Beyond the Self: Identity, Impermanence, and the Meanings of Life in the Novels of Virginia Woolf

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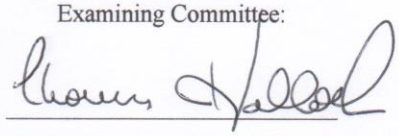

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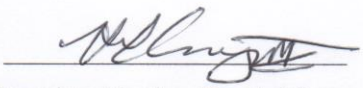

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's novels posit a view of a self and world that is constantly in flux. This thesis explores Woolf's novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, tracing the development of themes such as selfhood, impermanence, and individual meaning, and strives to show how they are presented and intertwined in Woolf's fiction. The thesis focuses on characters in Woolf's works and how they strive for balance in their lives between inhabiting a self and being constrained by it. I explore how characters' ideas of themselves as individuals give rise to the kinds of meaning they find in their lives. Further, I argue that those characters who can embrace a more fluid, broader definition of selfhood – one in which the boundaries between one life and another are called into question – are better equipped to deal with life's impermanence and the creation of a meaningful existence.

Introduction

Towards the beginning of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, one of the novel's central characters experiences a momentary loss of self. After letting her mind run rampant with negative thoughts of aging, disillusionment, and unhappiness, Mrs. Ramsay stares out the window at the titular lighthouse and begins to clear her mind. Suddenly, "all the being and the doing [… evaporates]," and she shrinks "to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (71). And while such a description may seem negative, it becomes clear that this is not the case. Woolf continues, "there was freedom, there was peace. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity" (71).

In the preceding passage, Woolf presents the self more as a limitation of human experience than as something to be cultivated or perfected. In the scene of Mrs. Ramsay's escape from the self, personality is characterized with states of unease and contrasted against freedom and peace. Such a depiction is markedly different from many Western notions of identity in which the self takes primacy. One need only consider how much society values concepts like self-esteem, self-image, or self-reliance. We speak of finding one's self, the underlying assumption being that if we peel away at our inner lives and thoughts like an onion, one can find a stable, authentic self hiding beneath the accumulated psychological baggage. And while Woolf's above episode describes shrinking to "being oneself," the reader gets the sense that this self is of a different kind than that described by the aforementioned ideas. What would such a state of being entail, how does it differ from conventional conceptions, and what unique insights might it provide one?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the other manifestations of selfhood in Woolf's novels. For instance, as a wife and mother Mrs. Ramsay constantly attempts to fulfill her ideas of what such social roles entail – a pursuit which, while valuable in some senses, also exhausts her. Other characters, like Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway*, find their social roles even more constraining. In living as a housewife for so many years to a well-meaning but unexciting politician for a husband, Clarissa feels she has lost some essential part of her identity. She remembers the passionate idealism and romantic longings she felt in her youth, and laments their loss and replacement by the domestic life she inhabits now. Even still, other characters like Mrs. Ramsay's husband define themselves in terms of their lasting impact on their society and the world at large. In *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay is a moderately successful teacher and philosopher who experiences discouragement and self-loathing because of his desire[i] to be remembered as a great thinker throughout the ages. Given that Woolf's work deals intimately with the impermanence of life and the sorts of meaning one can find in the face of that truth, it is no surprise that these more rigid ideas of the self can be unfulfilling.

There is a philosophical and religious system that provides a different view of the self: Buddhism. While Woolf was not a Buddhist herself, Woolf's depiction of identity as fluid, illusory, and indeterminate speaks to a Buddhist understanding of the self. Similarly, clinging to the self in Woolf's novels brings a great deal of suffering – a phenomenon that Buddhism defines as one of, if not the, root of all suffering in general. As Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse writes in *What Makes You Not a Buddhist*, "Everything we do in our lives depends on how we perceive our 'selves,' so if this perception is based on misunderstandings, which it inevitably is, then this misunderstanding permeates everything we do, see, and experience. It is not a simple matter of a child misinterpreting light and movement; our whole existence is based on very faulty premises"

(45). Woolf's characters often feel boxed into social roles at the expense of what could make them happier, like Clarissa. Or, they recognize the futility of trying to be remembered throughout time, but still focus on that elusive goal as a source of meaning – as is the case with Mr. Ramsay's quest to become a legendary philosopher in the Western tradition. As Woolf's novels and Buddhist philosophy demonstrate, struggling against such inherent contradictions in selfhood cannot produce any satisfaction. Since many of Woolf's major themes – impermanence, the meaning of life, among others – seem inextricably connected to the self, analyzing her novels in the context of Buddhism alongside other literary criticism seems appropriate.[ii]

With the understanding that the self can constrain and limit experience rather than heighten it, the momentary falling away of Mrs. Ramsay's personality doesn't seem as alien or undesirable. Instead of worrying about her life, about aging, about her childrens' futures, she can turn her attention to the present; instead of having to act as mother, as wife, or as an emotional support for others, she can finally be apart from the roles, the expectations, and constructs of the self and exist for a moment free of their dictates. There is nothing to live up to, only a sense of peace; "not as oneself did one find rest ever, but as a wedge-shaped core of darkness." But just as this idea of the self seems so insular, Woolf expands its boundaries in what comes next: "it was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, how one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one" (72). Woolf thus suggests the existence of a much more fluid, porous definition of selfhood: one that is unconstrained by the decrees of the social realm and open to fusion with the natural world and possibly even other selves.

This more open definition of selfhood has serious implications for how one derives meaning from experience. It is clear that many of Woolf's characters suffer for fear of

insignificance in the face of life's inevitable change; after all, one life seems rather small in the grand scheme of the world's existence. But if that idea of one life can be expanded – if, in fact, there are fewer separations and blurrier boundaries between selves and between a single self and the world around it – then the meanings of a supposedly single life proliferate as well. Bernard in *The Waves* ponders how to distinguish his life from the myriad ways in which it has been shaped by those of his friends; Clarissa Dalloway wonders if her life really ends at her alone, or if she has touched innumerable lives and will continue to live in the people, places, and memories she has encountered. Suddenly, one can see how this idea of selfhood can address this fear of impermanence. If the effects of one life are so immeasurable and impactful in countless ways, then the notion of a life and its innumerable impacts and meanings ending at death seems shortsighted.

