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Annika Hawkinson

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MAKING ROOM FOR ONE'S OWN:
LITERAL AND LITERARY FEMININE SPACE IN THE WORKS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

by

ANNIKA HAWKINSON

FACULTY ADVISOR, DR. JENNIFER MAIER
SECOND READER, DR. TRAYNOR HANSEN

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Abstract

In this project I explore Virginia Woolf's modernist preoccupation with representing ordinary, female life in her fiction. Reading her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* alongside some of her more explicitly feminist essays, I analyze the way that her female protagonist, Clarissa, navigates the physical world around her, and why the spaces she occupies are so crucial to her character. Because I am primarily interested in the question of feminine space, this project is divided in two parts that respectively explore Clarissa's relationship with the "outside" world of the city and the "inside" world of her home. It is my belief that by making a physical space on the page for the everyday woman, Woolf celebrates the often trivialized experiences of domesticity and femininity while simultaneously expanding the definition of what it means to have a novel-worthy story.

INTRODUCTION

On October 30th, 1924, Virginia Woolf published an essay called “Character in Fiction.” Her impetus for writing was a recently-published, harsh piece of criticism by author Arnold Bennett, in which he denounced the talent of up-and-coming modernist authors and, in particular, one of Woolf’s own novels. “Character in Fiction” refutes his claim that “no young novelists of any first-rate importance are rising up to take the place of the important middle-aged” (Bennett 4). Her rebuttal is an ample and beautiful defense of her literary generation, and the heart of her argument is located in one bold observation: “On or about December 1910 human character changed” (“CF” 15).

The “change” that Woolf mentions is, of course, what she recognizes as the arrival of modernism: the literary movement that consciously upended tradition by breaking ties with conventional prose and linear narratives. Woolf—along with the Joyces, Eliots, and Pounds of her generation—saw modernity as fraught, fragmented, and only to be understood through the use of literary methods previously thought uncanny or unfounded. Modernists abandoned conventional syntax and used narrative modes like stream of consciousness to pass through the minds of multiple characters. They upended the notion of objective truth and required their readers’ active participation in their texts in order to gauge their meanings.

This new approach to literature resulted in a completely new way of depicting character—one devoid of easy interpretation. But where Bennett dismisses “young novelists” as being unable to create true or convincing characters, Woolf applauds those same writers for laying down the tools of prior literary traditions and writing in a way that reflects the rapid social change of their time:

All human relations have shifted — those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. (“CF” 16)

Woolf’s essay was later titled “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” reflecting the way that its argument centers around a female character of Woolf’s creation. “Mrs. Brown,” says Woolf, “is eternal” (“CF” 31). She is a universal representation of the everyday woman—the mothers, maids, servants, and shopgirls who live less than spectacular lives, and whose stories are often omitted from literature. Woolf argues that her own power, and the power of her contemporary novelists, is that they are trying to see, understand, and make real Mrs. Brown in a way that no generation of authors has done before. Woolf believed “that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite,” and it is precisely this wish to shine a truthful light on even the plainest, most ordinary corners of the world that set modernism apart from the traditions that came before it (“CF” 22).

“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” which eventually became well-known for being an important exploration of literary modernism, was originally printed by Hogarth Press—a publishing house owned and operated by none other than Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Virginia’s work was sorting the blocks of type: “She would find each piece of type in the case (this was slow at first, but would get faster) and then place it, face up and upside down, in the composing stick... each line, set letter by letter and word by word, had to fill the width of the stick exactly” (Lee 358). She loved the materiality and meticulousness of the work; one can imagine her joy at watching her words literally take shape, the ink of her own argument blooming into being with each punch of block to paper. She created both the character of Mrs.

Brown and a physical place for her on the page—two actions that seem indicative, in a way, of her career as a whole. Woolf knew that changing the way we represent character—as well as the kinds of characters that are represented—was a political act, and one that fell upon the modernists to undertake.

But while Woolf's essays are well-known for their political charge, her fiction is most often remembered for its experimental nature and unparalleled style and form. These distinctions are both well-founded and well-deserved, but they don't tell the whole story of Woolf's intentions as a novelist. Her beliefs about society, politics, gender, and sexuality are embedded into the seams of her fiction as well as her nonfiction; her novels are as much about the themes they subtly comment on as the explicit beauty they contain.

This paper focuses largely on Woolf's 1925 novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Published less than a year after "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," *Mrs. Dalloway* is a novel that actively deploys the principles Woolf lays down in the 1924 essay. At first glance, it is a book in which nothing really happens. A woman plans a party, takes a walk, reflects on her childhood, mends a dress. The protagonist is a relatively ordinary 20th century society hostess whose life story doesn't seem to have much to offer the reader in terms of depth. But in reality *Mrs. Dalloway* has a lot to say about the state of the post-WWI world that Woolf wrote it in. When planning the novel she wrote in her diary that she wanted "to criticise the social system, and show it at work, at its most intense" (*WD* 56). By creating such an "ordinary" heroine and taking us through a day in her life, Woolf is able to comment on "the social system" by showing us precisely how Clarissa Dalloway fits into it. The novel, then, is largely about the physical and intellectual spaces that

Clarissa occupies. Where does she go? Why does she go there? Who does she converse with? What do they talk about? Where in her life is she privileged? Where is she restricted?

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the political and literary beliefs that led Woolf to write a novel like this one, I will examine *Mrs. Dalloway* alongside some of Woolf's more explicitly feminist essays. Since I am particularly interested in exploring the subject of feminine space, I lean heavily upon *A Room of One's Own*—Woolf's extended narrative essay on the past and present social and material conditions of women writing fiction. While the essay is commonly identified with the clear demands of its thesis—"a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction"—it also functions as a larger commentary on female space ("Room" 4). Literary scholar Lauren Elkin writes about the importance of analyzing this space in but also beyond the domestic experience:

A Room of One's Own is not purely about the need for closed-off private quiet space. It is also about the boundaries women bump up against in the world outside the room: it is about intellectual trespassing, daring to ask questions about women and fiction and women and history that have not been addressed before. (Elkin 87)

Using Woolf's own essays to illuminate the ideologies at work in her fiction allows for a deeper and more developed understanding of her intent as an author and feminist. "Analyzing the different ways that men and women are allowed to use space was part of [Woolf's] feminist agenda," and in reading *Mrs. Dalloway* by the light of *A Room of One's Own* and a few other essays, we are given a peek into her tremendous execution of this undertaking (Elkin 90).

