche. She too struggled to navigate the sea of her own despair. Yet Woolf was able to see something which Septimus could not, pearls waiting to be found in the depths of life's tumultuous waters. Through Septimus, Woolf constructs grief embodied. Woolf inquires into what it means to try and fail to grasp these moments of light, and what happens when these moments are simply no longer enough. When achieved, triumph makes the struggle worthwhile. Woolf not only explored but also experienced both these moments of triumph and failure. Although Virginia Woolf led a life brilliantly illuminated by her

own accomplishments, the struggle to notice the daily miracles became too much one evening and she drowned in the depths of her own despair.

Even though she is gone, the passion with which Virginia Woolf wrote and the intimate understanding with which she constructed her characters endures. In the struggles of Septimus Smith and in the triumph of Lily Briscoe, Woolf remains. Her strong voice is colored by the fragmentation of an era forced to face the inhumanities of man and the overthrow of deeply held notions of empirical truth in science. By exploring these facets of modernity, one can better understand the challenges facing individuals in their own battles with self-expression and the implications of their success or failure. The calamity of the Great War rippled out from the battlefields and washed ashore on the home-front. This chaos was internalized by Virginia Woolf and can consequently be found in her post-war novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

From 1914 to 1918, Europe found itself at the center of an unprecedented war. Before the advent of the Second World War, the First World War was commonly referred to as ‘the Great War’ and ‘the War to end all Wars.’ Disaster and destruction worked their way through the trenches and across no-man’s land, and into homes and towns to become commonplace amongst civilians. By the end of the Great War, more than nine million men in the armed forces had been killed in action while more than five million civilians had perished due to bombardment, hunger, disease, and occupation (Gilbert, xv). Virginia Woolf — a writer, intellectual, and civilian — was very attuned to the horrors of the war waging its way across the globe and into lives. Some of Woolf’s most critically acclaimed work was published and praised during this four-year term of horror and the ensuing decade of unease. Her sensitivity to suffering and her understanding of adversity granted Woolf the ability to put a human face on inconceivable tragedy.

As the dust began to settle on war-torn nations, people began to fully comprehend to what destructive end knowledge could carry civilization. Francis March, in his 1918 *History of the World War*, writes “never since the dawn of time had there been such a perversion of knowledge to criminal purposes; never had science contributed such a deadly toll to the fanatic and criminal intentions of a war-crazed class” (217). Trench warfare was quite possibly one of the most inhumane tactical advancements characteristic of the Great War. Young men, deprived of food and proper clothing and fighting hand to hand in the cold, wet, blood-soaked trenches, were just another weapon, just another cog in the machine of war, easily molded and easily replaced. While the fighting in the muddy trenches only took place abroad, the fighting in the sky brought war back to the home front. Airplane bombing visited death and destruction upon the civilian population, reminding everyone that no one is immune from war.

After four years of hell, the harsh staccato of gunshots gave way to a quiet throbbing pain. A band-aid, in the form of Armistice Day (11 November 1918), was placed over the nation’s gaping wound of loss. “Shrieks of whistles, the booming of a cannon, and the clangor of bells” which awoke “millions of sleeping persons, many of whom trooped into the streets to mingle their rejoicing with those of their neighbors” (March, 660) masked the chaos and pain of the postwar world. Able to strip away the shallow facade of celebration, however, the soldiers returning home from war felt the lack of meaning in the high-carnival.

As the curtain closed on a bloody struggle for survival, it opened onto a new struggle facing both the nation as a whole and the survivors of the Great War. The burdens of peace were far greater than the frivolities of Armistice Day would suggest. For many of the young men returning home from war, both victor and vanquished, “the pain and bereavement of the war

could never be entirely, and for millions never at all, assuaged by medical or social amelioration” (Gilbert, 505). General Freyburg wrote on 18 November 1918, “I don’t know if I am glad or sorry to be alive. I only know that it wasn’t my fault that I am alive” (qtd. in Gilbert, 505). Many men would never quite recover from the mental anguish of their experience; some would find just as much anguish in the forgetfulness of others. Throughout the 1920s, memorial tributes and “unveilings continued throughout England . . . almost without reference to survivors of trench warfare, much less survivors of the war from the streets” (Levenback, 39). The human reminders and remainders of the war were left shattered, ignored, and swept unceremoniously to the side.

The Great War has indeed gone down in history books as one of the bloodiest and most destructive wars of mankind. The unfathomable nature of the war resonated just as heavily among the intellectuals of Britain as it did for the men fighting hand to hand in the trenches. Among these intellectuals, horrified by the suffering caused by the Great War, were Virginia Woolf, her husband Leonard Woolf, and their close circle of friends, all of whom were pacifists. Woolf found it hard not only to understand the true horrors of the Great War that was swallowing up bright, young, promising men from all over the world, but also to conceptualize why such a horror would occur and how man could commit such atrocities upon his fellow man. Through her writings we get a taste of the confusion and disbelief with which Woolf approached the idea of nine-million young men being sent to slaughter for their country.

In her 1916 essay, “Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth,” Virginia Woolf conceptualized the war abroad as it would have been understood by many on the home front. Woolf illustrated just how distanced many civilians were from the war, not only physically but

also mentally, while she simultaneously examined how these same civilians would have internalized and understood the war in their own imagery. Rather than the sound of guns being likened to “the hammer stroke of fate” or “the pulse of Destiny,” Woolf wrote that the guns sounded like “the beating of gigantic carpets by gigantic women, at a distance” (40). The incredible size of the source of the constant noise, accompanying all walks at all times, was marginally undercut by the distance separating the source and the recipient of the sinister sound. The war as received on the home front was understood to be no less of a danger than it was abroad; however, the war had to be re-imagined in a way that made sense for people who had never seen the true workings of war. Two years after “Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth” was published, Virginia Woolf published another war essay, “War in the Village.” In this 1918 essay, Woolf wrote of the understanding a woman living in a rural village would have had of the war to which her husband had been sent:

By November, to her inexpressible bewilderment, her own house and happiness are at the mercy of a force so remote that, though it has power to take her husband from her, she can hardly figure to herself what the nature of it is. (292)

The war was unfathomable to so many; at the height of the war, in September 1917, Virginia Woolf posed the question, a question surely echoed in many households in respect to the war: “What’s it *for*?” (*Diary I*, 52). Because people hardly knew what they were fighting for, the Great War became even more dismal and the cost in human life was exponentially exacerbated.

From her civilian position, Virginia Woolf was forced to examine not only the unfathomable horror of the ‘war to end all wars,’ and the incomprehensible atrocities man committed against man, but also the tactical advancements that made it feasible. To those who waited anxiously on the home front for either news or battle to make its way overseas, incredible

advances in technology solely for the purpose of destruction would have been baffling. Many villagers and city dwellers alike were forced to gather their conceptions not only from what they heard but also from the disruptions that took place in their everyday routines. In “Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth,” Woolf wrote how the war had manifest itself as fear and confusion in the minds of those on the home front. In this essay Woolf describes how a young farm-girl’s daily routine has been changed by the war:

When she came to hatch out her eggs, she will tell you, only five of the dozen had live chicks in them, and the rest were addled. This she attributes unhesitatingly to vibrations in the earth caused by the shock of the great guns in Flanders. If you express a doubt she will overwhelm you with evidence from all the country round. But no one here limits the action of the guns to the addling of a few hen’s eggs; the very sun in the sky, they assert, has been somehow deranged in his mechanism by our thunder on earth. (41)

By describing the changes in this one rural-dwelling girl’s life, Woolf is writing a more general commentary on how every daily routine, and consequently everyone’s life, had been altered in some way by the war. The war had undeniable far-reaching effects that altered ways of life across the nation. Although the guns were out of sight much of the time, they might as well have been in every backyard. The general destruction of the war impressed upon civilian victims just how disordered the war of man upon man was, how it had seemingly become far greater and far more terrible than any force of nature. Even the sun quaked in the light and heat emanating from explosives and flame-throwers.

Virginia Woolf wrote not only of the general experiences of civilians across the nation but also of her own experiences with the war. Woolf’s personal writings, her letters and her diary (Volume I) are littered with accounts of bombings on the home front and the necessity to take shelter from the war that was brought into civilian homes. On 20 October 1917, Woolf made an entry in her diary the morning after German airships had dropped bombs at random on Piccadilly

Circus. She wrote that luckily one of her acquaintances, Alix, “didn’t presumably wander in Piccadilly all night, or the great bomb which ploughed up the pavement opposite Swan & Edgar’s might have dug her grave” (*Diary I*, 63). Woolf was aware of the disaster that loomed ahead as silently as the Zeppelins that often hovered unseen over the city of London.¹

Throughout her diary, Woolf wrote of multiple instances in which she, Leonard, and their servants had to bunker down in the basement to protect themselves from air raids. In an effort to comfort one another, they communicated: “Lottie having said she felt bad, passed on to a general rattle of jokes & comments which almost silenced the guns. . . . In fact, one talks through the noise” (*Diary I*, 85). Together, they found solace in the mere human voice. Such community however was continuously undercut by danger rearing its ugly head. As Woolf noted, “guns at one point so loud that the whistle of the shell going up followed the explosion. One window did, I think, rattle” (*Diary I*, 85). The idea of the home as a safe-haven was swiftly shot down by the explosions shaking the house, proving that every construction of man, and every man, could indeed be torn down by more advanced innovations.

Although the war reaching to the home front was more of a mainstay in her life, the war abroad was not entirely unknown to Virginia Woolf; she had a few acquaintances who gave her an insight into the war overseas. She wrote in her diary entry in February 1915 of men who

¹ Virginia Woolf wrote about a Zeppelin raid the same night as the bombing of Piccadilly Circus. She wrote simply, “It turns out that a Zeppelin came over, hovered unseen for an hour or two & left” (*Diary I*, 63). In October 1917, the same month during which the preceding episode was written, the German military were vehement in their efforts to frighten and demoralize the city of London. ‘The Feilding Star’ published a news article on 31 October 1917 concerning “The Silent Raid” conducted on 20 October 1917 (the same Zeppelin raid about which Woolf wrote). The article calls for the Government to announce, without further delay, the constitution of the Air Ministry. Virginia Woolf was not alone in her surprise over the Zeppelin raid; the newspaper wrote the following: “A remarkable feature is that numerous people in the suburbs knew nothing of the raid till they passed a street in London where a bomb had fallen. Nobody heard the engines of the Zeppelin and the fall of the bombs caused the utmost surprise. There is much criticism at the silence of the aircraft guns” (4).

despair of going to the front, weigh with her their possibilities of making it out alive, and contemplate the life they will lead after the war:

Cecil has a machine gun, which may lead to his going, &, if so, almost certainly to his being killed. Poor Philip was a good deal agitated, I thought, with his prospects. What is he to do after the war is over? He thinks he must emigrate. (*Diary I*, 34)

Woolf had no doubt of Cecil's imminent demise if he were to go to the front lines, a sentiment which enforces the idea that the war simply swallowed up men by the thousands. On the other hand, Philip's anxiety demonstrates how little opportunity awaited those who managed to survive the war. Men were left physically, financially, emotionally, and mentally damaged. Soldiers were faced with the incredible challenge of assimilating themselves back into the society that sacrificed and spurned them. Nearing the end of the Great War in May 1918, Virginia Woolf contemplated the idea of the "war hero." She wrote of her acquaintance, T.A. Hodson, who had become a soldier; Hodson "didn't like the war, but joined "as a duty" (*Diary I*, 147). Woolf continued to note that "there was no heroism in this: mere 'such is life'" (*Diary I*, 147). Such is life: to be shipped to a slaughterhouse, to be consigned to fight, and to risk everything for a cause in which one does not believe. Woolf wrote that Hodson was merely "a man of average gifts" and was "thus a sample of what the world does to human beings" (*Diary I*, 147). In a world in which spring means both the daffodils and the guns were out, in a world in which men would worship a tank "like the hum of bees round some first blossom," Woolf was left to contemplate not only what the world has done to humanity but also "what man has made of man"² (*Diary I*, 131).