This letting go of social roles and embracing of what Clarissa Dalloway calls "the privacy of the soul" also allows for a greater appreciation of the mundane (124). Joshua Rothman writes, "Clarissa, famously, buys the flowers herself, and that allows her to enjoy the coolness, stillness, and beauty of the flower shop; the same, Woolf suggests, happens in Clarissa's inner life, where her heightened feelings are allowed to stay pure, untouched" (Rothman). A self unburdened by the weight of social expectation and vehement passions can be more mindful of the beauty that exists in ordinary experience. It is far easier to find the value and beauty in one's surroundings when one is not worried about performing a role.

Even with these realizations, however, it would be foolish to wholly discount more socially-based views of the self and the meaning of life. Many find great joy in fulfilling their roles as wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, and the like. Sometimes Woolf's characters do as well, as is the case with Clarissa's love of throwing social gatherings. And clearly one cannot

function in the world without a self; one needs personality, some form of an ego, simply to exist in society. The recognition of the social self as a kind of necessary fiction, then, underpins Woolf's work. These roles and selves may be social constructs, but that does not make them or their demands any less real to Woolf's characters. The difficulty her characters face, then, is to find a way to reconcile these varying views of the self in a rewarding way that grants life a sense of meaning. Woolf thus presents life as a balancing act between different embodiments of selfhood, with the requirements of the social self in tension with the more expansive, porous experiences that characters have in which such a social self dissolves.

There is a clear unity and coherence of idea in Woolf's novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* that lends itself to their grouping and combined analysis in this thesis. While Woolf wrote nine novels (alongside countless short stories, essays, letters, diaries, and more), these three are often identified as her most critically acclaimed and, for lack of a less problematic term, important. Additionally, the three considered together form a natural sort of trio, with obvious parallels existing between certain themes and characters. There even exist deliberate callbacks to particular phrases by Woolf, leading one to believe that the three novels – despite *Orlando* being written in between *Lighthouse* and *Waves* – indicate a natural progression and development of sorts that inspired this work.

Consulting the critical conversation around Woolf's work, one finds it has undergone countless developments and changes over the decades. Many critics from the mid-1900s examined Woolf's connection to literary impressionism, psychology, and myth, while more contemporary critics explore her work in terms of feminism, aesthetic theory, postcolonialism, and ethics. Many critics read Woolf's work through various theoretical lenses, among them Lacanian psychoanalysis or Derridean deconstruction, while others explore Woolf via genetic

criticism, geocriticism, and other approaches. Much writing exists on the presentation of the self within her novels, but mostly through feminist and other theoretical modes of analysis.

My approach is not to cast aside or ignore previous Woolf criticism; in fact, much of it informs this thesis.[iii] I am chiefly concerned, however, with the broader existential implications of Woolf's work and as such do not hone in on any particular school of literary theory as a mode of analysis. Instead, this thesis is in some ways inspired and informed by Buddhist philosophy and its ideas about the self and impermanence. Rather than claim Virginia Woolf as an accidental Buddhist, the aim is to explicate some of Woolf's thematic concerns and argue for a particular view of selfhood in her novels using both Woolf criticism and Buddhist philosophy as frameworks for analysis. In examining Woolf's novels *Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse,* and *The Waves*, then, this thesis argues for an intimate connection in Woolf's novels between ideas of the self and notions of life's significance in the face of its impermanence. Further, it suggests that those characters who can recognize the pitfalls of a static, fixed self and embrace a more fluid definition of selfhood – one in which the subject's division from the world around them and from other selves is questioned or even eliminated altogether – can more deeply appreciate the mundane and life's meaning as opposed to those who see the self as isolated, static, and wholly distinct from its surroundings.

The Great Balancing Act: Identity and its Dissolution in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Set in London shortly after the First World War, *Mrs. Dalloway* focuses on a mundane day in the lives of a number of its inhabitants. Chiefly, it follows its titular character Clarissa Dalloway as she navigates the city in preparation to throw one of her famed parties for London's upper class. It also delves into the consciousness of many other characters, most notably Septimus Smith, a traumatized war veteran, and Peter Walsh, Clarissa's old love who has returned from India. Should the reader wish for more of a concrete plot to grasp hold of, either in *Mrs. Dalloway* or in the other novels examined in this thesis, he or she will find themselves wholly out of luck. Famously, Woolf begins with Mrs. Dalloway's decision to "buy the flowers herself" (1). Woolf's novel eschews traditional plot in the sense that little physical action can be said to occur; there are no nail–biting cliffhangers to be found within *Dalloway*, nor any rip-roaring tales of adventure. But this does not mean that nothing happens in Woolf's novel, unless one has a very narrow definition of what constitutes an event. The action in Woolf's novel may take place inside the characters rather than outside within the physical world, but this does not diminish its impact, excitement, or poignancy. If anything, such an approach elevates the inner world to the status of the outer, and communicates how internal experiences can be just as visceral, transformative, and powerful as any other.

Thematically, *Mrs. Dalloway* is largely concerned with issues of identity, and prefigures *To the Lighthouse* and especially *The Waves* in how it investigates boundaries of selfhood, life's impermanence, and individual meaning. *Mrs. Dalloway* focuses on the implications of living in a constructed self and how to maintain some degree of freedom and purpose when such a self produces the boundaries and guidelines for one's entire life. The novel also perfectly encapsulates the notion of selfhood as a balance; Clarissa at once values the social self with her

enjoyment of organizing gatherings and bringing people together, whilst simultaneously treasuring the moments in which that constructed self falls away and the boundaries between her and the world dissipate.

Woolf begins *Mrs. Dalloway* with a sense of joy in the everyday. Woolf's titular character emerges into the streets of London as she marvels at "what a morning" it is (3). Astounded by life's beauty and intensity, Clarissa thinks how "it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing" (8).These paragraphs communicate the novel's fascination with the intensity of ordinary experience, of the seemingly mundane moment one takes so often for granted. Woolf finds infinite depths within the daily, the ordinary, the moment-to-moment experience of life as it unfolds. An appreciation of this fact serves as a key difference between some of the characters in the novel, and figures into their capacity to enjoy and meaningfully inhabit the world around them. Interestingly, Woolf relates this capacity to appreciate the mundane to a specific mode of inhabiting the self.