Thirty-one years after Virginia Woolf's death, author and feminist Adrienne Rich published an essay on patriarchal literary history. Referencing Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*,

Rich suggests that “the specter ... of male judgment, along with the active discouragement and thwarting of her needs by a culture controlled by males, has created problems for the woman writer” (Rich 37). She calls for “a radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse” and sees this as a valuable and vital next step for the world:

Re-vision — the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction — is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (Rich 35)

I believe that *A Room of One's Own* was Woolf's early endeavor to dig into this notion of “re-vision,” and that *Mrs. Dalloway*—written while her ideas for *Room* were still budding—was an active attempt to create a new kind of novel, one that encouraged this “drive to self-knowledge.” Woolf believed the stories of plain old Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway had as much to offer the world as those of the most heroic journeys and adventurous plots. In order to create a literature that recognized the importance of these ordinary women, she situated herself directly within the realm of their everyday life. The rooms they occupy, the places they go, the things they think about—Woolf knew that all of it matters, that all of it has something to tell us about these women and the world they live in.

PART ONE: OUTSIDE

A Morning Walk

For those unfamiliar with the novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* chronicles a single June day in the life of a woman named Clarissa. Woolf introduces her eponymous heroine on the morning of a day she is planning to throw a party, quickly establishing her preparations for the evening as the central bud from which the rest of the story blooms. The very first phrase is an act of readying for the gathering: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (*MD* 3). This initial sentence is simple: its ring is clear and easy, hardly hinting at the dense, well-mapped beauty of the story to come. But underneath the seeming clarity of this opening line is a clue to the nature of the novel itself. That Clarissa’s marital status is the first thing we come to know about her already says much about the world she lives in; that this wealthy woman chooses to perform a task she could easily have assigned to a servant tells us something about her character; that this simple task is worthy of an opening line declares the centrality and importance of everyday life in this novel.

The weight placed on Clarissa’s wifhood is certainly intentional on Woolf’s part. Because one of her goals for the novel was to criticize the social systems of her time, she created a protagonist she knew would be subject to some of those systems. Clarissa Dalloway is “a charming woman... light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness” (*MD* 4). She married a wealthy man, treats her servants kindly, and is almost wholly consumed by her plans for her party in the evening. But while she loves her parties and the way they bring the people in her life together, she constantly questions throughout the novel if being a

society hostess is meaningless in a world still dealing with the aftermath of a war. She reflects on her past and wonders how her life would've been different if she'd made different choices—if she'd gone down a less secure path.

By declaring that a novel-worthy story exists in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, Woolf turned literature toward a new kind of truth. For many of the modernists, this truth was located in what had previously been regarded as the mundanities of everyday life. What were before simple tasks swept into the often overlooked category of “women’s work”—party-planning, dress-mending, and even flower-buying—were now methods of parsing through the most intricate subtleties of being. That this ordinariness hums at the center of the book that changed the course of the novel forever is no small matter, but Woolf knew this from the beginning: “Virginia Woolf knew exactly what she was up to—title and heroine’s name sprung in her first line, the clarity of diction, the very simplicity of the domestic errand suggesting a world that we will comprehend” (Howard vii).

But perhaps the most important function of the opening sentence is the way that it takes Clarissa physically out into the world. A morning walk may seem like a trivial enough beginning to a novel, but what Woolf is really doing is highlighting the crucial connection between physical and psychological space. An early 20th century woman walking and thinking alone and in public was no small phenomenon; by beginning the novel with an activity that would not have been accessible to Clarissa had she lived just a few decades earlier, Woolf already calls attention to the way that the simplest, everyday actions often reflect great societal change.

In Woolf’s fiction these quotidian, urban moments also often serve as the key to unlocking the complexities of her characters. As Clarissa steps through the city on her quest of

buying flowers, a clearer sense of her being comes into vision for the reader. Immediately we are thrown into the bustle and eddy of the London streets. And from Clarissa's first spoken words in the novel, we gather that she is an active participant in the world around her: "I love walking in London" (*MD* 6). She praises the rhythms of the city, seeing beauty everywhere:

In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (*MD* 4)

While she is a housewife and hostess whose occupation is mostly bound to the domain of the domestic, Clarissa feels at home in the movement and the mystery of the city. She finds parallels between her own parties and the unforced, intrinsic community of the urban streets: "she, too, loving it as she did with an absurd and faithful passion... was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party" (*MD* 5). The city renews and reaffirms Clarissa's sense of purpose, and walking through it gives her a kind of energy unseen anywhere else in the novel.

Mrs. Dalloway's walk is often interpreted through the lens of *flânerie*: the French term for the act of strolling or wandering aimlessly, most often through urban settings. The figure of the *flâneur*—the individual engaging in the act of *flânerie*—first emerged in an essay called "The Painter of Modern Life" by poet Charles Baudelaire in 1863. Here, Baudelaire identifies the traditionally masculine figure as someone who feels at once enthralled by and comfortable in the hubbub of urban life: "For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home"

(Baudelaire 9). This literary type is largely embodied by male characters because of the way that it demands personal agency outside the house and the ability to idle—luxuries not readily awarded to 19th and early 20th century women. And yet here was Virginia Woolf clearing room for Clarissa Dalloway, who became “perhaps the greatest flâneuse of twentieth-century literature” (Elkin 80). The grammatical change to the French feminine ending that some scholars are starting to observe mirrors the way that authors like Woolf changed, or started, a larger conversation around the female experience of the city. Women were not given the ability to experience urban life in the way that men were, but this does not mean that they were oblivious to its magic: “there is a sense of the city you can’t plot on a map or a phone. It is an intense, embodied relationship to its atmosphere, and Woolf gives it to Clarissa Dalloway” (Elkin 83).