² Woolf writes in her diary that as she was boarding the Underground to travel to Asheham, she began to reminisce on Wordsworth's 'Lines written in Early Spring, 1798.' Especially poignant and relevant to the time in which Woolf was reflecting upon the poem, the last lines quoted above stayed with her. Right after she poses the question herself, what indeed has man made of man, Woolf remarks in her diary that she repudiated the "importance of what was being done" and that there was even an "odd pallor in those particular days of sunshine" (*Diary I*, 131).

Just as explosively as the Great War burst onto the scene, so subtly yet just as swiftly did it begin to fade from the consciousness of civilians. Even before the war officially ended, Woolf predicted the public's move to forget the past four hellish years. In October 1918, she wrote that she and her acquaintance, Mrs. H. Ward, talked of the postwar world, "how the sausage balloons will be hauled down, & gold coins dribble in; & how people will soon forget all about the war & the fruits of our victory will grow as dusty as ornaments under glass cases in lodging house drawing rooms" (*Diary I*, 211). About a month later, Woolf described Armistice Day as she saw it from her bedroom window. In both her diary and her letters she noted that there were "neither bells nor flags, but the wailing of sirens and intermittent guns" (*Diary I*, 227) and the air was tainted with "an atmosphere of the death bed" (*Letters II*, 290). Indeed, while a few people congregated to gaze out of the safety of their own homes, many people went on with their work as if nothing extraordinary had happened. One of the only positives of the war, the British Empire coming together with a universal common bond, dissolved as Britain once more became "a nation of individuals" (*Diary I*, 217). As 1918 ended, leaving a bitter taste in Britain's mouth, the start of a new year prompted Woolf to contemplate how anyone could now believe in "any good from war, or any ideal, or anything . . . undertaken by bodies of human beings in concert" (*Diary I*, 229). The world had changed; morality, honor, and the illusion of victory died right alongside the men in the trenches.

Four years of men and women sacrificing and being sacrificed culminated in a hollow victory. Because of her keen sensitivity to war, Woolf was able to unmask the medals that the government was bestowing upon the slumping shoulders of the men whom they had sent to slaughter. She stripped away the facade of honor, uncovering a senseless war, and a broken

nation. Within less than a year, the war had convinced Woolf that the “human race had no character at all — sought for nothing, believed in nothing, & fought only from a dreary sense of duty” (*Diary I*, 19). Woolf saw that, deprived of their humanity, men put their lives on the line only out of obligation. She came to realize that there was very little to believe in, very little that seemed as if it could last, as if it could withstand the bombardment of brutality. The shattered homes and broken bodies that she saw scattered about London only testified to the sad nature of war, reminding her and other survivors of the painful struggles that they were all left to face.

These victims of violence preyed upon Woolf’s artistic sensibilities, forcing her to turn to her pen to try to unscramble her own torturous thoughts. She began to see that the struggle to express the self was just the micro manifestation of the greatest wars that men fight against men. For Woolf, the failure to express the chaos of the human mind would result in a perpetual replay of agonizing thoughts as she realized her own isolation from the world that would never fully understand her. Woolf saw the human mind as a war-zone, with individuals fighting to form and express their own thoughts in a way that others could understand. Woolf wrote of these everyday struggles for triumph, using the war language that colored an entire culture. To Woolf, what she wanted to express often seemed to be completely inexpressible. In a culture in which war seemed truly unwinnable, the battlefield of the human mind seemed to be a place in which failure was a mainstay.

Virginia Woolf wrote of these struggles to successfully express the self in her novels at the same time that she too found herself grappling with trying to write her chaotic thoughts into a harmonious symphony. She approached her personal challenges with the same sense of determination and duty with which young men went off to the battlefields. Much of her

inspiration was taken from her experiences that she consequently reworked and wrote through her own provocative perspective: “I keep thinking of different ways to manage my scenes, conceiving endless possibilities; seeing life, as I walk about the streets, an immense opaque block of material to be conveyed into its equivalent of language” (*Diary I*, 214). The difficulties with which she struggled in writing stemmed from the incredible challenge of conceptualizing something as esoteric and multi-faceted as the human experience. In a culture crippled from violence, the value of and reason for existence were especially abstruse. She wrote often in her diary about her impending anxiety with writing after the initial thrill of the idea for a new novel gave way to the difficulty of realizing her own vision:

The creative power which bubbles so pleasantly on beginning a new book quiets down after a time, & one goes on more steadily. Doubts creep in. Then one becomes resigned. Determination not to give in, & the sense of an impending shape keep one at it more than anything. I’m a little anxious. How am I to bring off this conception? Directly one gets to work one is like a person walking, who has seen the country stretching out before. I want to write nothing in this book that I don’t enjoy writing. Yet writing is always difficult. (*Diary II*, 36)³

Virginia Woolf was not intimidated by the lack of options for her writing, but rather by the plethora of possibilities. Although she had less immediately at stake if she were to fail in her attempts to adequately express herself, the turmoil of wading through complete chaos in pursuit of some abstract victory was felt by both Woolf and the young men fighting their own battles abroad. Instead of the bodily destruction that waited to pounce upon the soldiers pursuing their goal, mental destruction loomed threateningly over Woolf.

The prospect of mental destruction came to Virginia Woolf in the form of manic-depression, an illness that sapped both her physical and mental strength. In *Beginning Again*, an

³ This diary entry was dated to May 1920, a month when Virginia Woolf would have been working on her novel *Jacob’s Room*. Her sentiments of anxiety and hesitation with her writing persisted through her work on *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

autobiography of the years 1911 to 1918, Leonard Woolf recounts an observation he made of Virginia:

When Virginia was quite well, she would discuss her illness; she would recognize that she had been mad, and that she had had delusions, heard voices which did not exist, lived for weeks or months in a nightmare world of frenzy, despair, violence. When she was like that, she was obviously well and sane. (79)

When she was entrenched in her illness, Virginia Woolf's mind was as terrifying as a war-zone. Leonard's writing gives us glimpses of what it is like to be on the outside, looking into mental illness; Virginia Woolf on the other hand writes in her diary what it is like to be afflicted with the dreadful disease. In July 1926, Woolf describes "a whole nervous breakdown in miniature" in a note titled "My own brain."

Sank into a chair, could scarcely rise; everything insipid; tasteless, colourless. . . . Wednesday — only wish to be alone in the open air. Air delicious — avoided speech; could not read. Thought of my own power of writing with veneration, as of something incredible, belonging to someone else; never again to be enjoyed by me. Mind a blank. . . . No pleasure in life whatsoever. . . . Character & idiosyncrasy as Virginia Woolf completely sunk out. . . . Difficulty in thinking what to say. (*Diary* III, 103)

Able to disassociate her sane being from her moments of sickness, Woolf could reflect just what was at stake if she lost her battles with her illness. She found herself fighting the chaos of her mind, periodically losing herself under the waves of her mental turmoil.

Just as with any war, Woolf's war of finding her sanity and expressing herself had high stakes. Just like the shell-shocked soldiers, carrying the war home in their minds, Woolf's war against mental instability was a life-long one. She did manage, however, to find more than a few instances of triumph through self-expression. Virginia Woolf found both solace and salvation in writing. Her pen was the weapon with which she combated the waves of depression that often threatened to drag her under. In one of her diary entries, dated September 1921, she wrote of her

love of writing and its ability to heal: “Much more important (to me) than anything else, was my recovery of the pen; & thus the hidden stream was given exit, & I felt reborn” (*Diary II*, 134).

Writing was Woolf’s release from being trapped in the trenches of her own mind. The accumulation of torturous thoughts, while a seemingly insurmountable barrier barricading Woolf away from normality, could be funneled through her pen and written out of the war zone of her mind.

Virginia Woolf was plagued by the incredible current of tumultuous thought building up in her consciousness. The chaos of the post-war culture made the release of this current of thought all the more critical. In 1926, reflecting back upon the worth of the war, Woolf came to the conclusion that “the war is now barren sand after all. But one never knows: & waiting about, writing serves to liberate the mind from the fret & itch of these innumerable details” (*Diary III*, 83). Woolf found writing to be a cathartic release from the chaotic battle of thoughts in her head, the thoughts that were only magnified by the uneasy times that Britain was facing as a fractured nation. Sometimes though, the world outside her room was so chaotic that she compared writing a novel in the heart of London to “nailing a flag to the top of a mast in a raging gale” (*Letters III*, 244). Woolf’s acute awareness of the world outside her window gave her both fodder for great literary success and an anarchic lens through which to view human experience.

Even after the war had officially been ended, the aftermath remained and had a continued impact on the culture of the British Empire. While mankind’s actions were becoming more unfathomable, so too was the world of science. Around the same time that Virginia Woolf was working on *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, discoveries in science that “highlighted the gulf between the world of physics and the world of sense” were becoming more popularized and

therefore more accessible to the general population (Kent, 568). As an intellectual, Woolf was well-informed in many different spheres of knowledge and, even though she did not read his work, she read about Einstein's theories in comprehensible science journals that had been disseminated to the public. Her circle of close friends were also aware of advances in science, and in the 1920s, Woolf and her literary circle would discuss the work that Einstein conducted.

Virginia Woolf and the other members of her literary circle did not delve too deeply into the specific mechanics of Einstein's *Special Theory of Relativity*. They did understand, however, that it "established that time was not absolute but flowed at different rates for different observers moving at different speeds relative to one another" (Briggs, 134). As Candice Kent writes in her essay, "How Does the Mind Move to Einstein's Physics?; Science in the Writings of Virginia Woolf and Mary Butts," this new exploration into the world of physics "revealed a world stochastic rather than teleological, in which the classical continuum is replaced by discontinuities" (568). These advances in research placed emphasis on the unpredictable nature of the universe, replacing ideas that natural phenomena, such as time, are the evidence of a grand design. Furthermore, the idea of a universal and immutable space and time yielded to theoretical demands that the notion of an absolute "now" be abandoned (Kent, 568). The idea of the absolute now was replaced by the idea that at any point in time we are constituting our present by our past experiences and thoughts for the future. According to Karen Levenback, in her book *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*, "the present includes both the past and the future" and this internal time-consciousness, our internal clock, is then constituted by an individual's "personal sense of the time past, time present, and time future" (50). The nature of man and now the nature of space and time had been proved to be without any ultimate design. As well as being thrown

into the disarray of a culture permanently changed by the war, the individual was also newly understood as being embedded within the constant flux of space time.