As Clarissa notes how the world around her is "absolutely absorbing," she ruminates on the self and its connection to those around us. Remembering Peter Walsh, an old friend and lover, she notes how "with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into" (7). She compares this with her relationship to her current husband Richard, which contains "a little license, a little independence between people" – a space for them to live their lives with a sense of inner privacy (8). Woolf's work suggests that within this distance there opens up a space for gratitude and mindfulness that would otherwise be filled with concerns of the social self. Clarissa treasures what she terms the privacy of the soul: something akin to the ability to live life for itself rather than having one's thoughts, values, and experiences constantly shared and devoted to others. For Clarissa, the privacy of the soul is the freedom to remain silent when questioned with

what life is about. Clarissa does not want to live her life wholly *for* someone, or *for* something; "what she liked was simply life" (118).

Despite Hannah Williams' observation that "Clarissa's identity is as fluid as the names she goes by," Clarissa still feels bound by the social self's demands frequently (55). She often wonders whether she has failed in some essential duty to live authentically, at one point asking if she is "not even Clarissa anymore," but simply "Mrs. Richard Dalloway" (10). Having grown up rebellious and idealistic, Clarissa has settled into a safe, comfortable, and unchallenging life as the wife of a politician. To her dismay, Clarissa finds her old flame Peter's taunting prediction all too real: that she would grow up to be "the perfect hostess" who would "marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase" (7). Such an insult tapped into Clarissa's fear of becoming nothing more than a domestic ideal, and it is her wrestling with this ideal and its roles that constitutes much of her inner struggle throughout the novel. Fearing that her indescribable, incalculably complex experience of life could be boiled down to such a singular notion, Clarissa resolves to "not say of any one in the world now that they were this or that" (8). The anti-essentialism of such a statement speaks to Clarissa's desire to view the self and personality as shifting forms rather than static entities. She doesn't believe that simple description can do justice to – or even accurately represent – the true constituents of a human life. With such an outlook, Clarissa refuses to let the social self dictate her sense of who she is at her core and refuses to impose such rigid definitions on others. In treasuring her privacy of the soul, Clarissa prioritizes the sorts of insights and experiences of connection and appreciation for life that are enabled by the establishment of one's own inner life – one that is defined by oneself, not others, and wholly open to new experience and constant revision. Perhaps paradoxically, these retreats into inner life are what enable Clarissa's passionate engagement with the outer world.

Clarissa's desire for a rich inner life leads to introspection on life's biggest questions, perhaps most important among them the question of mortality and the meaning of one life. The reader is told of Clarissa's recent illness, only a few pages in: "she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness" (4). Soon enough, Big Ben strikes: "first a warning, musical; then the hour; irrevocable" (4). This use of Big Ben, Marlowe Miller notes in *Masterpieces of British Modernism*, **"**does more than give structure to the novel; it conveys the passage of time on a much grander scale […] bringing us back to Clarissa's ongoing meditation on her life's choices and her aging" (171). Clarissa considers her old age, feeling as though "this body she wore, this body with all its capacities, [seemed] nothing" (10). But in exercising what Peter Walsh, in a rare moment of clarity, calls "the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it around, slowly, in the light," (77) Clarissa embraces an idea of self that confronts these existential insecurities:

> Did it matter then, she asked herself walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease to exist completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? But that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, her self. (9)

Reading this account of death, one is struck by its similarities to Buddhist views on the subject in its emphasis on the impacts of a supposedly single life. In his book *No Death, No Fear*, Buddhist author and monk Thich Nhat Hanh explains: "Our actions and our words […]

take us in a linear direction. But they also take us in a lateral direction as they flow into and influence the world around us. We should not look for our real selves in just one vertical direction. […] Our essence has gone into our children, our friends and the entire universe. We have to find ourselves in those directions […]" (125). This view allows the self to be imagined not as an isolated pillar, but as the center of a sprawling web of interconnections and effects which ripple outwards to touch other lives. In holding this kind of self-concept, Clarissa can take peace and comfort in the realization that there is much more to her life than her mere physical presence within her body. Not only does this view help negate the idea of impermanence in its emphasis on lasting connections on other lives; it also grants her a deeper sense of the meanings her life is creating in the here and now.

A view such as this separates Clarissa from most of the other characters in the novel, and demonstrates how Woolf connects ideas of the self to differing approaches to life's meaning and impermanence. Clarissa's strong belief in a kind of emotional breathing room between persons is a cornerstone of her self-concept; her treasury of the privacy of the soul seems almost the defining aspect of her worldview. This view grants her the awareness to recognize deeper connections than those normally enabled by the social self. In doing so, she can approach experience with a keen awareness of the interdependence of life. Clarissa's inner life also allows her to see the forest for the trees where others cannot; she is still limited by the social self, but she *knows* these limitations where others are blind to them. In recognizing how often she finds herself "doing things not simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that," Clarissa demonstrates a kind of insight that can only be achieved when a person can look into themselves and past the dictates of social rules (10).

There is an apparent quibble in this characterization of Clarissa's personality: her main desire in the novel is to throw a party for London's upper class. On the one hand, one would be hard pressed to find a moment where people are more concerned with appearances and the social self than at a party. But at the same time, parties present opportunities for the self to become fluid or even fall away. Clarissa notices this phenomenon herself: "Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself; and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another. It was, she thought, partly their clothes, partly being taken out of their ordinary ways, partly the background, it was possible to say things you couldn't say anyhow else, things that needed an effort; possible to go much deeper" (167). Parties thus embody this nondual perception of the self: it can arise as a static social façade, but the rate at which these social masks are swapped for others or abandoned entirely speaks to its constructed, fluid nature. Clarissa seems to understand this, and through this understanding is granted a deeper engagement with life. But to more clearly examine the connections between self and meaning, it is necessary to view some counterexamples to Clarissa: those characters who don't experience this deeper sense of meaning, and how their views of self differ from those of Clarissa.

Strong passions in *Mrs. Dalloway* seem to act as blocks to direct experience of life. Miss Kilman, the tutor of Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth, serves as a prime example. Miss Kilman's character is defined through an unhealthy obsession with her religion, as she views everything in life through that ideology. Her self-concept is entirely dictated by this rigid belief system, and she strives to convert others to that same worldview – among them Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth, the thought of whose conversion by Kilman terrifies Clarissa. Kilman's views seek to take the soul and life's fundamental spontaneity and filter them through a lens: "it was the soul and its

mockery that she wished to subdue; make feel her mastery" (122). And despite her religion's insistence upon peace and love, Miss Kilman nevertheless wishes to "make [Clarissa] weep, to ruin her, to humiliate her" (122). Woolf connects Miss Kilman's fervency of belief with her judgmental nature; after being told how Kilman had "seen the light two years and three months ago," the reader is soon reminded how Miss Kilman "pitied and despised [women like Mrs. Dalloway] from the bottom of her heart" (121).