But Mrs. Dalloway is not Woolf’s only famous flâneuse. In 1930, she published “Street Haunting,” an essay with a narrator whose relationship to the city is interesting to observe alongside Clarissa’s. Here, the anonymous heroine sets out on a night walk in the search of a new pencil, a simple errand that she admits is an excuse to “indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London (Woolf, “SH”). As the narrator moves through the city she also moves in and out of the minds of each person she passes, wondering what life and London are like for members of every level of society. It is this imaginative act of observing the world after being inside all day that brings the narrator to life: “The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye” (Woolf, “SH”). The anonymity that the city provides is something that social and domestic duties in the home have

never offered women, and the ability to exist in the world as a mere observer of it—if only for the duration of a walk—allows these women to begin asking questions about the role of their “selves” among all of it. We see these questions arise most clearly in “Street Haunting,” when the narrator explicitly wonders about her “true self”: “Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves?” (Woolf, “SH”). But while both texts can be read as a celebration of physical and intellectual wandering in the search of female identity, they also pose questions about the limits of this freedom for the early 20th century woman. Both Clarissa and Woolf’s street haunter come alive when they are spatially and socially free out in the city, but at the same time they are experiencing a kind of freedom that seems bound by a domestic task.

The difference between these two women becomes most evident in examining their levels of awareness of the limits of their freedom. Mrs. Dalloway rides for a moment on “the waves of that divine vitality” that her walk in the city offers her, and then returns rather promptly—her walk is over by page 29—to the duties of the domestic sphere (*MD* 7). “Street Haunting,” on the other hand, introduces a narrator supremely and immediately aware of the way her gender limits her. In an essay on commodity culture, scholar Kathryn Simpson explores how this narrator knowingly subverts the system by embracing the socially-accepted female role of “shopper” in order to experience the city with the freedom of the male flâneur. Simpson writes that “Woolf’s narrator refuses to respond to the glittering spectacle in the way commerce intends; instead of privileging the profit motive, her responses are imaginative not materialistic or acquisitive, and these responses create space for the articulation of her fantasies and desires” (Simpson 48).

Where *Mrs. Dalloway* represents a woman submissive to, or maybe even unaware of, the way that her freedom in the city is bound to her acts of consumerism—in this case, flower-buying—“Street Haunting” offers an example of the way that being aware of the systems under which the world operates can set you free from their limitations. Woolf’s essential modernist beliefs are busily at work here. She tucks wider conversations about social and gender roles into these common activities that appear, on the surface, quite simple. By locating these enormous questions within actions as ordinary as women walking, Woolf implicitly argues that real, meaningful, worthwhile stories about real, meaningful, worthwhile ideas exist right within our everyday lives.

Simpson argues that at the end of “Street Haunting,” Woolf’s narrator “can return to her room with renewed inspiration and the means, and the freedom, to create” (53). But Clarissa is not given this same kind of clarity. Upon returning home she’s drained of the energy with which the city filled her almost immediately; the entry hall of her house is quiet, empty, and “cool as a vault” (*MD* 29). Clarissa seems to lose something at the end of her walk, though she can’t quite name precisely what it is.

What was Woolf trying to accomplish in giving her heroine a temporarily captivating yet predominantly limiting experience of the outside world? This theme of women being checked by certain social or physical barriers frequently occurs in her work—not because Woolf wanted to perpetuate these gendered limitations, but because she wanted the world to acknowledge that they existed. Her influential essay *A Room of One’s Own*, for example, opens with a similar sort of situation. Woolf writes from the position of the essay’s fictional narrator, Mary Beton, who is

walking, thinking, and reflecting on the subject of women and fiction—a topic on which she has been asked to give a talk—when suddenly she is struck with an idea:

But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind—put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still. It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. (*Room 6*)

Like in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the narrator here experiences a heightened sense of intellectual and emotional freedom that mirrors the expansiveness of the physical space she is in. But, like in *Mrs. Dalloway*, her experience is also curbed by the limitations of her gender: “Instantly a man’s figure rose to intercept me” (*Room 6*). Woolf’s narrator had been walking in a place where women were not allowed to be, shown by the “horror and indignation” on the face of the Beadle who quite literally stopped her in her tracks (*Room 6*). As a result of this physical limitation, she loses the idea that had initially been so important to her.

The narrator’s experience in *A Room of One’s Own* is not exactly like Clarissa’s; Mrs. Dalloway is not a writer, so what she loses when she must reencounter the domestic sphere is not an idea but a feeling. The city provides her a kind of liberty that the expectations attached to life at home will simply never measure up to. Woolf held a great reverence for the simple pleasures of domestic life, which I will explore in further detail later in this paper. But at the same time, Woolf’s intention in much of her writing was to show that home-life was not the only subject on which women were capable of having an opinion: “women, like men, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity” (*Room 83*). Her female characters come alive in

the city, as well as at the dinner table; they find as much, if not more, pleasure in walking alone as they do in hosting dinner parties and keeping house. What *Mrs. Dalloway* hints at, and what *A Room of One's Own* makes clear, is that Woolf is “devoted to tracing the effect of social restrictions on female personality” (Rosenman 36). Her feminist agenda is always at work: “Although it is sometimes muted, the process of historical change can be felt in her novels and essays as a force that can transform consciousness” (Rosenman 36). In its own subtle way, *Mrs. Dalloway* is dedicated to this kind of change; Clarissa’s experience sheds light on restrictions around the early 20th century female experience in general, especially in regards to life outside the home.

“The Accumulation of Unrecorded Life”

One of the ways that *Mrs. Dalloway* serves as a vehicle for a kind of transformed consciousness is how it pays particular attention to what Woolf calls “the accumulation of unrecorded life” (*Room* 89). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf calls out the way that patriarchal literary traditions have omitted certain kinds of stories. She writes of the everyday glories and drudgeries that women have always experienced, and believes in their power to tell a new kind of truth: “all these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded” (*Room* 89). Woolf wrote stories from the perspectives of the kinds of characters she felt literature had long ignored: “And there is the girl behind the counter too—I would as soon have her true history as the hundred and fiftieth life of Napoleon or seventieth study of Keats” (*Room* 90). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, we see this partly at work in the choice of Clarissa as protagonist. That Woolf located a novel-worthy story

in a relatively ordinary society hostess—on a relatively unremarkable day—says something about the kind of truth she wanted the novel to uncover.