Albert Einstein was only one of the many physicists working with changing conceptions of time; many scientists continued and built upon the work he began with his *Special Theory of Relativity*. James Jeans was another physicist who played with the idea of the absolute now merely being an illusion. In reference to the fluidity of time, Jeans elucidates that:

The fundamental laws of nature, in so far as we are not present acquainted with them, give no reason why time should flow steadily on: they are equally prepared to consider the possibility of time standing still or flowing backwards. The steady onward flow of time, which is the essence of the cause-effect relation, is something which we superpose on to ascertain laws of nature out of our own experience. (qtd. in Kent, 570)

Therefore, both the idea of a universal space and time experienced similarly by all human beings and the concept of time as following a solely unilinear trajectory were proven to be mere illusions.

Virginia Woolf was just one of the many Modernist artists who broke from traditional techniques of expression which had been based upon a static culture. These innovations in art paralleled the advancements in science that had created a theory of discontinuous existence. Modern art served for many as a way to understand the various evolving facets of the culture in which they were immersed. According to Kent, “the discontinuities introduced by the quantum theory required revision of the physical concepts in order to meet them” (527). Not only did people have to change their conception of continuity in existence, but they also had to adapt the mediums through which people came to their own understandings of an uncertain world. This generation of artists, writers, and thinkers was often referred to by Woolf as the orphaned generation, a generation who saw civilization undercut by the horrors of war and whose long-

standing beliefs were being challenged by scientific advancements. In a letter to her fellow writer, Gerald Brenan, Woolf lamented that she and her fellow orphans were doomed to failure:

This generation must break its neck in order that the next may have smooth going. For I agree with you that nothing is going to be achieved by us. Fragments — paragraphs — a page perhaps: but no more. (*Letters II*, 598)

Virginia Woolf recognized the greater difficulty of successfully and completely expressing the self in such a tumultuous time. Woolf felt the struggle of writing a cohesive and meaningful work of literature in a world where time had become disjointed and the illusion of civilization had been challenged by war.

Modernist artists, while without footing, were not completely without hope. The adaptability of the human spirit, the same adaptability that Woolf hoped she would have if her literature were to be deemed a failure, propelled man to persevere. Art began to evolve to reflect shifts in culture. Briggs writes that the fragmented nature of Modernist writing was the result of the writer only being able to see in glimpses rather than seeing the wholeness that the high Victorians had reached for (128). In a letter composed on Christmas Day 1922 to Gerald Brenan, Woolf bemoans the difficulty in writing that her generation is left to face:

I think I mean that beauty, which you say I sometimes achieve, is only got by the failure to get it; . . . by facing what must be humiliation — the things one can't do — To aim at beauty deliberately, without this apparently insensate struggle, would result, I think, in little daisies and forget-me-nots . . . But I agree that one must (we, in our generation must) renounce finally the achievement of the greater beauty: the beauty which comes from completeness. (*Letters II*, 599)

In a world which had cracks branching along the foundation, artists could not expect their own artwork to be anything but fragmented. Woolf realized that the small daisies and dainty flowers of art have no place in a world which has seen true horror and has been stripped of such

delicacies. In the same letter however, Woolf thought again about the role of artists and how they may have been the only dreamers and hoppers left in a disenchanted world:

Only now that I have written this, I doubt its truth. Are we not always hoping? and though we fail every time, surely we do not fail so completely as we should have failed if we were not in the beginning, prepared to attack the whole. One must renounce, when the book is finished; but not before it is begun. (*Letters II*, 599-96)

Woolf recognized that while triumph is never guaranteed, if one does not try one will certainly fail. Many people in the post-war world lost the ability to hope while many others grappled to find it. Virginia Woolf was able to hope while not being dragged into a delusion, a delusion many others would have found as their only solace. Briggs writes that for Woolf, “a major shift in artistic taste . . . could only flow from a deeper and more fundamental alteration in the nature of society” (130). Woolf realized that past art could no longer satisfy the need for beauty in the present culture. Modernist artists were aware of their need to create beauty while simultaneously keeping themselves grounded in the reality of a fractured world. Woolf had very few predecessors upon whom she could base a new writing style; therefore, she made her own.

Virginia Woolf was able to build her changing understanding of relativity and time into her novels through her innovative writing techniques. According to Louise Westling, Woolf’s experiments with point of view and narrative structure “absorb the epistemological lessons of relativity, wave theory, and the interdependency of observer and phenomena observed from quantum physics into a new fictional ontology” (856). Woolf was able to internalize these shifts in culture and a general alienation from long-held notions of the permanence of patterns of time. She then explored her own understanding of the nature of being through her works of fiction, especially through her use of multiple perspectives within the novel. These scraps and fragments of consciousness and perspective “are part of a whole reality, no matter how disjointed,

contradictory, or chaotic they may appear from particular vantage points” (Westling, 686).

Virginia Woolf found a way to encompass different shards of thought into a complete whole, explorative of separate understandings and conceptions of one singular subject. Woolf explored her own impressions through her developing stream-of-consciousness techniques and play on multiple perspectives. According to Gillian Beer, Woolf’s emphasis on rhythm rather than plot, and her stream-of-consciousness technique both serve to “express the wave-like fluidity of a newly imagined universe” (121). Therefore, while the understood universe was changing, so too were the individuals completely at the mercy of the ebb and flow of culture, time, and space.

Virginia Woolf continued to relate her understanding of scientific advancements to her personal experiences while simultaneously writing these understandings into two of her most critically acclaimed novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf’s use of multiple perspectives within one novel developed in light of some of Einstein’s most notable discoveries. As Julia Briggs writes in her essay, “‘This Moment I Stand On’: Virginia Woolf and the Spaces in Time”, “the idea that time is experienced differently by different individuals, and that each of us has a series of different internal clocks measuring different times plays upon Einstein’s *Special Theory of Relativity*” (134). Virginia Woolf explored how our multiple internal clocks and conceptions of the passage of time are inextricably linked with our multiple selves, which are a result of our own perceptions and others perceptions of us. Woolf explored the flow of time in the techniques of narration that she developed in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. In these two novels, Woolf replaced “the single fixed point of view that dominated conventional narratives with spatially differentiated points of view, existing simultaneously” (Kent, 569). She also experimented with “points of view outside of ordinary human awareness” and therefore

challenged “positivistic assumptions of permanence, progress, and transcendence” (Westling, 856). Through her writing techniques playing with points of view, Woolf explored and crushed the assertion that every rationally justifiable pronouncement could be verified scientifically or logically. She called into question the beliefs that people have an enduring impact on others and that mankind is advancing perpetually. In a world in which an understanding of the nature of time was drastically changing, the importance of mankind was dwarfed. All that remains of man are his fleeting and small, self-defined victories. These victories suffice only to make the individual feel accomplished in some way, but they cannot ensure any form of permanence.

While Virginia Woolf combines a variety of internal clocks and ranging perspectives in her fiction, she still acknowledges the unpredictable nature of human existence. In both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the fluidity of time still falls prey to harsh moments of rupture. Like many Modernist writers, Woolf regarded time as circular.⁴ Woolf’s exploration of time as circular also takes into account the possibility of circularity being broken due to a missing link in the form of a sound consciousness. As Gillian Beer has noted, Einstein’s theory points out that “this space and this time are still entirely embedded in the ego” (117). A broken ego, a shattered state of mental existence, would therefore fragment an individual’s sense of the circularity, and consequent continuity, of time. In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf explored this conceptualization of space time and demonstrated that without the ability to project the self into the future, the present and the past cannot be reconciled.

⁴ In her article, “‘This Moment I stand On’: Virginia Woolf and the Spaces in Time”, Julia Briggs writes: “Modernist time . . . is commonly regarded as circular, from Bergson’s ‘duree’ (time as a continuous process of ‘becoming’), through Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence, Yeats’s spiraling and modal gyres, James Joyce’s Victorian cycles, and even T.S. Eliot’s sense of time as awaiting Christian redemption” (137).

In a world recovering from the trauma of the Great War and in which long-held conceptions were being shattered, many people struggled to understand what was permanent, what was real. People were left wondering how they could navigate the world around them, the world in which they had ceased to be of any importance. Through the innovative techniques with which they supplemented their own mediums of art, many Modernist artists, including Virginia Woolf, were able to create something both tragic and beautiful, both fragmented and whole. These men and women had their fingers on the pulse of humanity; their compositions were an imitation of reality, a reality in which civilization was undercut by the horrors of war, space time and humanity had no grand design, and the individual had no purpose. Woolf suffered not only from the chaos into which the world was seemingly dissolving, but also the turmoil of her own mind. Oftentimes, there was no escape from the disarray of the culture which had created her own orphaned generation; her own mind had ceased to offer any protection from the pandemonium of the world outside her windows. To be able to cope with her changing understandings of the nature of mankind, relativity, and time, Woolf worked to develop her own outlet for self-expression and a more personal definition of success. The mere fact that such innovations could come out of chaos stood as a testament to the ability of man to persist, to row harder against the currents of despair that threaten to sink all of our ships.

Jacob's Room was the first of Virginia Woolf's novels to engage with completely new techniques in her writing⁵. By January 1920, just a little over a year after the end of the Great War, Woolf mused in her diary that she had just that afternoon "arrived at some idea of a new

⁵ *Jacob's Room* is often described as being Virginia Woolf's "first truly experimental novel" (*Letters* II, 409). In a letter to C. P. Sanger, a fellow literary critic, Virginia Woolf wrote how anxious she was about the experimental aspect of *Jacob's Room*: "You are quite right, I am sure, in having grave doubts about the form of *Jacob's Room*. So have I. . . I feel quite at sea as to the success or failure of the whole" (*Letters* II, 578). Even in the face of fear, Woolf felt a growing satisfaction with her experimental techniques as she went on to write that "There's no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice" (*Diary* II, 186).

form for a new novel” (II, 13). She wrote that her approach “will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen” (*Diary II*, 14). The nature of humanity and the world in which we are all immersed had been proven to be without any divine scheme, any structure; Woolf wanted to do with her work what mankind had done with their own world. She wanted to take away the foundations and write only flashes of human experience, told through multiple perspectives and her new stream-of-consciousness technique, both of which she developed in an effort to cope with the confusion in her mind.