Despite Clarissa's subsequent condemnation of religion, the novel does not condemn Miss Kilman for her belief in and of itself. Tellingly, it is the vehemence with which she believes, and the desire to subjugate and humiliate others with that belief, that appears so contrary to the nature of someone like Clarissa. Miss Kilman functions, like Dr. Bradshaw – another domineering character whose importance to the novel will be discussed later – as a representation of the desire to bend others to one's will. Such extremism never seems to make these characters happy, and is never met with approval by anyone around them. And ultimately, the novel suggests, these characters emerge weak and powerless. Take, for example, Clarissa's realization that Miss Kilman's behavior as a judgmental, callous fanatic masks her fundamental vulnerability and emptiness: "odd it was, as Miss Kilman stood there, how, second by second, the idea of her diminished, how hatred crumbled, how she lost her malignity, her size, became second by second merely Miss Kilman, in a mackintosh, whom Heaven knows Clarissa would have liked to help" (123). But Miss Kilman is not the only example of ideology run amok, and the dissatisfaction it can bring.

The novel's suspicion of grand causes also takes form via the character of Lady Bruton, an elderly, bitter heiress of a respected family that is now losing its power. If Miss Kilman's grand cause is religion, then Lady Bruton's is that of emigration – of "emigrating young people

of both sexes born of respectable parents and setting them up with the prospect of doing well in Canada" (106). Lady Bruton's dedication to emigration from London grows to define her; with a reputation for "being more interested in politics than people," we are told that "emigration had become, in short, largely Lady Bruton" (106). Like Miss Kilman, Lady Bruton seems to define her entire self and reason for living based upon one fragile premise; indeed, the subject of emigration is described as "the ramrod of her soul, that essential part of her without which Millicent Bruton would not have been Millicent Bruton" (106).

Furthering her distance from Clarissa, the reader learns that Lady Bruton prides herself on being a woman of "downright feelings, and little introspective power (broad and simple – why could not everyone be broad and simple?)" (107). But with her lack of an inner life and unceasing devotion to such a cause, Lady Bruton struggles to find meaning in this self-definition. She feels horrified when she finds she cannot write the letters she needs for her cause: her experience is described as "a morning's battle of beginning, tearing up, beginning again" (108). With such battles, Lady Bruton is made to "feel the futility of her own womanhood as she felt it on no other occasion" (106). She must relinquish her sense of autonomy to Hugh Whitbread, a blowhard politician, who offers to write the letters for her. If one's foundation for action in life is so easily relinquished, one is not left with much. Lady Bruton's attachment to her cause brings her suffering and fails to grant her meaning in the face of life's fragility; when she gives up control of her cause to Hugh and Richard Dalloway, she admits that "what she would have done without both of them she did not know" (108). The reader gets the sense that this is not an insignificant remark for a character so hollow in her source of purpose. It is no surprise, then, that Clarissa – one of the characters so opposed to such ideas – seems able to find more meaning from life even if she has her own issues in navigating the self.

Clarissa is wary of behaviors and views like those of Miss Kilman or Lady Bruton; she views strong passions and desires with suspicion, thinking how "love and religion" are "the cruelest things in the world," how they would "destroy whatever it was, the privacy of the soul" (124). Clarissa thinks how "she [knows] nothing; no language, no history, she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed," and yet "what she [loved] was this, here, now, in front of her" (8). Clarissa's willful detachment from ideology leaves her open to life's possibilities. She does not fancy herself as an expert or as someone who has life figured out. When contrasted with Kilman or Bruton, one gets the sense that her world is much richer because it can contain so much more outside of any single, stifling ideology. She seems to embody a concept Shunryu Suzuki discusses in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. He writes, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few" (21). Clarissa marvels at life's complexity, at its depth, at its mystery, and tries to approach it with that mindset. She does not want life filtered through a lens of another person or an ideology – she simply wants life. Clarissa's mindset stands in sharp contrast to that of characters like Lady Bruton or Miss Kilman, who only wish to see life as an expression of their singular causes. To Lady Bruton and Miss Kilman, then, the self must be expressed as a function of a particular cause or ideology. In contrast, Clarissa allows the social self to exist and play a part in identity, but also lets it be subsumed in a greater, more universal idea of connection with others.

Another character in *Mrs. Dalloway* who seems to recognize the connections and unities most others cannot is Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran haunted by hallucinations and visions of his fallen comrade and friend. But if Clarissa Dalloway delights in and marvels at the intensity of ordinary experience, then Septimus feels overwhelmed by it. Seeing myriad meanings and unities in daily life to the point of delusion, he views the air trails left by planes in the sky as

signaling to him, their shapes as "unimaginable beauty […] and signaling their intention to provide him with […] beauty, more beauty!" (21). Septimus seems to view the world around him as animated, with his declaration that "leaves were alive; trees were alive […]. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds" (22). Septimus' viewpoint seems infused with a sort of trans-rational meaning at every point, in which even the absence of phenomenon (in this case, the silences *between* sounds) is shown as an integral part of experience. In some sense, his vision of the world is beautiful, transcendent; there can be no doubt that he is able to find significance where others cannot. But just as vivid as these scenes of the world unfolding are those of a nightmare continually recurring in front of him; Septimus is haunted by the spirit of his dead friend Evans. Septimus' horror at these visions leads his wife, Lucrezia, to seek medical help. The doctor she eventually enlists, William Bradshaw, seems intent on enforcing his views of health onto those around him. It is Septimus' resistance to Bradshaw that drives him to his ultimate decision in the novel: to commit suicide as an act of rebellion in which Septimus' own self is protected and reclaimed.