But Woolf's wish to record what was previously "unrecorded life" also extends to her portrayal of the city in general. When Mrs. Dalloway goes home, London keeps moving. Woolf creates a detailed and multi-layered depiction of the city, and in doing so takes her reader in and out of the minds of all kinds of characters on the street—ranging from those whose lives are intertwined with Clarissa's to perfect strangers whose thoughts we only briefly glimpse. *Mrs. Dalloway* was the novel that first marked Woolf as a master of stream of consciousness writing, and this nearly constant dip into the thoughts of surrounding characters is largely the reason why. Critic Elaine Showalter emphasizes the novel's success at painting a vibrant picture of Clarissa and the world around her: "following her thoughts, memories, anxieties and epiphanies from morning to night on the day when she is preparing to give a large party, and entering the minds of the people she passes or meets, we see a broad and deep cross section of London, five years after the Armistice" (Showalter). Woolf lingers on these cityscapes and urban moments even when her protagonist is not directly involved, because she knows that a fuller picture of London—and the patchwork of moments and minds that compose it—leads inevitably to a fuller picture of Clarissa and her place within it all.

One of the results of this time spent building up the world in which Clarissa lives is a cluster of brief, beautiful moments that read as an ode to the communal nature of urban life. Much of the story is focused on Clarissa's individual, interior experience, but these moments show a knowledge for the way that part of understanding a character is understanding the world in which they live. One of these moments occurs when a car stalls, and the "pistol shot" sound in

the street outside tethers every passerby to a collective wonder about who the grand car might belong to (*MD*13). Woolf flits from mind to mind as each pedestrian guesses what royal face might have been glimpsed before the curtain was pulled, and the car moved on: “Was it the Prince of Wales’s, the Queen’s, the Prime Minister’s? Whose face was it? Nobody knew” (*MD* 14).

At first glance, the stalled car seems to add little to the novel as a whole. And in reality, had Woolf chosen to omit this admittedly trifling moment, the rest of the novel likely wouldn’t have been much affected. But perhaps in making room for these moments in which nothing really happens, Woolf is asking us to pay attention to what already has. This scene, with its stalling car and turning heads, represents a moment of daily urban life, but it also goes beyond that—it is an active declaration of empathy and community in a post-war world. When the car drives away, the individual subjectivity in which each witness of the scene had been mired goes with it. There is a sudden feeling of oneness, the whole city comes together for a moment:

The car had gone, but it had left a slight ripple... For thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way—to the window... Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fulness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire. (*MD* 18)

In the middle of a story about a society hostess and her party, here is the presence and the remembrance of war. Women in literature who have the financial and social privilege of Mrs. Dalloway are hardly ever examined in the context of their political climate, and yet in this scene

Woolf creates a sort of tension for Clarissa and her fellow pedestrians: What are they to do with the memories and echoes of war? How are they to proceed with life as usual? This vast tangle of interior lives becomes a part of the story itself: “During the war years and immediately afterward, the modernist writer’s need to realize an anguished response to the experience of war became inseparable from the need to reveal inward states of consciousness” (Goldman 85).

Woolf illuminates her characters’s thoughts in a way that demonstrates the painful reality of war, even in the midst of flower-buying and the monotony of everyday errands. By allowing her novel to veer outside of the mind and home of her protagonist, Woolf makes room for a story that hints at a larger cultural memory and experience—one felt by every member and rank of society.

But perhaps Woolf’s strongest representation of the effects of war—and the most important character introduced by her wide and sweeping scope of the city—is Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked veteran of World War One. In her 1928 introduction to the novel, Woolf explicitly noted her intention for Septimus to serve as a double for her protagonist. In many ways, he appears to be the absolute inverse of Clarissa; his working class status puts him on the fringes of society, he is marginalized because of his poor mental and physical health, and he is altogether failing to measure up to the masculine ideal that society expects of an ex-soldier. There being no diagnosis for PTSD—the term “shell-shocked” is only mentioned once in the novel—Septimus does not receive adequate care from the doctors he visits. Over the course of the story, we watch as his suicidal threats and vivid hallucinations increasingly consume him.

But despite Septimus’s many outward differences, there are also aspects of his character that strongly mirror Clarissa. Both characters are empathetic and aesthetically attuned—they are both roused, for better or for worse, by the streets of London, and they both spend significant

parts of the novel thinking about death. While Clarissa wonders whether being a society hostess is a worthwhile legacy to leave behind in the shadow of a war, Septimus is preoccupied by hallucinations of a friend he had lost in battle: “Evans was speaking. The dead were with him” (*MD* 93).

The interesting thing about these doubles is that they never actually meet. At the end of the novel Clarissa learns of Septimus’s suicide, which the second half of this paper will address. But until that moment they are entirely separate entities, viewing and coping with the same world in different ways. In fact, the first time we meet Septimus is during the scene with the motorcar. He and Clarissa happen to share the same visual experience from different sides of the street, but his impression of the scene lacks the magic that Mrs. Dalloway felt:

There the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. (*MD* 15)

Septimus’s inability to see the beauty of “the drawing together of everything” is telling of the way the war has destroyed him, and later becomes one of the primary markers of difference between him and Clarissa.

Despite the figure of Septimus playing such a central role in the novel, the political commentary on war in *Mrs. Dalloway* is largely overlooked: “One might have expected that Woolf’s description of Septimus Warren Smith’s shell-shocked condition (‘the world itself wavered and quivered and burst into flames’) would of itself have ensured *Mrs. Dalloway* a place in the canon of war literature” (Goldman 85). Some scholars suggest that the dismissal of

the novel as a text that has no political bearing stems from the fact that Woolf allows “woman’s stronger hold on life to be victorious. The apparently trivial, feminine, celebration of her party enables Mrs. Dalloway to face the perpetual threat of loss and death” (Goldman 87). In the end it is ordinary Clarissa, and not war-veteran Septimus, who is able to reclaim her life and find purpose in the midst of all this cultural change.