Although the writing process was rewarding and cathartic, it was also mentally and emotionally exhausting. Utterly drained, Woolf feared that the completion of her novel, and therefore a success in self-expression, was indeed unattainable: “I’m a failure as a writer. I’m out of fashion; old; shan’t do any better; have no head piece” (*Diary II*, 106). Looming threateningly ahead was self-doubt, the adversary which Woolf had to defeat before it could destroy her career and demolish her ability to express herself. Along with her fear of failure, Woolf also felt an incredible hope for grand accomplishment: “Nature obligingly supplies me with the illusion that I am about to write something good” (*Diary II*, 199). Just as the myth of a meaningful victory thrust men back to the trenches, Virginia Woolf’s hope for literary success thrust her back into her struggle with self-expression. To be deluded allows an individual to believe in something worth fighting for, whether that battle is between brain and pen or between human beings.

Virginia Woolf continued to struggle with both her hopes for and her fears about *Jacob’s Room* until October 1922, when the novel was published to mixed reviews. While *Jacob’s Room* opened the door of high Modernism to Virginia Woolf, it was not awarded the critical praise

afforded to her next two novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. *Jacob's Room* was not a failure however; rather, the novel was an important step that Woolf took towards realizing her own vision and version of triumph. Thomas Caramagno, author of *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness*, argues in his analysis of *Jacob's Room* that “the novel tells a story that falls apart” (185). Caramagno goes on to suggest that:

The Jacob we seek exists somewhere between the text and the reader. . . . That neither Jacob nor the reader achieves a moment of being does not make this an unsuccessful novel. It is, rather, an appropriate precursor to *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, both of which create this space between objectivity and subjectivity, but, in addition, fill the void. (208)

Virginia Woolf loosed her own mental anarchy upon her writing in *Jacob's Room*, and, without having fully found balance in her attempts at self-expression, the center could not hold. With *Jacob's Room*, Virginia Woolf realized that through her own innovative writing techniques she could begin to channel the chaos from her mind, into her pen, and onto paper.

Mrs. Dalloway and *To the Lighthouse*, published in 1925 and 1927 respectively, continued Woolf's experiments with writing techniques and her interest in the lasting effects of the Great War, both of which she had initially addressed in *Jacob's Room*. Simultaneously, Virginia Woolf also incorporated into these two novels the changing face of science that proved that humanity was caught in an unpredictable flux of space time. While *To the Lighthouse* is regarded by many to be Virginia Woolf's magnum opus, both this novel and *Mrs. Dalloway* are the culmination of Woolf's years of struggle with her ability to voice herself through the chaos of her own mind. She addressed what it means to successfully express the self and therefore be understood by others, and whether one can even do so in a world broken by war and altered by science.

In order to address these questions of self-expression in her novels, Virginia Woolf continued to hone the stream-of-consciousness technique that she had discovered with *Jacob's Room*. In her diary, Woolf wrote in November 1923: "It took me a year's groping to discover what I call my tunneling process. . . . this is my prime discovery so far" (*Diary II*, 272)⁶.

Regarding her stream-of-consciousness technique in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf regarded the novel to be the "greatest stretch" that she had "put her method to," and that "it holds" (*Diary III*, 109).

With her work on *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf had reached the mark of success that she had set for herself.

While she developed her stream-of-consciousness technique in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf also developed her characters with a multi-faceted existence of their own. Woolf recognized that her characters were coming to life in a world in which the importance of human existence was seemingly dwarfed by the incredible horrors of a world war, and the autonomy of the individual, trapped in the unpredictable flux of space time, was called into question. Woolf rendered her characters through a shifting and impersonal narration that "impartially verbalizes the intimate thoughts of various characters" (Caramagno, 210). Woolf examined the spectrum of perceptions that constitute one state of being, and therefore she presented an individual both constructed and fragmented by his or her own surroundings. Virginia Woolf's changing perspective of space and time and how they relate to one another had an impact on how she created the spatial layout of the novel and how the characters move through and relate to both space and time.

⁶ Understandably, Virginia Woolf initially referred to her stream-of-consciousness technique as her "tunneling process." She would siphon off the tumultuous thoughts in her mind and tunnel it into her original narrative technique.

Even after she finished writing *Mrs. Dalloway* and felt that it her best work to date, she undercut her own pleasure by convincing herself that all the critics would find it utterly fragmented and discordant⁷. By the time she had written *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf felt that “as far as I know, as a writer I am only now writing out my mind” (*Diary III*, 67). *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* demonstrated that even fragments of consciousness and brief glimpses of human existence can be pieced together within one literary work to produce something groundbreaking. Virginia Woolf proved that there was still beauty and wonder in the world as well as the ability for the individual to adequately express self.

While *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse* are all noteworthy in their own respects, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* were the two novels in which Virginia Woolf developed her techniques most drastically. These two novels not only helped to solidify Virginia Woolf as one of the great Modernist writers, but they also helped her to realize her own greatness. Woolf had already cemented her reputation in the literary world as an outstanding essayist and novelist; with *Mrs. Dalloway* she became an exemplary figure of the Modernist movement.

Published in May 1925, *Mrs. Dalloway* was the end result of Virginia Woolf’s work on what was initially just going to be a short story. Soon, Woolf’s ideas for her story grew out of the confines of a short story and into a one of a kind novel. Woolf wrote in her diary that “Mrs. Dalloway has branched into a book; & I adumbrate here a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side” (*Diary II*, 207). With two states of consciousness

⁷ Upon completion of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf began an interesting interplay between her hope for victory and her fear of failure: “One feels about in a state of misery — indeed I made up my mind one night to abandon the book — & then one touches the hidden spring. . . . I’ve not re-read my great discovery, & it may be nothing important whatsoever. Never mind. I own I have my hopes for this book” (*Diary II*, 272).

intertwining and complementing one another so closely throughout the novel, Woolf writes separate perspectives that give different interpretations of the human experience. Woolf not only addresses contrasting perceptions of the world around us and the culture in which we are steeped, but she also creates her characters through both their own perceptions and others' perceptions of them. Through the implementation of this technique, Woolf enforces the idea that we are all multi-faceted creations of our surroundings and the people who drift in and out of our lives.

The two main characters of the novel, Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway, are interdependent upon one another. Initially however, the novel was going to be centered solely on Clarissa Dalloway, who was to commit suicide at her own party (Caramagno, 211). Unable to reconcile the sane and the insane into one being however, Woolf separated these two states of consciousness into two people that were unknowingly integral to the other's characterization, and consequent existence, in the novel. Woolf writes that Septimus is the most essential part of *Mrs. Dalloway*, and that "Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway should be entirely dependent upon each other" (*Letters III*, 189). Septimus and Clarissa are but passing ships in the night, caught in the flux of their own orientation to both space and time, unable to ever bridge the physical and conceptual distance between them both. While they never meet in physical space, their personal decisions and movements through, or stagnation in, space and time have an unconscious effect upon the other. The destructiveness of the Great War, however, fractures this fluidity, bringing in the idea that the insane can never quite function the same as the sane.

While the reader is able to compare the two characters closely, Septimus and Clarissa never actually come into contact with one another. Politically, emotionally, and socially Clarissa and Septimus are juxtaposed to one another through their separate interpretations of daily

experiences. Clarissa is an older socialite whose day is focused hour by hour on the future, for in her future lies her party, the event to which the entire novel is leading. Clarissa's London is brought vibrantly to life; her space is in the public sphere. In her introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*, Bonnie Kim Scott writes that "there is a sort of mechanical vitality . . . in London's well-run houses, monumental clocks, marching soldiers" (lxiv). Her world operates like a clockwork toy, wound up to function normally.

While Clarissa winds her own clock so that she can be carried forward, Septimus is a broken man, missing the key with which he can wind his own cogs. Shell-shocked and dumped back onto the shores of Britain after the Great War, he is stuck in a constant replay of the horrors of war. His hours do not move him towards anything; rather, he is propelled forward only to his suicide. Septimus' suicide is left unseen by the reader and the delivery of the news in the novel is impersonal. Upon hearing that some young man, broken by the war, threw himself out of the window, Clarissa finds her own affirmation of life. In turn, Clarissa's recognition of the beauty of life imbues Septimus' action with purpose, a meaning that Septimus struggled to find in life. With Clarissa's reality operating mechanically and the absence of any form of reality to Septimus, Woolf illustrates the lasting effects of the war and how these effects are manifest in our understanding of time and space, on both the civilian and the soldier.

When she embarked upon the challenge of writing such an intricate novel as *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf had luckily "entered her most productive and confident phase as a writer" (Scott, xxxvi). She still faced her own personal struggles with keeping at bay the mental illness that hovered about her, waiting to strike her back down into darkness and a sense of defeat. Her victory over her past stints with mental illness brought a level of experience into her

work on *Mrs. Dalloway*, a work concerned with survival and triumph over illness. The passages in which Septimus struggles the most with his mental illness were also the passages that Woolf found most challenging to write. In a letter to her friend, painter and fellow writer Gwen Raverat, Woolf confided the incredible difficulty that she faced in writing the scenes of Septimus' madness that reminded her of her own stint with illness: "I will look at the scenes you mention.⁸ It was a subject that I have kept cooling in my mind until I felt I could touch it without bursting into flame all over. You can't think what a raging furnace it is still to me — madness and doctors and being forced" (*Letters* III, 180). She mastered her fears and apprehensions however and completed the novel, even though the scene of suicide was painted briefly. Virginia Woolf wrote Septimus' death much as Septimus saw life, in fragments and glimpses. This fragmentation was characteristic of much art at the time; therefore, the beauty of art and the world of broken men and broken ideologies were reconciled into something both innovative and tragically elegant.

Regardless of her self-doubt and fear of lapsing back into her mental illness, Woolf saw the promise in her work and the great heights to which it would reach if she could execute her vision: "I want to foresee this book better than the others, & get the utmost out of it. I expect I could have screwed Jacob up tighter if I had foreseen; but I had to make my path as I went" (*Diary* II, 210). Woolf was able to get the most out of her writing partially because of the evolution of what she referred to as her "tunneling process" (*Diary* II, 272). Her developments in writing overcame her struggles with self-doubt and self-deprecation. She began writing for herself rather than for the approval of others. Even when she felt like giving up, when she felt

⁸ Here Woolf is referencing the madness and suicide of Septimus Smith.

about “in a state of misery” and considered abandoning her book, Woolf touched upon “the hidden spring” of her brilliance and passion and was able to persist (*Diary II*, 272).

Although they strike a harmonious balance, Clarissa’s and Septimus’ conceptions of the world around them and of their place in time are completely different. The issue of time and its progression is so important because, as Hans Meyerhoff argues in his book *Time in Literature*, “time . . . is the most characteristic mode of our experience. . . . It applies to the inner world of impressions, emotions, and ideas for which no spatial order can be given” (1). Therefore, the complete lived experience of man is constituted by his understanding of each of his separate experiences, experiences that have left their mark on his awareness of the world around him and of his own self-awareness.