Septimus' suicide can be read as a refusal to relinquish autonomy and the self to someone who would delight in controlling and constraining it. After all, William Bradshaw is introduced as "the ghostly helper, the priest of science" who delights in "conversion" to his point of view, with his wife experiencing the "slow sinking, water-logged, of her will into his" (98). Bradshaw "made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion" (97). Like Miss Kilman, Bradshaw's views on life are a monolithic ideology that must be imposed on others; it is no coincidence that the word "conversion" is used to describe his tactics and align them with those of someone like Kilman. Under Bradshaw's orders, Septimus would be removed from his wife and sequestered away for months. Moreover, Septimus would be forced into

accepting Bradshaw's sense of "proportion," and likely experience a similar submerging of his will as that of Bradshaw's wife. Septimus finds this proposition appalling, and thus opts for the physical destruction of the self as a means of withholding it from a spiritual destruction and takes his own life. This act can be read as Septimus' attempt at preserving his own privacy of the soul, and will have profound consequences for Clarissa later in the novel.

Septimus serves numerous roles in the novel, but of most note is his connection to Clarissa. Both characters seem to experience life more intensely and feel more connected to it than those around them. Imagery of nature – waves, and especially trees – accompanies both Clarissa's first section in the novel and the sections told from Septimus' point of view. Of this connection, Marlowe Miller writes, "Clarissa and Septimus both share this philosophy of the connectedness of all things (the essential truth that both perceive). […] Their shared vision is sane, but Septimus has been so wounded […] that he cannot find joy in his insight, whereas Clarissa continually renews her love of life by returning to visions of the subtle, ineffable connection between all living things" (167). Given this interpretation of the novel, and Clarissa's notion that death is not a true end to the impacts or bounds of a life, it is tragic but fitting that the greatest moment of connection between Septimus and Clarissa occurs via Septimus' death.

Upon hearing of Septimus' death at her party, Clarissa retreats to be alone for a few moments. Pondering the situation, she finds that she feels "somehow very like him – the young man that had killed himself" (182). Clarissa knows of Dr. Bradshaw, whom she thinks of as "obscurely evil, capable of some indescribable outrage – forcing your soul" (180). She views Septimus' death as "defiance," as "an attempt to communicate" that the self cannot and must not be bound to the whims and conquest of others (181). There must be an aspect of individuality,

something left unshared, even if that private essence is what allows Clarissa to feel such a connection to Septimus and to break out of that self of which it is a part.

Clarissa's thoughts of Septimus are placed next to her reflections on the privacy of the soul that she holds so dear. She thinks how Septimus' death has reconnected her to life – how "he made her feel the beauty. He made her feel the fun" (182). She remembers how she used to feel "nothing could be slow enough; nothing last too long. Nothing could equal straightening the chairs, pushing in one book on the shelf" (181). In *The Lady in the Looking–Glass: Reflections on the Self in Virginia Woolf*, Stephen Howard writes, "This view of the self as merged with people and places, as opposed to stable and unitary, is central to *Mrs. Dalloway*, and emerges most forcefully in the parallel that is drawn between Septimus and Clarissa. Through his suicide, the novel suggests, Septimus allows Mrs. Dalloway to continue living. This demonstrates Woolf's view that 'behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern': the textual 'affinity' between the characters transcends physical connections and traditional understanding" (52). Empowered via her connections to the world and its inhabitants around her, revitalized with appreciation for her life and for the moment, Clarissa reenters the party and resolves to reenter life with a new appreciation.

The incident with Septimus exemplifies the interconnectedness of human experience via his effect on Clarissa's life. Her privacy of the soul is enriched as she views another human being resisting the tyranny of those who would seek to contain the soul within the constraints of their own ideologies. This act of resistance against Dr. Bradshaw's tyranny inspires Clarissa in her fight for a self against similar figures in her own life; she finds solace and meaning in the everyday, not through the self-swallowing ideologies of those like Miss Kilman or Lady Bruton. Though maintaining a distance from such feelings can alienate Clarissa from those around her, it can also allow momentary experiences of freedom and mindfulness in which she embodies the unity she

strives to create through her parties. Through this larger connection to others, Clarissa develops a greater appreciation for her own individual life and selfhood, embracing a balance between that individual self and a connection with something greater.

Mrs. Dalloway thus invites the reader to consider how a self is imagined by those who can appreciate life's "secret deposit of exquisite moments" (29). It argues for a view of the present as anything but mundane, ordinary, or unremarkable; indeed, life is remarkable as it unfolds, and one need only to stop for a moment and appreciate that fact. The self may take on new roles and forms, but they are necessary fictions that one cannot allow to become dictates or rules to live by. The reader sees Clarissa's suffering and struggle, but also her unique insight and sense of meaning when compared to other characters. By the end of the novel, she has at once brought many isolated selves together into a state of unity through her party, and also lived moments where that sense of isolation has dissolved completely. She has come to terms with the many identities contained in the social self, whilst also recognizing the liberating sense of connection that can be found outside of it. She has found a balance between the social self and what lies outside it, and come to see the self as porous, indefinable, and fluid. As such, she doesn't experience the fundamental lack of fulfillment as a Lady Bruton or a Miss Kilman, and when she does harbor such thoughts, she can recognize the source rather than be blinded by the self. In short, Clarissa's inner journey throughout the novel encapsulates the joys of when we view our lives not as means to ends, but as ends in themselves.

In Time's Grasp: Impermanence and Selfhood in *To the Lighthouse*

To the Lighthouse is set on the Isle of Skye in Scotland during the 1910s, and follows the Ramsays, a family whose home is also occupied by a number of other central characters who figure prominently throughout the novel. As is the case with *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* is not a plot-driven novel. Prefiguring *The Waves*, the novel's plot seems even slimmer in comparison to *Mrs. Dalloway* (at least that had a party at the end of it!). And like its predecessor and the novel that follows it, *To the Lighthouse* is not an easy read. The reader struggles to keep up as momentary impressions, introspections, and emotions rise and fall in the minds of the characters. Perhaps even moreso than *Mrs. Dalloway*, the novel shows how these impressions are not based in reality, with characters' moods and ideas of themselves swinging wildly from one pole to another within a manner of seconds. In examining the artificiality of these impressions as they develop over time, the novel calls into question the notion of personality and the self, and how those constructs are built, deconstructed, and reformed over the span of a lifetime.