And yet the narrative of Septimus Smith—along with the thoughts and opinions of every other mind met on the London streets—would never have found its way into the world of the story had Clarissa not been allowed to make *her* way out into it. But even after Mrs. Dalloway goes home, Woolf continues to dip in and out of other consciousnesses. These urban descriptions and encounters remain as much a part of the novel—and, in turn, of Clarissa’s own life—as her own immediate relations and intimate memories. While it may not seem like much on the surface, Clarissa’s walk is what enables Woolf to literally and figuratively step outside of the domestic spaces to which women had too often been confined. In highlighting the minds around Clarissa almost as much as her own, the novel emphasises the way that Clarissa’s perception of her “self” and the city around her are not just things of her own creation; her perspective is constantly made and remade by her experience of the world. Clarissa Dalloway is actively impacted by the city around her, and therefore deserves to be an active participant within it. In creating a female character with interests beyond “the perennial interests of domesticity,” Woolf created a fuller definition of what it meant to be a 20th century woman (*Room* 83). But in giving her protagonist certain limitations to her experience of the “outside” world, she demonstrates that there is still much work to be done.

At the center of all of this walking and thinking and cultural change is the idea of time. At the individual as well as at the communal level, this novel asks questions of the past, present, and future: Who or what has time erased? What will it preserve? How do we remember? By bringing Clarissa out into a world grappling with these questions, Woolf is declaring that such big ideas don't run contrary to a "woman's" story. Clarissa, just like every other character in the novel, feels the weight of time and change: figuratively, in the energy of the city streets, and literally, in the sonorous ringing of Big Ben. The successive chimes of the famous clock throughout the novel keep the plot grounded between all the back and forth from mind to mind and memory to memory: "There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable" (*MD* 4). Each stroke of the clock seems charged with the change its society is facing. Woolf's insistence on this weighty, literal presence of time seems in a way to challenge her readers and characters alike: how they will proceed, what they will change. But for now, the clock strikes and the day goes on. Mrs. Dalloway returns home and the rest of the world keeps moving. Time passes and we pass with it.

PART TWO: INSIDE

The Angel Returns Home

It would not be a Woolf novel without an emphatic reverence for ordinary, everyday life. This becomes clear in the analysis of the author's representation of the city in *Mrs. Dalloway*—the trifling errands her characters run, as well as the literal and cognitive paths they wander down while out in the world, are as much a part of them as their fatal flaws or greatest adventures. But Woolf's love of the commonplace is also evident in the way she engages with the domestic; she illuminates the world of ordinary things and moments around her characters in order to illustrate the way that they are shaped by the spaces in which they spend their lives.

More than just for its simple and often-unnoticed beauty, Woolf's affinity for the ordinary endured because of her belief that "intellectual freedom depends upon material things" (*Room* 108). Woolf's writing is highly aware of the connection between physical and psychological space and, like many modernist works, "exposes the fundamental role of the built environment in creating the categories we use to organize and understand who we are" (Rosner 2). Even Woolf's own autobiographical writing demonstrates the importance of this notion to her. In her 1939 essay "A Sketch of the Past," in which she recollects her childhood, she comes to a conclusion after reflecting upon some of the seemingly ordinary moments, people, and places that shaped her: "I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of that work of art"

(*MB* 72). At the core of Woolf's own life and writing is the idea that in thinking about our "selves," we need not "abandon ordinariness or the external world, because inwardness of course is shaped by a myriad of external factors" (Olson 59). The "cotton wool" has something to teach us, but first we must be willing to enter into it.

In a 1956 essay remembering Woolf's literary greatness, poet W.H. Auden praised "her passionate love, not only or chiefly for the big moments of life but also for its daily humdrum 'sausage-and-haddock' details" (Auden). These details are often what readers take away from her writing; in the midst of her swirling and meandering prose, the physical rooms and objects she describes become touchstones of reality for reader and character alike. *Mrs. Dalloway* brims over with detail about the interior spaces of its characters, as well as the ordinary things that fill them: "the cupboard, the table, the window-sill with its geraniums" (*MD* 58). In many modernist texts, there is a kind of double meaning to the idea of interiority: "The 'interior' is both one's inner nature or being and the inside of a particular space...[there is] an essential resemblance or interdependence between these two senses of the word" (Rosner 129). A close reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* in particular shows that its details are not mere stylistic embellishments, but deeply relevant avenues into the minds of its characters—their inner lives often mirroring the interior spaces they inhabit.

Woolf knew that there was more to female identity than life at home, but at the same time she understood the indisputable and embedded presence of the domestic sphere in the lives of women of and before her time—in real life as well as in literature. In *A Room of One's Own*, she writes that "women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of

bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics” (87). Clarissa Dalloway is not a writer like Woolf describes in this essay, but her power does stem similarly from the wish to make more of the domestic experience to which her gender assigns her. Her creative force, and greatest gift, is her ability to bring people together through her parties—which is why it’s so important to examine the space in which she does so.

Clarissa’s experience of interior space is particularly interesting because of the sharp change in temperament that occurs the moment she crosses the threshold of her own home. She quits the sultry, summer streets of London for the cool familiarity of home, and immediately upon entering is like “a nun who has left the world and feels folded round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions” (*MD* 29). The energy of the city escapes her right away, and she settles back in to the predictable patterns of home-life:

The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and, bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought. (*MD* 29)

At first glance Clarissa seems wholly satisfied with the simplicity and predictability of life at home, finding beauty and pleasure in the smallest of things. But it is precisely this attention to detail that also reveals a more nuanced relationship to the domestic sphere; Clarissa’s own acute self-awareness tunes the reader into the idea that her feelings are more complicated than they initially seem.