Both Clarissa’s and Septimus’ sense of time passing is further complicated by the existence of two different types of time, the passage of time as dictated by the clock and the passage of time in the human mind. This time in the mind is what Meyerhoff calls our “psychological time,” which is our present experience, our memory of past experience, and our hopes for the future. While our inner self-awareness is constituted by our “psychological time,” the progress of our outside world is constituted by the “public time” (Meyerhoff, 5). While psychological time is subjective, public time is “the objective structure of the time relation in nature,” the measurement of “which we use, with the aid of watches, calendars, etc., in order to synchronize our private experiences of time for the purpose of social action and communication” (Meyerhoff, 5). Clarissa Dalloway is able to keep track of her experiences and surroundings through both psychological and public time; she considers the past while simultaneously living her present and planning her future all in consideration of the time on the

clock. Septimus exists only in his psychological time, unable to reconcile his past experiences with the objective time that constitutes the progression of the world around him. Septimus cannot communicate with or be understood by others because he is existing in a separate time.

In order to strike a balance between psychological time and public time, individuals must measure their psychological time by the public time. According to Meyerhoff, we become more self-aware when we are able to order our memories and goals against the public time during which these memories took place and these future goals which will hopefully be realized (18). Clarissa accesses not only her memories, but also her thoughts for the future in order to better understand both herself and her space in time and place: “But she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton’s face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced” (*MD*, 29). Clarissa understands time and is therefore aware that her personal time must come to an end. This awareness of future time allows her to understand and accept her own mortality. Such a recognition is simultaneously an acceptance of life.

While Clarissa can exist in the present and propel herself both into the past and the future, Septimus is trapped in a repetitive recall of past memories. Because there is no absolute “now,” Septimus has irrevocably shut off any notions of public time progression by constituting his own state-of-being with the psychological time of his past experiences. Meyerhoff uses the causal effect in his explanation on the importance of psychological time being measured against a linear public time. Meyerhoff argues that the causal principle in time can be “seen most easily in the so-called irreversible processes of nature” (19). In nature, the causal effect is examined to order a steady progression of events through time; one can see that the tree has grown because the seed was planted, not that the seed was planted because the tree has grown. Septimus, by projecting

his own fragmented psychological time onto the ordered public time, is reversing this causal effect entirely: “‘I will tell you the time,’ said Septimus, very slowly, very drowsily, smiling mysteriously. As he sat smiling at the dead man in the grey suit the quarter struck – the quarter to twelve” (69). Rather than understanding his psychological time through public time, Septimus completely disassociates the two. Instead of building hopes for the future through events of the past, Septimus is projecting his past onto both the present and the future. Interestingly, by bringing the dead back to life and by applying past to present rather than understanding present through past, Septimus is reversing these processes of nature. The reversal is unnatural, however, and cannot last. Rather than living to see the future, Septimus must die because he has not created a viable future for himself.

Septimus Smith’s convoluted sense of time and chaotic sense of his surroundings are the result of his condition of shell shock. A diagnosis of shell shock was still relatively new and generally misunderstood, even when Virginia Woolf was writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, seven years after the war had officially ended. Even seven years after Armistice Day, the war still raged on in the minds of tens of thousands of men⁹. The term “shell shock” first appeared six months after the start of the war in a British medical journal (Alexander, 58). While the terminology had begun to be more accepted in medical fields, the cause and treatment of shell shock cases were still hotly debated. Ignorance of the disease allowed the public to overlook the soldiers who had been broken by the war. By ignoring these broken men, the public could also ignore the high cost of the war, a truth that threatened any illusion of true victory.

⁹ According to Caroline Alexander in her article “The Shock of War,” by 1929, 74,876 cases of shell shock had been documented in the files of the Ministry of Pensions. Furthermore, “an estimated 10 percent of the 1,663,435 military wounded of the war would be attributed to shell shock” (64).

The British public was ready to embrace only two possible scenarios for men returning home from the war. Either the individual would return to the home front, unscathed and victorious, or he would have died as a hero in the war. The return of broken men was problematic in that they challenged the Victorian ideology of the war hero. These men, who were now damaged goods, “were seen to have no life at all, no existence” (Levenback, 58). Even when battered and beaten soldiers returned home from war, the violence did not end. They faced the incredible challenge of assimilating into a culture that first sacrificed then shunned them; they were entrenched in a culture which did its utmost to disregard the truth that these men represented. This truth challenged outdated and false ideals. Ultimately, these men could only tell their tales through their own broken bodies and confused existence. London had indeed “swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith” (82).

The sanity and insanity dichotomy we see in Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith can also be examined through Septimus Smith and his wife, Lucrezia Smith. Lucrezia feels that the Septimus who went away to war is not the same man who has returned: “And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now” (22). Septimus is suffering from a seemingly insurmountable mental illness that very few people, including Lucrezia, understand. Lucrezia is unable to reconcile her former image of Septimus with her image of the Septimus before her. Therefore, the Septimus with whom she could communicate lives only in her past, not in her present.

In Regent’s Park, Lucrezia tries to communicate with Septimus; Septimus however is caught in the repetition of his past experiences and can therefore only communicate with the dead. Septimus sits more comfortably with the dead than with the living:

There was his hand; there the dead. . . . Evans was behind the railings!
 “What are you saying?” said Rezia suddenly, sitting down by him.
 Interrupted again! She was always interrupting. (25)

The world of the living is only a mild interruption into Septimus’ world. Although Lucrezia is making the effort to communicate with Septimus, this effort goes unreciprocated. He is slipping farther away from her and slowly becomes utterly unreachable. When Lucrezia’s attempts at communication go unreturned, she urges Septimus to “notice real things”¹⁰ (25), but he cannot because Septimus’ reality is his own convoluted consciousness, his past projected into the present and the future. In Septimus’ reality, the dead are more alive than the living:

“Look,” she repeated.
 Look the unseen bade him, the voice which now communicated with him who was the greatest of mankind, Septimus, lately taken from life to death. (25)

Because Septimus cannot reconcile his psychological time to the public time, he cannot constitute his now with that which surrounds him. Septimus has already left the living, so in a sense, both Lucrezia and Septimus are only ever speaking to the dead.

Eventually, Lucrezia enters her own illusions in an effort to cope with the painful “real” world, a world in which she is shut off from all communication with others who do not listen to her repeated insistence that she is unhappy. In their final moments together before Septimus commits suicide, Lucrezia feels an illusion of connection through communication. Septimus is listening to “the voices of the dead” while Lucrezia begins to build up her illusion:

She held her hands to her head, waiting for him to say did he like the hat or not, and as she sat there, waiting, looking down, he could feel her mind, like a bird, falling from branch to branch, and always alighting, quite rightly; he could follow her mind, as she sat

¹⁰ The request that Lucrezia is making of Septimus to “notice real things” was a treatment prescribed by Dr. Holmes. This prescription was not uncommon to the treatment of shell shocked soldiers at the time. The treatment also included persuasion treatment, in which the medical officer “persuades the patient to make the effort necessary to overcome the disability,” as well as “deliberate insistence on the illegitimacy of nerves as a symptom of illness,” “the minimization of sympathy for the patient,” and the penalization of despair. (Thomas, 54).

there in one of those lax poses that came to her naturally and, if he should say anything, at once she smiled, like a bird alighting with all its claws firm upon the bough.
(142-3)

Septimus and Lucrezia can only meet in an illusion. While Lucrezia feels this connection, this last attempt to communicate with one another successfully, Septimus still does not understand what she wants. Lucrezia tries to connect with him through a discussion of “real things”; Septimus can only even begin to notice and understand her when he has brought her into his entirely different understanding of the world around him. He sees a connection with Lucrezia being accomplished through merely speaking, though the words cease to matter entirely.

Although Lucrezia has a moment of illusory triumph in her communication with Septimus, he never feels this sense of victory. Due to his horrific experience in the war, Septimus is caught in a perpetual replay of the terror he felt in the trenches, unable either to acknowledge his own existence in the present or to project himself into the future. While outsiders distance themselves from Septimus because he speaks to the dead, Septimus distances himself from the general public because of what his fallen comrades say only to him: “He, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth” (66). This truth, the “supreme secret,” is both distorted by Septimus being caught in the unreality that constitutes his reality, and fragmented by his inability to express himself and others’ unwillingness to listen: “universal love, he muttered gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out” (66). While Septimus sets himself apart from others, he finds himself unable to communicate what hidden truths divide them so harshly. Furthermore, those with whom

Septimus is trying to communicate but no merit in his words and fail to understand him because of his being trapped in a state of unreality.

Septimus siphons off these great truths that he cannot speak into his writing. Before the war, Septimus had honed his artistic sensibilities by writing poetry.¹¹ After the war, Septimus saw writing as another means by which he could try to express himself and the great truths that he had been called upon to hear: “There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down)” (24). Lucrezia sees these writings as a mere illustration on paper of the confusion in Septimus’ mind: “Diagrams, designs. . . . how the dead sing behind the rhododendron bushes. . . . Universal love: the meaning of the world” (144). Regardless of the medium, Septimus is so shattered by violence and stuck in his own horrific past that he cannot express himself completely, an inability that is exacerbated by other’s unwillingness to listen to him.

Septimus is tragically aware that he is not being heard. Although he mutters to Lucrezia that “communication is health,” she fails to understand him and sends for the doctor (91). Furthermore, Septimus’ doctor, the one person who is supposed to help heal Septimus, works under the belief that “health is proportion” (96). Woolf satirically lauds Sir William as making England prosper by having “secluded her lunatics,” penalized despair,” and having “made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views” (97). Septimus has come to hate and fear his doctors, yet, this fear of another living human being brings him back momentarily into the present. As he has just made up his mind to permanently leave the world of the living, Septimus

¹¹ As a young boy, Septimus left home to pursue a life that would be more conducive to his being a great poet: He “had left home, a mere boy, . . . because he could see no future for a poet in Stroud; and so, making a confidant of his little sister, had gone to London leaving an absurd note behind him, such as great men have written, and the world has read later when the story of their struggles has become famous” (82). This love of writing continued to develop as he grew older.

realizes that “he did not want to die. Life was good. The sun was hot” (146). The prospect of being taken away by Doctor Holmes, and therefore being forced into silence once more, is more frightening to Septimus than joining his fallen comrades.

His moment in the present is brief, and, jumping from the window, Septimus dives into death, liberating himself from the culture which had sacrificed and ostracized him. As Karen Levenback argues, the underlying cause of Septimus’ suicide “is the prospect of continuing life in a postwar society informed by the indifference to the war and the self-serving power over its survivor-victims” (72). Therefore, while the arrival of Dr. Holmes prompts Septimus to his final action, he ultimately resolves to fling himself from the window when he realizes that his own fractured existence in the postwar world has been made impossible by the institutions that have come to shut him away. Because of his horrific experience, Septimus is a shattered man who can only express himself in fragments. His attempts at communication go unreciprocated by a world which cannot and does not want to understand him, forcing him to search for the acceptance and understanding that he cannot find in the living world. In death, Septimus does find the freedom he lost in life: “Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death” (180). Therefore, while the impetus for Septimus’ suicide is tragic, there remains a beauty in his death, a beauty stemming from the action of self-emancipation and the resultant moment of living once more, albeit very briefly, in the present.