To the Lighthouse is thematically indebted to *Mrs. Dalloway*. Both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* present human life as interconnected; in *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, Kearney argues that Woolf creates a "multipersonal representation of consciousness" that "has synthesis as its aim" (119). Further, she claims, the novel's narrative technique "gives the reader the impression that Mrs. Ramsay's soul is somehow porously interconnected with the scattered souls of those around her. And this mysterious sense of interbeing is confirmed in the last part of the novel when we find her devoted painter friend, Lily Briscoe, recalling the same thoughts and qualities of Mrs. Ramsay herself" (120). Such a reading calls back to the connection between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, and further develops Woolf's thematic interest in the dissolution of the individual self – and perhaps the sense of unity that emerges as its boundaries

are questioned and expanded as time unfolds, whether in moments or across decades of experience.

Time almost figures as a character in the novel, with an entire section of the novel called "Time Passes." While impermanence showed up as a major theme in *Mrs. Dalloway*, here it is paramount. Identity is examined in the face of that passage of time; how can we find meaning in our lives if, as Mr. Ramsay notes, a rock will outlast Shakespeare? Like *Mrs. Dalloway*, the text features characters struggling to make sense of their selves and to forge a purpose for their lives. Lily Briscoe's attempt to capture a moment via her painting serves as one of the novel's main thrusts: the balance of finding the permanent in the impermanent, of valuing moments, relationships, and aspects of the self without clinging to them too tightly. There is also an ongoing examination of how to traverse the boundaries between selves – how can we form meaningful relationships with others if we cannot ever truly know someone else, much less ourselves?

Within the novel, the self's construction is always conditioned by the passage of time. Moments of escape from the confines of the social self, for example, are one way in which characters can exist freely outside of time's grasp and decay. As in Woolf's other novels, time's impact on the self's development emerges as a locus of meaning, and Woolf examines individual desires for connection to others, for legacy, and for permanence within a new narrative and structural context. Broadly speaking, then, if *Mrs. Dalloway* encapsulated characters struggling between the social self and its boundaries, then *To the Lighthouse* embodies the self's struggle towards acknowledging and accepting life's impermanence.

This search for permanence takes form in numerous ways in different characters, and to numerous degrees of success. Whether through Lily's production of artwork or Mrs. Ramsay's

creation of special, enduring moments, the novel's characters try to create experiences whose significance lasts in a meaningful way. These attempts at the creation of meaning are still held back by the same struggles with the self that characters faced in *Mrs. Dalloway*: namely, that desire to know others and express one's self when the prospect of true connection and understanding between people is dubious at best and the social self is more constraining than liberating.

Mr. Ramsay's character is emblematic of – and exists as a product of – these concerns. Introduced as a killjoy who enjoys "the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife," Mr. Ramsay emerges as a profoundly unpleasant and unhappy person (4). Of everyone within *To the Lighthouse*, his struggles seem to center most openly around this notion of life's impermanence. Mr. Ramsay relentlessly wrestles with and frets over the passage of time. We learn that his friendship with Mr. Bankes, an old friend staying with the Ramsays, has diminished over the years, as "repetition had taken the place of newness" (24). Ramsay feels "aged and saddened and somehow put in the wrong" when he sees his daughter's youthful exuberance (24). His notion of self is based entirely around knowledge and individual legacy, with his hope that he shall become a successful philosopher remembered throughout the ages. But Mr. Ramsay is all too familiar with the realities of his life. Thinking of the extent of human knowledge and how close philosophers have gotten to truth, Mr. Ramsay believes he is stuck. If "thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty six letters all in order, then [he had reached] say, the letter Q" (38). He notes that Q is an accomplishment, and that it is only "one man in a generation" who could reach Z. But Mr. Ramsay is not satisfied with this; "if he could reach 'R' it would be something" (39).

Thus, Mr. Ramsay is continually grasping at something beyond his reach, moving the goalposts of achievement and self-satisfaction further and further from whatever position he occupies.

Woolf's novel exposes this constructed self as the shallow, fragile creation it is. Mr. Ramsay is aware that his desire to be remembered as a seminal thinker is both unlikely to occur and irrelevant to time in a greater sense. From a minor mishap in which Mr. Ramsay runs into Lily Briscoe (an artist staying with the Ramsays, and one of the novel's central characters) and Mr. Bankes, we learn that "all [Mr. Ramsay's] vanity, all his satisfaction in his own splendor, riding fell as a thunderbolt, fierce as a hawk at the head of his men through the valley of death, had been shattered, destroyed" (34). Thinking back to Lady Bruton from *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is clear that these sorts of characters have very fragile egos indeed; even minor incidents seem able to demolish the walls they construct around themselves in the name of legacy or ideology. Stephen Batchelor notes the dangers of such conceptions of the self in his book *Buddhism Without Beliefs.* He explains, "It is as though this self – which is a mere configuration of past and present contingencies – has been fired in the kiln of anxiety to emerge as something fixed. Fixed, but also brittle. The more precious it becomes to me, the more I must guard it against attack. The circumstances at which I feel at ease become ever narrower and more circumscribed" (79). Characters like Mr. Ramsay cannot entertain a notion of the self that extends beyond their own isolated experiences and rigid categories. As such, they are doomed to struggle against that notion of life's impermanence, unable to find any meaningful way to re-view or re-cast their experience as related to and inextricable from that of others.

In stark contrast to characters like Clarissa Dalloway, Mr. Ramsay's self-obsession also blocks him from seeing and enjoying the world around him. It is difficult to imagine Mr. Ramsay having such revelatory moments of rapture as those expressed by Clarissa in which one treasures

the moment and the beauty of the day. Of her husband's intellect and detached way of experiencing life, Mrs. Ramsay notes, "he seemed to her sometimes made differently from other people, born blind, deaf, and dumb, to the ordinary things, but to the extraordinary things, with an eye like an eagle's. His understanding often astonished her. But did he notice the flowers? No. Did he notice the view? No. Did he even notice his own daughter's beauty, or whether there was pudding on his plate or roast beef? He would sit at table with them like a person in a dream" (80). Intellectual understanding, the reader senses, only gets one so far. In the world of someone like Mr. Ramsay, one can have it all figured out and yet still be unable to experience the simplest and most fulfilling pleasures of life; this is far from that sense of beginner's mind embodied by Clarissa. Thus, Mr. Ramsay's massive ego – and his underlying assumptions about the self's fixity in time and its rigid boundaries – blinds him to both those around him and the meaning that less self–involved characters can find in life.