In a 1931 essay entitled “Professions for Women,” Woolf writes about “the Angel in the House”—the Victorian notion of the ideal wife and woman who is “intensely sympathetic” and “immensely charming,” who “sacrifices herself daily” and who is, most importantly, pure (115). Woolf believed that destroying the Angel in the House was part of her duty as a woman writer who urged the importance of thinking for oneself: “I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence” (“PW” 116). But for all her efforts to kill this image of the perfect, unflinching woman, she is not entirely absent from Woolf’s fiction. Woolf understood the difficulty of finding a sense of identity after being stripped of the story that has defined women for so long; rather than completely circumventing “the Angel in the House,” Woolf leans into the reality of this kind of character in a way that allows her more self-exploration. In many ways, Clarissa Dalloway is herself an example of this kind of Angel; her inferior social role to that of her husband is constantly emphasized in her private life, and in the public sphere her position as a society hostess puts her at the mercy of the wills and wishes of everyone around her. But the reason Clarissa is so interesting is that she is not blind to the way that her position in life comes with certain gendered social and familial expectations. Clarissa is highly aware of the way that her femininity might be limiting her in the domestic sphere, and she spends the bulk of the novel trying to figure out what to do with that knowledge.

This becomes particularly clear in examining the way that Clarissa navigates and interacts with the spaces within her home. After coming back from her walk, one of the first things she does is go up to her bedroom. Before entering, she pauses at an open staircase window which “let in blinds flapping, dogs barking, let in, she thought, feeling herself suddenly

shrivelled, aged, breathless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body” (*MD* 30). Immediately afterwards, the reader senses her apprehension about entering her own bedroom: “There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room... Narrower and narrower her bed would be” (*MD* 31). We learn that because of an illness requiring sound sleep, Clarissa does not share a room with her husband, Richard. But this is not the kind of creativity-inducing “room of one’s own” that Woolf’s writing demands for the woman artist. Not all rooms are equal, and this cramped, narrow, lonely chamber seems to represent for Clarissa the restricted nature of her own life: “Clarissa’s claustrophobia seems to be provoked not by fear of urban space but by the confinements of women’s domestic life” (Rosner 150). Instead of serving as a restful balm to the chaotic movement of the city, the stillness of Clarissa’s own room actually unnerves her to the extent that it reminds her of her separateness from that outside world. If this scene offers an image of “the Angel” in her native habitat, then it becomes increasingly clear that Clarissa is not entirely at ease in this role.

The brief moment at the window offers a stark contrast to the way that Clarissa’s own room makes her feel. Part of Clarissa’s unease seems to stem from the fact that she does not know how to translate the vitality and liberty with which the city fills her to her life at home. Out in the world her purpose seems clear and her life hopeful, but in the solitude and relative confinement of her own room she loses that clarity. While we don’t see Clarissa really reconcile with these two seemingly separate selves until the end of the novel, throughout the book Woolf makes this dissonance clear to the reader. Modernist scholar Victoria Rosner writes that Woolf’s work suggests “that if the flaneuse could return home to a space more continuous with the street she might sidestep the spatial pathology so frequently associated with women in the city and

discover a roomier interior life” (150). Clarissa’s discomfort, while unfortunate, is not accidental; Woolf plays with that double meaning of “the interior” and, in doing so, subverts the notion that the domestic sphere is unworthy of examination by displaying the complicated relationship that her female characters have with it.

A Madman, A Memory, and An Old Woman Opposite

In order to emphasize Clarissa’s discomfort at home, Woolf oscillates throughout the novel from her inner thoughts to those of her double, Septimus Smith. Both characters struggle with what society expects of them and, while they never cross paths, each seems to mirror, in a way, the internal battle of the other. While Septimus’s war hallucinations feel far-removed from Clarissa’s quest to find meaning in her role as a society hostess, he also seems to represent “aspects of Clarissa’s character that she denies but that are necessary for her to recognize if she is to achieve self-knowledge” (Gillies 115). Through Clarissa’s character, Woolf condemns the physical interiority of the domestic sphere as unable to fully nurture the emotional interiority of the women expected to occupy it. Through the character of Septimus she goes a step further: by showing how society fails to acknowledge and care for the painful inner life of this ex-soldier, Woolf sheds light on the way that the novel’s post-war world is unable to provide solace for men and women alike. By going deep into the rocky interiorities of these characters, Woolf actually creates a wider commentary on the systems and standards that helped form them. The “Angel” and the veteran are both social roles with attached expectations, and Woolf’s writing unveils the harmful nature of these kinds of imposed identities.

But because Clarissa does not learn about Septimus's story until the very end of the novel, Woolf gives her protagonist another, more immediate "double" against which to measure her experience as a woman. Like Septimus, Clarissa never meets this character. But, unlike Septimus, we learn that she has been long, though remotely, acquainted with her. This second double comes in the form of the "old lady opposite"—an elderly woman who lives in the house across the street from Clarissa, and who she can see from her drawing room window. The reader learns that Clarissa has long been examining this woman, and has a sort of reverence for the way that she lives her quiet life: "Somehow one respected that—that old woman looking out of the window, quite unconscious that she was being watched. There was something solemn in it" (*MD* 126). Mrs. Dalloway knows that this woman has no clue that she is being observed, and in a strange way this comforts her.

Clarissa looks at this older woman, and the space that she occupies, and sees herself—the inevitable oncoming of the future, of age, and the loneliness that may accompany it. But while this scares her to some degree, she also finds an immense comfort in the woman's possession of what Clarissa calls "the privacy of the soul" (*MD* 126). The social systems at work in Clarissa's own life lead her to feel like she is constantly invaded by their demands, and this woman provides her an image of intimacy with oneself that is so Woolfian at its center:

Why creeds and prayers and mackintoshes? when, thought Clarissa, that's the miracle, that's the mystery; that old lady, she meant, whom she could see going from chest of drawers to dressing-table. She could still see her. And the supreme mystery... was simply this: here was one room, there another. Did religion solve that, or love? (*MD* 127).