Just as abruptly and fragmentary as she paints the scene of Septimus’ suicide, Virginia Woolf also gives us very brief glimpses of Clarissa Dalloway. Septimus’ harsh death, as well as

his identity, are swept away by the passing ambulance and Woolf returns the reader to the rooms of Clarissa Dalloway¹². Even though Virginia Woolf wanted Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith to be “entirely dependent upon each other” (*Letters III*, 189), Clarissa is completely distanced from Septimus’ fragmented, war-torn world; she is a socialite civilian touched only shallowly by the war¹³. Just as Virginia Woolf experienced days of peace after the war as being characterized by sales of shop clothes, Clarissa Dalloway’s experience with the war was also manifest in how she noticed the difference in the quality and price of everyday material goods before and after the war¹⁴. Clarissa, unlike Septimus, can take notice of the “real” things and how they have changed after the war. Furthermore, while Septimus saw dying on a daily basis during the war and is still visited by the dead, Clarissa’s only experience with war victims is through the losses of others: “The War was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed” (4). Because her waking moments are not plagued by violent memories and visions of the dead, Clarissa Dalloway is able to focus on the hours of the day ticking away until her dinner party.

Clarissa Dalloway’s dinner party was considered by Virginia Woolf to be “the best of my endings” (*Diary II*, 312). Clarissa’s day is measured almost solely by the public time, as

¹² Immediately following the scene of Septimus’ suicide, Virginia Woolf shifts her focus to Peter Walsh. Walsh is made aware of a nameless, faceless man being swept away out of the story right after Woolf has made the reader aware of the death of Septimus: “Swiftly, cleanly the ambulance sped to the hospital, having picked up instantly, humanely, some poor devil” (147).

¹³ Karen Levenback, in her book *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*, wrote that in *Mrs. Dalloway* “the reality of a politician’s wife, Clarissa Dalloway, . . . is juxtaposed with that of a combat veteran, Septimus Warren Smith. Woolf transformed the physical distance during the war into a physical proximity during the day in the postwar London the novel involves” (47). Therefore, while they physically exist entirely separate from one another, we can see how Clarissa and Septimus would have been two halves of one whole experience of war.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf writes in her *Diary*, “I have been long meaning to write a historical disquisition on the return of peace. . . . The most significant sign of peace this year is the sales; just over; the shops have been flooded with cheap clothes” (*Diary II*, 92). This entry is similar to Clarissa Dalloway’s musings during her shopping trip on Bond Street when she stopped, “pausing for a moment at the window of a glove shop where, before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves” (11).

measured by Big Ben: “It was precisely twelve o’clock; twelve by Big Ben . . . twelve o’clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on her bed” (91). Because her lived experience is gauged objectively and independent from how she personally experiences subjective time (Meyerhoff, 5), her final orchestrated goal, her dinner-party, is the culmination of her linearly measured day. Regardless of the depths to which the novel dives through psychological time and trips into the human psyche, it ends as the public time day ends, an ending that is felt by Clarissa as being a triumph: “So it wasn’t a failure after all! it was going to be all right now — her party. It had begun. It had started” (166). Yet, even this triumph is tempered by some sense of loss. Having realized her goal, her day’s work, and having successfully expressed and presented herself to those in attendance, Clarissa feels how fleeting these moments of victory are and how we must constantly set new goals: “She had felt that intoxication of the moment . . . for, though she loved it and felt it tingle and sting, still these semblances, these triumphs . . . had a hollowness . . . it might be that she was growing old but they satisfied her no longer as they used” (170). Clarissa knows that after that singular triumphant moment, the individual is faced with the need to make, not simply find, these moments that make the struggle of life worthwhile.

Clarissa’s moments of clarity regarding the larger scheme of life, larger than the daily trivialities, are aided by Septimus’ suicide. In respect to the nameless, faceless, young man who had killed himself, Clarissa ponders the situation: “She was glad he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” (182). In death, Septimus is able to reach out to another. For Clarissa, Septimus’ suicide serves as an affirmation of the beauty of life. Her own awareness of the passage of time allows Clarissa to see the fleeting nature of the lived experience, even though

she does not directly see death. To Septimus, death was his own emancipation from an impossible and painful existence. Clarissa is able to make use of the impersonal and partial news of suicide, however, to feel the frivolity and to enjoy the trivialities of her life. By taking his death into her own conception of the present, Clarissa Dalloway is, in a way, reclaiming Septimus from the oblivion of death. Septimus is saved in the memories of others, and marches once more alongside the living.

Virginia Woolf did not end her exploration of self-expression and the effects of war on the human psyche with *Mrs. Dalloway*. Two years after the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf's most critically acclaimed novel, *To the Lighthouse*, was published. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf answered some of the issues that she first addressed in *Mrs. Dalloway*. She asked how one makes a meaningful existence for oneself in a culture fractured by violence and in which technological advancements and scientific discoveries have made one's own existence small. Woolf found her answer in how one must create these moments that validate and bring significance to one's personal reality. One's accomplishments in self-expression, either large or small, makes the chaos of life more navigable. By finding, even if only briefly, moments in and methods by which one is able to connect with both one's interior self and the external world, one's daily struggles are made worthwhile and one's own existence is made more complete.

While Virginia Woolf did have more ease in expressing herself in *To the Lighthouse* than she did in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she still struggled with her own insecurities and fears of failure. Woolf was aware of her own limitations, and, in September of 1921, Woolf was still able to pursue a set goal: "I am still crawling & easily enfeebled, but if I could once get up steam again,

I believe I could spin it off with infinite relish” (*Diary III*, 39). Though her pursuit of self-expression was arduous, a victorious finish still seemed, and was indeed, possible. Virginia Woolf was able to sort through the incredible oceans of chaotic creativity and ideas in her mind, and produce a novel like no other¹⁵. Part of what has made *To the Lighthouse* a mainstay in literature is Virginia Woolf’s perfecting of her stream-of-consciousness technique, her bringing her own life experience into her characters and their reactions to situations, and the unique form of the novel. Woolf drew on her personal experiences with the war, the changing face of science, and her familial relations, in order to uncover more depth in her characters. Rather than following the characters on their journeys through space, *To the Lighthouse* follows a family and their friends’ mental and emotional journeys on the Isle of Skye. Although the characters leave their summer home on the Isle of Skye, the novel does not examine how they mentally and physically move through any other spaces. While the novel is focused in one space, the characters are fluid in their movements and states of consciousness.

Two characters fundamental to the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, are based loosely on two people fundamental to Virginia Woolf’s life — her own mother and father. Virginia Woolf contemplates to her lover, Vita Sackville-West, that Mrs. Ramsay may have inadvertently been based upon her own “child’s view” of her mother (*Letters III*, 374). Woolf’s sister, Vanessa Bell, wrote in a letter to her that the character of Mrs. Ramsay was such an accurate portrait of their mother that “it is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead” (*Letters III*, 572). In that same letter, Bell also wrote that Woolf had “given father too I think as clearly” (*Letters III*, 572).

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf was at first stymied by the flood of ideas awash in her creative consciousness. In a letter to her friend Roger Fry, an artist and art critic, Woolf wrote: “Cant write (with a whole novel in my head — its damnable) can only read oceans and floods of trash” (*Letters III*, 208)

Virginia Woolf's parents had continued to be a presence in her life, even after their deaths¹⁶.

Through composing her characters in *To the Lighthouse* after her own mother and father, Virginia Woolf finally laid them to rest¹⁷.

While two of the main characters in are based upon the Victorian family into which she was born, the third major character in the novel, Lily Briscoe, is a woman “before her time” (*Letters III*, 573). Just like Virginia Woolf, Lily Briscoe often lacks confidence in her art, yet she still manages to see her vision through to completion. Lily is able to triumph in the face of adversity; she is a middle-aged, single, female artist in a culture whispering the mantra “women can't paint, women can't write.” Lily departs from the Victorian ideology that the place of the woman is the domestic sphere and the business of the woman is the family. Lily's defining characteristics not only set her apart from the other characters in *To the Lighthouse*, but they also make her integral to the balance in the novel. Virginia Woolf played with dichotomies in *Mrs. Dalloway* with Clarissa Dalloway's sanity juxtaposed with Septimus Smith's insanity. While this dichotomy never finds a complete balance and Septimus is driven to suicide, Woolf, with the character of Lily Briscoe, introduced a balanced binary in *To the Lighthouse*. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, the married couple, and Lily Briscoe, the single female artist, manage both to find their individual places in the world and to strike a harmony between the whole, high-culture of the Victorian era and the fragmented, innovative Modern era.

While the development of the novel is structured around character development, the actual structure of the novel is broken down into three distinct sections. *To the Lighthouse* is

¹⁶ In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf wrote in respect to her mother that: “She has haunted me: but then so did that old wretch my father” (*Letters III*, 374).

¹⁷ On what would have been her father's 96th birthday had he still been alive, Virginia Woolf wrote the following in her diary: “I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse*, laid them in my mind” (*Diary III*, 208).

broken into “The Window,” “Time Passes,” and “The Lighthouse.” As Mark Hussey observes in his introduction to *To the Lighthouse*, “the three-part structure of *To the Lighthouse* . . . reflects that movement from the coherent but oppressive world of the late Victorian middle class through the trauma of the First World War to the realities of the postwar world” (liii). We can see these shifts not only in the action of each section, but also in the characters that come to the forefront. These sections, however, are not completely separate from one another. As Gillian Beer argues in her book chapter, “Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*,” Woolf holds the sections together “by separating them. ‘Time passes’, like Lily’s line, both joins and parts” (32). Therefore, while the novel is fragmented into three sections, a level of completeness still remains, a completeness that was once inherent in art and has now become a challenge.

“The Window” is the longest section of the novel, yet only covers the span of a few hours on the Isle of Skye. This section focuses mainly on the interactions between the members of the Ramsay family and takes place before the start of the Great War. Even though the world is at peace, *To the Lighthouse* is immediately colored by James Ramsay’s resentment towards his father’s oppressive nature when his father coldly denies his request to go visit the lighthouse across the bay from their house. Mr. Ramsay is a self-absorbed man who spends his time measuring his own success, and consequently his self-worth, against the accomplishments of other men. By achieving comparable greatness, Mr. Ramsay believes he will live on in the minds of others and extend his life past death by at least a few years. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, is more self-sacrificing and serves as the glue that holds the Ramsay family together. Her dinner-party is one of the last scenes in “The Window,” and is both beautiful and fleeting. The triumph felt by Mrs. Ramsay with her dinner party culminating “The Window,” was also felt by

Virginia Woolf. While Woolf felt that the Clarissa Dalloway's dinner party was "the best of my endings" (*Diary II*, 312), by the time she had finished writing Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party, Woolf realized that this dinner party was not only "the best thing I ever wrote" but was also "the only thing that I think justifies my faults as a writer" (*Letters III*, 373). Both dinner parties were moments of triumphant self-expression not only for Woolf's characters, but also for Woolf herself. These brief and beautiful moments ended linearly measured days, brought people together, and affirmed a more meaningful existence for Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay.