If Mr. Ramsay exists on one end of the spectrum as wholly constrained by the social self, and Clarissa on the other as having found a sense of balance, then Mrs. Ramsay arrives somewhere in between. Much like Clarissa Dalloway would plan parties to unite people, Mrs. Ramsay strives to bring others together through matchmaking – one success of hers being the union of two of the Ramsay's younger visitors, Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle. Mrs. Ramsay seems similar to Clarissa in more ways than one: in *Fiction, Intuition, & Creativity: Studies in Bronte, James, Woolf, and Lessing*, Angela Hague writes, "Mrs. Ramsay resembles Clarissa Dalloway in her intuitive grasp of the world around her, and, like Clarissa, she is both uneducated and presciently sensitive to both people and her surroundings: "'Her simplicity fathomed what clever people falsified'" (32). But like Clarissa, Mrs. Ramsay also struggles to enact this openness to experience in spite of her intuitive insight into the world.

Taking after her husband, Mrs. Ramsay views life's impermanence as an enemy; she "never [wants] (her children) James to grow a day older or Cam either," and feels that "nothing made up for the loss" of their childlike wonder at the world (66). Perhaps projecting her own emotional state onto her children, she thinks that they "are happier now than they ever will be again" (67). Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay views life itself as an "old antagonist," and Lily notices how "old she looks, how worn she looks, and how remote" (96). Mrs. Ramsay sees herself aging, losing time. She thus acts as a matchmaker for the young people around her, trying to unite them so that "however long they lived she would be woven" (129). She manages to unite Paul and Minta in this manner, but one gets the sense that this is done as much for Mrs. Ramsay as it is for Paul and Minta. Mrs. Ramsay sees this creation of special moments and unities as her legacy, and unlike her husband, it does provide her with some sense of meaning. By creating connections between others, she feels "that community of feeling with other people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin that it was practically one stream, and chairs, tables, maps, were hers, were theirs, it did not matter whose, and Paul and Minta would carry it on when she was dead" (130). Such an episode sounds strikingly similar to that of Clarissa's ruminations on death. But even setting such connections in motion is rooted in an ego for Mrs. Ramsay, with her admission that her matchmaking comes from a selfish place in one sense. There is another approach she takes, however, that is arguably more effective in creating meaning for herself and others.

Towards the middle of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay hosts a dinner party at which virtually all of the characters are gathered. The scene exemplifies both Woolf's narrative technique and thematic concerns, with its constant shifts of perspective and the internal states of the characters. As mundane conversations emerge, Woolf documents their insecurities and disappointments

with themselves and one another that underlie their every word and gesture. Mrs. Ramsay, sat across from her husband, wonders what she has done with her life and how "she had ever felt any emotion or felt any affection for [Mr. Ramsay]" (94). Mortified at the state of those around her, Mrs. Ramsay notes how "nothing seemed to have merged. They all seemed separate" (95). The scene depicts selves closed off from one another, unwilling to make attempts to bridge the gap. Lily notes Mrs. Ramsay's misperceptions of those around her, especially of William Bankes, whom she pities for no good reason. Charles Tansley, the resident snob who just so happens to be a pupil of Mr. Ramsay's, refuses to "talk the sort of rot these people wanted him to talk," blaming the scene's tension and lack of joy on the women (97). He agonizes over his ego, over "being made a fool of" (99). Mr. Bankes realizes he feels very little for Mrs. Ramsay despite their years of friendship, making him feel "uncomfortable and treacherous" (99). The partygoers carry on their idle conversation, but all "felt that something was lacking" (107). The beginning of the scene exemplifies the primary struggles faced by the novel's characters, and of the ways in which their fears about selfhood manifest. But it is what happens next that is even more telling.

After all of their bickering and introspection, the partygoers manage to momentarily get outside of their petty squabbles and experience a moment of unity through Mr. Ramsay's recitation of a poem. In a key passage of the novel, Mr. Ramsay reads as the room falls silent:

> Her husband spoke. He was repeating something, and she knew it was poetry from the rhythm and the ring of exultation, and melancholy in his voice:
>
> 'Come out and climb the garden path,
>
> Luriana Lurilee.

The China rose is all abloom and buzzing with the

yellow bee.'

The words (she was looking at the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves.

'And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be

Are full of trees and changing leaves.'

She did not know what they meant, but, like music, the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside her self, saying quite easily and naturally what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said different things. She knew, without looking round, that every one at the table was listening to the voice saying:

'I wonder if it seems to you,

Luriana, Lurilee'

with the same sort of relief and pleasure that she had, as if this were, at last, the natural thing to say, this were their own voice speaking. But the voice had stopped. (132)

This scene exemplifies Woolf's moments of being, in which one experiences a sort of awakening from one's daily routine and mundane experience into a greater awareness and appreciation of the here and now. Like Mrs. Ramsay's previous experience of her self as dissolving into a "wedge-shaped core of darkness," the characters experience a unity with one another that is seldom seen in the rest of the novel. This unity comes after a scene in which the walls between selves are in full effect, with characters lamenting their inability to feel or other's inability to appreciate them. The moment of connection they feel, in which they all seem to speak with one voice, arises as the antithesis to what preceded it. The reader can assume that this

feeling of selflessness and interbeing is liberating for the characters; Mrs. Ramsay believes that everyone listens "with the same sort of relief and pleasure" as she does (118). The characters are given a moment in which they understand one another and can exist outside the walls of the self. Thus through Mrs. Ramsay's matchmaking and social organization, "the thing is made that remains for ever after" (120).

Mrs. Ramsay's moments of connection – those that "last forever" – seem to stand in sharp relief to the depiction of time in the *"*Time Passes*"* section of the novel. Documenting the passage of a decade with the Ramsays and others away from the house, the section at first glance appears to reflect and confirm the characters' fears of impermanence. Nights "full of wind and destruction" pass, seasons change, and the house grows more and more decrepit with nobody to take care of it (156). "The place was gone to sack and ruin", and nothing could prevent "the fertility, the insensibility of nature" (158). Nowhere is this exemplified more clearly than in the bracketed sections in these chapters, which unceremoniously detail the fates of some of the novel's main characters. Following a description of the nights that fall upon the old house, the reader sees in brackets that "[Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty]" (147). In between lyrical passages describing the qualities of the seasons as they change, we learn "[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said nobody deserved happiness more]" (151). Soon thereafter we learn of Andrew Ramsay's death: "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]" (152). Woolf's detached representation of these deaths speaks to a shift in perspective. Having lived inside of these characters for so much of the novel, it seems

jarring and almost disrespectful to see their fates rendered in such an aside. But this section is not told from a human perspective; instead, the reader sees things from the point of view of the cosmos, perhaps from time itself. The novel leaves behind the anthropocentric, self-centered view that characterized its previous chapters and allows the reader to view life on a grander scale.