Despite Clarissa's physical separation from this woman, she is soothed by her presence and reads it as an insistence that unforced and unshowy ordinary life is enough. The peace that she observes in this woman is the peace that she hopes to one day find within herself. This reverence for "privacy" of all things, kindled by years of examining this elderly woman, eventually allows Clarissa to confidently flourish as a society hostess. While the ability to retreat, calmly and comfortably, into oneself may seem like an unproductive skill for a woman who exists in the public eye, the reader begins to notice throughout the novel how crucial Clarissa's own inner life is to her ultimate self discovery.

One such scene that expresses the importance of this kind of private life of the mind occurs just after Clarissa enters her bedroom. After she gets over the shock of her solitude, this empty room provides a space for her to think. Her mind moves naturally to memory, and she reminisces on her past: first loves, youthful adventures, alternative paths or risks she might have taken. She is in a state of near-perfect reflective bliss and, through the power of engaging with her own mind, is able to transform this once emotionally-cramped room into a space that allows for the kind of indulgent aloneness that *A Room of One's Own* claims is so necessary for women: "the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space" (*Room* 23). Mrs. Dalloway carries on remembering, unfettered until she recalls a small, but unfortunate, moment in her youth. A boy named Peter Walsh had interrupted a nice evening she was having, and the recollection of this moment jars her still today: "'Oh this horror!' she said to herself, as if she had known all along that something would interrupt, would embitter her moment of happiness" (*MD* 36).

This memory of the incident with Peter, while annoying, is admittedly somewhat trifling; if a reader were to analyze Clarissa in this moment only, they may read her annoyance as petty and resentful. But Woolf is careful not to paint Clarissa in this way—she quickly introduces the fact that Clarissa’s relationship with Peter runs much deeper. He was her childhood friend, but also the man she almost married instead of her current husband. He had been absent from England for years and, after learning that he was to return to London, Clarissa’s distress at the memory of him becomes clearer to the reader. Because he represents in a way the life she might’ve had if she had chosen him, she is nervous about what meeting him in middle age will look like: “What would he think, she wondered, when he came back? That she had grown older? Would he say that, or would she see him thinking when he came back, that she had grown older?” (*MD* 36). They had been incredibly close friends in their adolescence, and Clarissa worries that meeting him now will exaggerate the loss of “their exquisite intimacy” caused by her refusing to marry him (*MD* 46).

But Woolf soon makes it clear that this is not the case. Just minutes after Peter’s intrusion into Clarissa’s daydreaming, the real Peter physically interrupts her day:

“Who can—what can,” asked Mrs. Dalloway (thinking it was outrageous to be interrupted at eleven o’clock on the morning of the day she was giving a party), hearing a step on the stairs. She heard a hand upon the door. She made to hide her dress, like a virgin protecting chastity, respecting privacy. Now the brass knob slipped. Now the door opened, and in came—for a single second she could not remember what he was called! so surprised she was to see him, so glad, so shy, so utterly taken aback to have Peter Walsh come to her unexpectedly in the morning! (*MD* 40)

While Clarissa is initially elated to see her old friend, the act of hiding the dress she was mending “like a virgin protecting chastity” speaks volumes about her relationship with Peter. On the surface this seems like nothing but a small, unconscious action. But in reality this automatic inclination towards “respecting privacy” reflects the way that perhaps their relationship is a little too close for comfort. While the intimacy of their friendship is a beautiful thing, if Clarissa had married Peter she knows that she never would’ve had the emotional freedom that her current life periodically allows her. Though she does not come to this conclusion immediately; throughout their brief conversation in the drawing room Woolf gives us her chaotic inner thought process, ranging from missing Peter deeply to being thoroughly relieved she did not choose him. Woolf uses what looks like a simple conversation between friends to expose the profoundly complex inner life of her protagonist.

The book never explicitly states that Clarissa would or would not have been better off marrying Peter. But a close reading of her marriage with Richard reveals how her current relationship nourishes her sense of privacy in a way that a relationship with Peter could never match. There is a moment in the novel when Richard comes home with a bundle of roses for Clarissa and the wish to tell her he loves her—a romantic action that Woolf leads us to believe is not too common for this couple. But for some reason he is not able to say anything when he gives them to her: “But how lovely, she said, taking his flowers. She understood; she understood without his speaking; his Clarissa” (*MD* 118). There is a sort of gap between Richard and Clarissa, though instead of expressing this gap as a lack of love, Woolf writes it as a mutual and deeply respectful act of privacy for one another:

And there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect... for one would not part with it oneself, or take it, against his will, from one's husband, without losing one's independence, one's self-respect—something, after all, priceless. (*MD* 120)

Woolf's intention was not to write a loveless relationship, but rather one with a profound respect for "privacy"—for that little kernel of selfhood given to each in their own way. In a way, Richard's refusal to make a show of his flowers is a respectful tribute to and acknowledgement of Clarissa's ability to buy the flowers herself. Whether she knew it initially or not, marrying Richard gave Clarissa the gift of maintaining that small but powerful and private sense of self that Septimus is without and that the woman across the street unknowingly encourages her to kindle. And in the end it becomes the thing that saves her.

The World within a Moment

When the time for Clarissa's party finally comes, she slips with ease at the end of the day into the role of the "woman who [sits] in her drawing-room and [makes] a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to" (*MD* 87). Woolf flutters from mind to mind of the partygoers, and through their sensibility of the magic of the evening it becomes clear to character and reader alike that Clarissa is a gifted hostess. She thrives in this domestic role, but by this point in the novel the reader also understands that her identity extends far beyond just this. By merely following the patterns of Clarissa's thoughts throughout the day, Woolf has woven a grand tale of this ordinary woman: "[Woolf] appears to be giving you simple thoughts as they occur to her, one by one and place by place. In reality, she is changing all the

directions and expectations for what counts as a valid way of presenting opinions on the erratic, elusive, impossible subject of women and fiction” (Bowlby). She plunges into the depths of Mrs. Dalloway’s emotions, revealing the complex interiority that lay behind a relatively ordinary exterior: her worries about growing older but also her slow acceptance of age, her reverence for the energy of the city but also her slow understanding of the way her gender bars her from fully participating in it, her love of giving parties but also her fear that they will never be enough for the dissonant world she lives in. Understanding what we do of Clarissa and the way that she is not blind to the outside forces at work in her life, we begin to make sense of her mixed feelings about the evening. People show up and she glides along to greet them, welcoming them graciously but wondering all along if the party is failing, if the party means anything, if she is losing her touch: “still these semblances, these triumphs... had a hollowness; at arm’s length they were, not in the heart: and it might be that she was growing old but they satisfied her no longer as they used” (*MD* 174).