This joy cannot last however, and the reader is abruptly met by "Time Passes." Set between "The Window" and "The Lighthouse," "Time Passes" is the hallway connecting these two rooms of thought. While the shortest section of the novel, "Time Passes" covers the longest span of time — ten years. Within these ten years, the house on the Isle of Skye is being reclaimed by nature while the Great War is sweeping across the world. Virginia Woolf depicted the battle of nature against creations of man in violent, war-language. This monumental language is juxtaposed to the brief moments in which news is delivered in an impersonal manner, always bracketed, concerning the characters with whom we have become familiar in "The Window." While a creation of men, the Great War, decimates hundreds of thousands of men, nature remains busy at work destroying other creations of men. The war of nature against men does not end here however; Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast step in to reclaim the house from the reaches of nature, time, and weather. After a total of ten years have passed, Mr. Ramsay, James Ramsay, Cam Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, and Augustus Carmichael return to the house.

"The Lighthouse" is the final section of the novel and takes place after the war. The remaining characters are left to rebuild their existence on the Isle of Skye after the past ten years

have fractured and changed all of their lives. Although years have passed and the world has changed, Mr. Ramsay, James Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe return once more to the goals that were their individual focuses in “The Window.” Now able to live more in the present rather than filling his hours with regret of the past and dreams for the future, Mr. Ramsay finally fulfills his promise to his children and takes them to the lighthouse across the bay. While she watches the three Ramsays reach the lighthouse, a place which has taken on new meaning for each of them, Lily Briscoe finishes the painting which had plagued her throughout “The Window.” The moment of success is brief; nonetheless it still makes meaning of Lily’s work and gives purpose to her actions, persistence, and lived experience.

Although distinctly different, all three sections of *To the Lighthouse* are similar to each other and to *Mrs. Dalloway* in their exploration of the difficulty inherent in self-expression and how these difficulties are exacerbated by our own inability to adequately connect with or understand one another. *To the Lighthouse* illustrates these challenges by being composed of a series of shifts in each character’s consciousness; these shifts are facilitated by Virginia Woolf’s perfection of her stream-of-consciousness technique. As Janet Winston observes in her reading guide, *Woolf’s To the Lighthouse*, this approach to narration reflects “the multiplicity and unpredictability of human perspectives” (28). These shifts in character consciousness explain why “the novel is pervaded by a bewilderment in the face of human relations and a longing for knowledge and intimacy” (Hussey, 29). This longing however encourages the individual to persist in his or her efforts to both understand and be understood by others. Consequently, the pervasive tone in *To the Lighthouse* of difficulty and struggle with communication and self-

expression is interspersed with rare and beautiful moments of triumph, moments never experienced by Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The rapid shift of consciousness begins in the first section of the novel, “The Window.” Even though this section is more cohesive than the rest of the novel, many of the characters still experience a sense of alienation between one another. The disconnect between James Ramsay and his father is characterized by interactions colored by the war language with which Virginia Woolf would have become familiar during the Great War. “The Window” section begins with these connotatively violent interactions between father and son when James’ request to visit the lighthouse across the bay is denied by his father. When his father refuses him, James thinks, “had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father’s breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it” (8). While the Ramsay family is complete, and the world is not yet at war, there are already fissures spreading between James and his father.

The language of violence between James and his father resurfaces throughout, yet does not completely dominate, the first part of the novel. In the character of Mr. Ramsay, and through his interactions with James, Virginia Woolf was exploring the “modern *Zeitgeist*” (Winston, 45). Even though “The Window” was written about a time before the war, Woolf’s uses her experience with the fractured spirit of the post-war world in her illustration of father and son. By expressing violent notions as passed between son and father, Virginia Woolf was exploring the “masculine fiction”¹⁸ of the war that would soon decisively fracture the Ramsay family.

¹⁸ In a letter to her friend, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, written on 23 January, 1916 Virginia Woolf wrote of her developing understanding of the war: “I become steadily more feminist, owing to the Times, which I read at breakfast and wonder how this preposterous masculine fiction [the war] keeps us going a day longer — without some vigorous young woman pulling us together and marching through it” (*Letters II*, 76). Virginia Woolf’s critique of the war, and her attributing it to the patriarchal social order can be seen in *To the Lighthouse*. Mr. Ramsay’s controlling and overbearing nature sparks violent tendencies and desires in James.

Although these small cracks of subterranean violence had already begun to form and spread, the Ramsay family did not recognize this disturbance in their pre-war world. Therefore, the family remained complete in “The Window,” pulled together by the mother figure of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay.

Mrs. Ramsay not only stands as the pacifier between James and his father, but she also serves as the glue holding the family together. At the head of the family are Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, who Lily sees as “the symbols of marriage, husband and wife” (75). As the ideal image of marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay represent some of the ideologies of the Romantic era. As Randall Stevenson argues in his article, “Woolf and Modernity: Crisis and Catotropics,” “approval for ways in which Mrs. Ramsay’s ‘simplicity fathomed what clever people falsified’ . . . indicated a preference for intuition or emotion, rather than intelligence and reason, typical of the Romantic movement” (151). Mrs. Ramsay serves as the embodiment of Romantic ideologies while Mr. Ramsay serves as a representation of the patriarchal social order that would soon bring out one of the most destructive wars of all time. Mr. Ramsay’s “qualities of rationalism and empiricism” are balanced against Mrs. Ramsay’s “ethical, humanistic and aesthetic concerns in order to promote the common good” (Winston, 45). Therefore, the wholeness of the Romantic, pre-war, period can be seen in the completeness of the Ramsay family and the balance struck in the Ramsay marriage.

In addition to holding the Ramsay family together, Mrs. Ramsay manages to bring together at one dinner party the other vacationers on the Isle of Skye. This dinner party, the culmination of “The Window” section, is dominated by a sense of completion and finality not only for Mrs. Ramsay, but also for Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley, who have become engaged to

one another, and for Lily Briscoe, who has a moment of clarity regarding her painting. While the dinner party is the last scene in which the Ramsay family and the other visitors to the Isle of Skye are together, the very last moment of “The Window” section also ends on a moment of triumph. This moment addresses an issue that Virginia Woolf had explored throughout many of her novels: the possibility of communication with the self and others. At the close of “The Window,” Mrs. Ramsay is able to successfully communicate with and understand her husband: “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. . . . And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew” (126). Just like the final moment between Lucrezia and Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the final moment of communication between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay is unspoken. Unlike Lucrezia’s illusion of victory however, Mrs. Ramsay does manage to triumph. Mrs. Ramsay is able to reach through the buzzing mass of unspoken words and unarticulated feelings in order to understand and connect with her husband.

After this brief and beautiful moment of triumph, “Time Passes” both interrupts the flow of the novel and manages to serve as the hallway connecting the two rooms of thought, “The Window” and “The Lighthouse.” Despite her initial doubts about “Time Passes,” Virginia Woolf found that the novel needed its middle section: “One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together” (*Letters II*, 385). Her creative choice was validated when she received critical acclaim from others about this section.¹⁹ This central line has been

¹⁹ In a letter to her acquaintance, Lady Ottoline Morrell, Virginia Woolf confided her own fears about the reception of “Time Passes”: “I’m specially pleased that you like Time Passes — It gave me more trouble than all the rest of the book put together, and I was afraid it hadn’t succeeded” (*Letters II*, 378).

seen by some critics as being very similar to the paintbrush stroke that Lily employed in order to successfully complete her painting and have a triumphant moment of realized self-expression²⁰.

Even though it serves as the binding force between the first and last sections of *To the Lighthouse*, “Time Passes” is drastically different from these other two sections. In her diary, Virginia Woolf mused that, in her writing she was trying to “learn greater quiet & force” (III, 37). Woolf manages to write this “greater quiet and force” into the “Time Passes” section by switching to a telescopic look at a larger cosmic battle. Rather than examining the characters’ everyday struggles with the inability to express the self and to understand others, Woolf poses the grand existential questions, “Will you fade? Will you perish?” (133). In “Time Passes,” our daily battles recede as the forces of time and nature reclaim the creation of man. To juxtapose the lasting power of nature against the brief presence of man, Virginia Woolf explores the insignificance of human life. She intersperses fragments of information on the individual throughout her analysis of chaotic cosmic battles.

These fragments of information, bracketed and mentioned as an aside, pertain to the individuals with whom we have become familiar in the previous section, “The Window.” We learn very abruptly that Mrs. Ramsay had “died rather suddenly” (132), “Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth” (136), and Andrew Ramsay, along with “twenty or thirty young men” died instantaneously when “a shell exploded . . . in France” (137). The impersonal delivery of the news of the demise of these characters is reminiscent of the detachment with which news would have been delivered to civilians on the home front during the war. As Karen Levenback observes in her book, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*, “in “Time

²⁰ In her book, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, Gillian Beer explains how Woolf held together “The Window” and “The Lighthouse” “by separating them” (32): ““Time Passes’, like Lily’s line, both joins and parts” (32).

Passes,” which might be called “the war years” section of the novel, the narrative represents a noncombatant experience that cannot transgress its geographical and lexical limitations” (102). To illustrate this civilian experience of helplessness and hopelessness, an experience with which Virginia Woolf would have been familiar, Woolf used the same techniques developed “with the ‘new journalism’ that controlled popular newspaper reports during the war” (Levenback, 102-103). Therefore, we can gather that the nature of news became steadily more selective and fragmented in nature during the war years.

While detached and impersonal language is used to deliver news of the death of the characters with whom we have become familiar, the rest of ‘Time Passes’ is colored by a more violent form of war language. As Levenback observes, “the narrator of ‘Time Passes’ seems to frame her own . . . observations of the empty house . . . in terms of war” (104). Rather than looking at different countries and groups of people as being allies or enemies, in “Time Passes” Woolf examines not the Great War ravaging the world but the war raging between man and nature: “Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which . . . swallowed up here jug and basin” (129-130). Nature reaches out to erode that which man has built up. Woolf depicts this war in the language that would still have been resonating across London and around the world: “The autumn trees, ravaged as they are, take on the flash of tattered flags kindling in the gloom of cold cathedral caves where gold letters on marble pages describe death in battle and how bones bleach and burn far away in Indian sands” (131). By intertwining images of the damage left behind from the war between men and of the cyclical pattern of life, Woolf is making the brief lives of men fleeting and small in the midst of

monumental cosmic chaos. This war, unlike the manmade war between countries, never ends. While nature is indifferent to victory or failure, humanity can experience both.

The transient and trivial victories of man are brought back into perspective near the end of “Time Passes.” Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast are the “force working” to “stay the corruption and the rot” and to rescue the house “from the pool of Time that was fast closing over them” (143). Even though the women manage to temporarily reclaim the singular human habitation from nature, as Mrs. Bast notes the space has been forever changed (144). The destructive force of nature is briefly staved off however, and this battle has been won by man, even though the war between man and nature continues. The victory is not a complete triumph, yet, “it was finished” (145).

With the destructive force of nature temporarily thwarted by the efforts of man and the devastating Great War of man finally ended, a sense of normality returns to the house on the Isle of Skye. The characters return to the house and bring with them the personal goals that had plagued them in the first section of the novel, “The Window.” Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James finally set out to complete their expedition to the lighthouse. The journey to the lighthouse is made all the more difficult and the stakes are heightened by the relationship between Mr. Ramsay and James. Even though the Great War has ended, the war between James and his father is still being waged. James has a resurgence of the murderous feelings that he felt for his father in the opening pages of the novel when he predicts the anger with which his father will chastise him: “James kept dreading the moment when he would look up and speak sharply to him about something or other. . . . And if he does, James thought, then I shall take a knife and strike him to the heart” (187). James is unaware, however, where this anger comes from and why it takes hold

of him only in the presence of his father. In his own musings about his relationship with his father, James considers that “they alone knew each other. What then was this terror, this hatred?” (188). The war between James and his father has been raging for over ten years. Yet, through “The Lighthouse” section of the novel, James begins to consider that maybe he and his father are not completely different from one other. James strives to understand why and how the barrier between his father and himself has been built so high. By recognizing the commonality between “self” and “other,” James is undermining the isolation and unknowability which stems from this distinction and finally recognizes an ultimate connectedness.

While James and Cam are both highly attuned to Mr. Ramsay’s actions, Mr. Ramsay, “with his long-sighted eyes,” (209) is focused on the abstract. The questions that had plagued Mr. Ramsay in “The Window” return to reclaim their space in his consciousness, and he becomes focused on the uncertainty of the future and the fear that he will fail in his great desire to make a name for himself. By living on in name, Mr. Ramsay believes that he can consequently stave off the obliteration to both body and being that accompanies death. Mr. Ramsay imagines his future self, old and miserable: “He was walking up and down between the urns; and he seemed to himself very old and bowed” (169). These fears of failure plagued Mr. Ramsay all throughout “The Window” and have come back to haunt him now. The moment of fear that grips Mr. Ramsay in the boat is reminiscent of a moment ten years before, as he was actually walking between the urns: “It is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies how men will speak of him hereafter. . . . His own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still” (39). Mr. Ramsay is aware and afraid of the mutability of life and of his own fleeting existence and minor importance

to others. Rather than accept death as a mere fact of life, Mr. Ramsay wishes to achieve a level of greatness that will extend his own existence and importance by at least a few years.

Even though he is projecting himself into the future, Mr. Ramsay is still able to call himself back to the present upon approaching the lighthouse. As soon as Mr. Ramsay reorients himself back in the present, in the boat with his children, he reaches out to James and, upon congratulating James for steering them safely to the lighthouse, forms the connection that waylays both his own fears about the future and James' insecurities about the present. Cam triumphantly notes that this is the moment for which James has been longing: "There! Cam thought, addressing herself silently to James. You've got it at last. For she knew that this was what James had been wanting" (209). Very briefly, Mr. Ramsay, James, and Cam experience a sense of triumph and victory. Mr. Ramsay has finally fulfilled his promise to his children that he will take them to the lighthouse. James has finally won his father's approval, and Cam is able to feel the significance of the connection that has been made between father and son. After the entire journey to the lighthouse was tainted by war language, miscommunication, and overtones of fear and anger, the arrival to the island is a fleeting and hard-won victory.

Watching the small boat slice its way across the water is Lily Briscoe. Her personal journey to successfully express herself through painting is a solitary and chaotic one. Although she has no living companions to aid her in her efforts, Lily is visited by her memories of those absent or dead, their remarks and their criticisms. By bringing the past into the present, Lily is at risk of losing sight of the future and any hope of triumphing over her struggles with artistic self-expression. Even as she is haunted by Charles Tansley's words, the same words that have become her mantra, "women can't paint, can't write" (163), the presence of another ghostly

figure from her past allows her to slice her own way through the tumultuous seas of her consciousness:

Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent . . . — this was the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. ‘Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!’ she repeated. She owed it all to here. (165)

The strong figure of Mrs. Ramsay cuts through Lily’s own self-doubts. Through her reflections on Mrs. Ramsay and by dipping back into the past to inform her present, Lily is able to see some form in the anarchy of life.

Her moment of complete clarity is brief, and Lily Briscoe is left facing her own inability to express herself artistically once more. She is not disheartened however; rather, she begins anew with a fervent desire: “Get that and start afresh . . . she said desperately, pitching herself firmly before her easel. It was a miserable machine, an inefficient machine, she thought, the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force on” (196). Lily is able to recognize the pitiful inefficiency of the human being to understand the self and express that self to others, yet she is also able to recognize that we have very few other options than to try.

The novel ends on a definitively victorious tone, a triumphant moment of realized self-expression that remains unspoken: “With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (211). This final scene is reminiscent of the ending of the previous two sections, and brings to a seemingly fragmented and divided piece of literature the sense of wholeness and completeness that many felt had been forever lost to the

Great War. Just as Lily Briscoe is able to complete her vision non-verbally at the close of “The Lighthouse,” so too do Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay reach out to and successfully connect with one another at the end of “The Window.” With incredible exhaustion, Lily realizes her victory over the difficulty of self-expression and grasps onto the fact that “it was finished” (211). This same recognition comes to Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast after they have victoriously reclaimed the creation of man from the grasp of nature and time; having triumphed, the women can retire from the battle to save the house because, “it was finished” (145). By bringing in the language that has been used to previously characterize moments of triumph, Virginia Woolf is bringing the accomplishments of man to the forefront and making them more significant. Even though “Time Passes” contextualizes the daily struggles of man in the larger cosmic battle and makes personal loss and gain seem insignificant, “The Lighthouse” paints our minor and fleeting victories as being worth the fight.

In her own personal journey through writing, from *Mrs. Dalloway* to *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf explores what it means to adequately express the self. Through her depiction of how each character traverses and understands his or her own existence, Woolf illustrates the shift in culture from the wholeness of Victorianism to the fragmented nature of Modernism brought about by the Great War and the changing nature of science. At the time of her writing *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf internalized these cultural shifts and wove them into her characters. Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, both strong female characters who struggle with and succeed in self-expression, are characteristic of the Victorian era. Reaching into Modernism, Woolf depicts the shell-shocked soldier, Septimus Smith, and the single female artist, Lily Briscoe, both of whom similarly struggle with self-expression in a world that seems to

be against them. By tracing the lives and single death of these characters, Virginia Woolf inquires into what it means to successfully express self and connect with others and what it means to fail.

In *Clarissa Dalloway* and *Mrs. Ramsay*, Virginia Woolf illustrates the completeness of the Victorian era. Both women are similar in that they measure their days linearly, both leading up to the execution of their dinner parties. Unmarred by the Great War, each of these women's conscious state of being is not fragmented by the Great War. To them, the bravery of men has not been defeated by the inhumanity of the trenches, and the government has neither been shaken nor contested by the war. In the domestic sphere, we can see the two women as being both revered and respected while their actions serve as a cohesive, uniting force.

Although they are plagued periodically by the inability to reconcile others' perceptions of them and their own self perception, both women finally achieve their moment of self-expression in the form of a dinner party. While Clarissa's identity is reaffirmed by others through her successful self-expression, Mrs. Ramsay's existence is substantiated by her family and friends around the dinner table. This triumph in understanding the self, in being understood by others, and in turn understanding others, grants both Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa Dalloway something that Septimus Smith was ultimately denied, a complete and enjoyable existence. The two women represent a passing era, an era annihilated by the Great War that swept across the world and the changing face of science that destroyed the idea of the absolute now.

With the completeness of the Victorian era no longer feasible, individuals must find different methods by which they can successfully express and understand themselves while simultaneously making the effort to understand others. Septimus Smith and Lily Briscoe are

faced with both the difficulty of leading a meaningful life in such a tumultuous time and the struggle with social ostracism. Due to his time in the trenches, Septimus suffers an irreparable mental condition and is permanently ostracized and alienated from others. While she does have a social stigma placed upon her as a single female artist, Lily does not have her own mind working vigorously against her. Consequently, while both Septimus Smith and Lily Briscoe find themselves circling between past and present, Lily is able to escape this replay in order to live in the present and make a future for herself, while Septimus can find the only escape from his broken mind in death.

Unable to reconcile his existence to the public time, Septimus has never left the trenches; he remains caught in a constant and unbreakable repetition of the past. The one thing urging Septimus on in life is the need he feels to share the ultimate truth, a truth which has been shared with him by the dead. Septimus is unable to communicate, however, and others are unwilling to listen. Septimus never achieves this miraculous moment of clarity. Because he searches solely for a grand revelation concerning the meaning and purpose of his own life, a grand revelation which will never come, Septimus can find no hope for the future and no purpose in the present. Unable ever to notice the real, the vibrant life and attainable moments of communication and connection that Lucrezia urges him to feel, Septimus' present existence is utterly darkened by his horrifying past. Septimus was never really actively engaged in his lived experience after the war; having died among his comrades in the trenches, he walks only with the dead in the world of the living.

While Septimus is trapped in his own past, Lily Briscoe is able to dip back into the past to better understand her present and to paint her future. Even though Lily recognizes that this

moment of successful self expression, this moment which holds so much meaning to her, may hold that meaning solely for her, she is still able to persist and complete her painting. In the last scene of the novel, Lily looks at her still unfinished painting and recognizes that “it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did it matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again” (211)²¹. Lily is able to navigate through her own tumultuous sea of existence to find her own small moments of triumph, moments that make the arduous journey worth the fight. Lily recognizes that the monumental revelation may never be attainable in any mortal existence; it does no good to chase this illusion and forget to live:

What is the meaning of life? That was all — a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other. (165)

These moments are not miraculous; they are neither grand revelations nor ultimate truth. Rather, the moments that constitute and make our existence worthwhile will only ever be brief and fleeting. To ignore these brief moments of wonder, whether they be painted, written, felt in silence, or expressed in the simple spoken word, would be to live in a world of darkness, a world devoid of any meaning or direction. If one is able to see the beauty in these daily miracles, however, the battles we fight daily are made more worthwhile and one may still be able to find wonder and passion in something as arduous as life. As Virginia Woolf so beautifully mused, “What seas of horror one dives through in order to pick up these pearls — however they are worth it” (*Diary I*, 20).

²¹ This moment of decision to persist with her efforts regardless of the ultimate outcome can be seen as vaguely reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s changing understanding of her own art. As she was writing *To the Lighthouse*, she began to find pleasure in the act of writing rather than being read. In her diary entry for 14 May, 1925, Woolf wrote: “The truth is that writing is the profound pleasure & being read the superficial” (*Diary III*, 18).

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