A pivotal moment in the evening occurs when Clarissa, in her subtle distress, drifts over to her husband and joins the conversation he is having with a prestigious local doctor and his wife. While the men discuss a legal bill—which, fittingly, “had some bearing upon the deferred effects of shell shock”—Lady Bradshaw, the doctor’s wife, begins talking with Clarissa (*MD* 183). She tells her rather simply that a young patient of her husband’s had committed suicide—that he had been in the army and had jumped out of a window. The young man is, of course, Septimus Smith, and this is the first moment in the novel in which Clarissa is made aware of his existence: “Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here’s death” (*MD*

183). She does not take on the insincere, gossipy tone of the doctor's wife; rather, she feels the need to remove herself from the situation.

Her first instinct is to enter a room where she believes others will be; we saw in the first section of this paper how Clarissa finds great solace in crowds of other people. But the room is empty, and this allows Clarissa to consider the death of this young man alone, thoroughly, and right within the comfort of her own home. Her reaction is largely corporeal: "Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt" (*MD* 184). Other than while walking through the city, this is perhaps the most "in" herself that Clarissa ever is throughout the novel, and this intense physical response to the death of this young man signals a kind of connection to him or to his fate.

The death of Septimus unleashes a flood of guilt and memory and questioning in Clarissa: she wonders how she is to carry on after learning something like this, having her little parties and pretending that nothing is wrong with the world. In order to find some clarity she moves toward the window and parts the curtains. There, across the street, is the old woman staring back at her: "Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed" (*MD* 186). On the surface, this moment is so simple. Two separate women in their own windows, perhaps acknowledging the presence of the other, and then carrying on—"There! The old lady had put out her light!"—with life as usual (*MD* 186). This moment seems like nothing, but in reality it is the spark that reignites the fire within Clarissa.

She mourns Septimus and the loss of his life, but watching this old woman continue with her patterns and habits reminds her of the necessity of carrying on, of showing up for the people

who are still here, of going back to the party. The collision of Clarissa with her doubles in this moment, while she never actually meets either of them, is crucial to the ultimate self-knowledge that she gains:

She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that 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. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room. (*MD* 186)

Her renewed sense of purpose stems from this solitary moment—this ability to take stock, process, and think for oneself. Here is the moment in the novel when Woolf allows “woman’s stronger hold on life to be victorious”; here is plain old, party-throwing Mrs. Dalloway teaching the world a lesson about what it means to choose life, to commit to oneself and one’s future (Goldman 87). Woolf’s panoramic view of relatively ordinary, though admittedly elaborate, Clarissa paves the way for a new kind of story, one that celebrates the often trivialized female experience as one worth paying attention to.

Finally, it is important to note that this moment of self-discovery—when Clarissa realizes the party *is* her life and chooses to embrace it, to go back to it—unfolds in the domestic sphere, within the realm of the “Angel.” Instead of denouncing traditional femininity or representing the notion of it as something unworthy of examination, Woolf spends this whole novel diving into it in order to reveal its complexities and prove to the reader that these particulars matter. This book is a clearing; a carefully-wrought creation of space for the unseen, unheard woman and the forces at work in her life. It is an ode to the ordinariness of the Mrs. Dalloways and the Mrs.

Browns—and perhaps even the Mrs. Woolfs—and its insistence that a story exists right within the mundane spaces and moments of the everyday is a celebration of and invitation to every life that comes across it.

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Appendix on Faith and Learning

The bulk of this project was written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the final weeks of its completion, millions of people gathered all over the world—despite this pandemic—to protest police brutality in light of the recent murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and the innumerable other Black lives unfairly and cruelly taken by the unjust systems of this country.

Sometimes it feels stupid to sit down and do schoolwork when there is so much else going on in the “real” world. There were days when faith of any kind felt far away, when I had to physically remove myself from the news on my phone in order to get work done, when I wondered why I bothered writing essays when it felt like the rest of the world was going up in flames.

But despite my own personal difficulties in paying attention to classwork, it has been powerful to watch over the course of this project and these last few months how the world has come together in an effort to do better. Literature, the tremendous tool and teacher of human understanding, has played a large role in this: people are reading to make sense of it all, reading to learn, reading to unlearn. I do not think there is one answer to all of this pain, and literature alone certainly is not it. But if all these books, prayers, donations, protests, and hard conversations lead to real change and a sustained desire to better understand our neighbor, we are moving in the right direction. Empathy is a learned thing, and I think it is the first step.

This is why Woolf’s work means so much to me. Her writing does not provide a vaccine for a virus or give a quick solution to generations of racial injustice. But what it does do is encourage us to approach these problems—these real, pressing, necessary issues of life as it is

right now—with all the heart we can muster. Even if we are afraid and feel unprepared, even if we don't have the right words yet.

The more I read about her and learn about the difficulties she faced with articulating exactly what she meant, the less I feel the pressure to have to do so in my own life. Despite the inability to always explain precisely why, Woolf's work is a testament to the interconnectedness of all things. Her stories lay themselves bare; the whole world reduces to just one room, one mind, one moment—and yet within these particulars and everyday scenes she's able to pick at the dissonance and bind together the disparities that haunt her. Woolf's novels offer a brief glimpse into what it looks like to tie the strings together and to really pay attention to the things around us: the light wrapped around the table leg and the patterns of the people we love, a single flower and the beauty of a sentence that sounds like spoken cursive. She is unafraid to stare directly into whatever light is throwing itself back onto her—be it good or or scary or complicated—and she is how I want to pay attention to the world. There is something holy in the everyday and the way that we interact with it, and for Virginia it certainly isn't God. But for me I think it might be, and it is on this little hinge of hope that I wish to live my life as a believer and scholar.