With its focus shifted away from individual lives and onto the grander scheme of the cosmos, the *"*Time Passes*"* section illustrates the dangers of putting one's sense of meaning within the ephemeral and mutable qualities of life. With descriptions of the seasons ravaging the house with "wind and destruction," the absurdity of Mr. Ramsay's project at becoming some philosopher remembered throughout the ages becomes clearer. The *"*Time Passes*"* section of the novel illustrates how meanings ascribed to life based on egotistical desires of vanity, perceived significance, or individual legacy are hollow and unsatisfying. But while these chapters remind the reader of the inevitability of change, they also imply that such a change can be positive or even necessary as well – and that such change does not necessarily diminish the impacts of individual lives, even in the face of time's passage.

In the novel's introduction, Julia Briggs writes, "the novel has a tendency to set up binary oppositions, […] oppositions that the novel examines then demolishes" (xi). For instance, in the *"*Time Passes*"* chapters Woolf juxtaposes the language of decay with language of life: "The saucepan had rusted and the meat decayed. Toads had nosed their way in. […] A thistle thrusted itself in between the tiles in the larder" (157). Just as Woolf notes the ruination of the house, she reminds the reader of the new life such destruction can accommodate. Thus this section casts impermanence as inevitable, but also as charged with potential and necessary for productive change. As Thich Nhat Hanh explains in *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, "Impermanence

does not necessarily lead to suffering. Without impermanence, life could not be. Impermanence teaches us to respect and value every moment and all the precious things around us and inside of us" (132). Nothing can last forever, Woolf's novel suggests, but the past lives on and the future is replete with possibilities for new creation and experience.

Writing further on the binary oppositions of the novel, Briggs continues, "the acts of mourning and forgetting are brought into a dynamic relation with acts of creation and remembering" (xi). We notice this in the novel's treatment of Mrs. Ramsay's death, with Lily's mourning leading to the novel's final act of creation and self-transformation in the form of her finishing her painting. Such establishment and demolition of binaries extends to the opposition between self and world, and between self and other. While Mrs. Ramsay has passed on physically, for example, her life's influence on Lily Briscoe is immeasurable and figures as a central point in the novel's conclusion. Calling these oppositions into question, both the *"*Time Passes*"* chapters and the novel as a whole suggest it is possible to recognize the passage of time while still carving out significant moments within it. Similarly, it is possible for people to pass away physically yet still exist and impact the lives of others in powerful ways. This reconciliation of life's impermanence with individual meaning is highlighted as a key struggle for the rest of the novel, and it takes form through the interior life of Lily Briscoe.

Early in the novel, Lily seems defined by two characteristics: through her struggle to create art, and through her relationship to Mrs. Ramsay. Of most interest initially is the latter; she wonders if "loving, as people called it, [could] make her and Mrs. Ramsay one" (58). Lily exhibits a desire to get to the root of other selves, to find out "how did one know one thing or another about people, sealed as they were" (59). This desire to bridge the gaps between selves sees some fulfillment in the sorts of unifying moments created by Mrs. Ramsay, but its ultimate

resolution arises through Lily's realization of the nature of identity that comes after Mrs. Ramsay's death. Like Clarissa Dalloway realizing that it was not Miss Kilman she hated but an *idea* of Miss Kilman, Lily thinks how "this making up scenes about [people] is what we call knowing [them]". She realizes that "not a word of it was true; she had made it up; but it was what she knew them by all the same" (197). Identity functions as a story, a "structure of imagination" – not as the sort of essential truth Lily had supposed it was earlier on. While people are undoubtedly unique, the novel suggests that to grasp for the essential core of another person is foolish. Lily's realization into selfhood grants her the insight to recognize that she doesn't have to search for connection with others, as she is already connected. There is no root of the self she must arrive at to experience that unity, because it was already there all along.

The novel furthers its deconstruction of the static, stable self via the relation of Lily's painting towards the end of the novel to specific modes of being. As Lily paints, she loses "consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance" (181). She inhabits a moment much like Mrs. Ramsay's scene at the party from before, in which the self is lost and its concerns fall away. She compares a memory of Mrs. Ramsay and its fixture in the mind as "like a work of art" (183). In *A Specially Tender Piece of Eternity: Virginia Woolf and the Experience of Time*, Teresa Prudente explains, "Lily's struggle in painting can be read as having two aspects. On the one hand, the painter intends to fix in her artwork the element of permanence and the sense of temporal suspension […]. On the other hand, Lily also wants to convey the moment of revelation in its fleeting and ephemeral nature" (106). Art exists as a means to break outside of the self, as something capable of recognizing and producing that "making of the moment into something permanent" (183). It is no surprise, then, that Mrs. Ramsay thinks of her life as "her stroke" on the canvas she has created, having – like Lily – in

her own way strived to create moments or representations of moments where the temporal and social selves fall away.

By the end of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay has passed, and all that is left for Lily is the final painterly stroke on her canvas – itself depicting a domestic scene of Mrs. Ramsay reading to her son. Whilst she still feels Mrs. Ramsay's loss, she nevertheless wishes to complete her work of art; no amount of time's passage can erase the impact Mrs. Ramsay had on her life, or the significance of Lily's recording of that impact via her art. She realizes, having undergone loss, having seen time's passage, that "[her painting] would be hung in the attics," that "it would be destroyed" (238). But she also realizes that this fact does not diminish the value of her achievement. She "[draws] a line in the center […] with a sudden intensity," and the work is finished (238). With the novel's final lines, she has had her vision. In *Desire and Form in Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse*, Eric Sandberg interprets this final stroke as "both a gesture of separation – for the dead are gone – and of reuniting, a connection between the two worlds of the novel. These worlds consist of "the world of "The Window" and "The Lighthouse," the world of desire and longing […], and the world of "Time Passes", a world […] in which human meaning refuses to reside" (72). Thus the impermanence of life is reconciled with the human need to make sense of existence within time, and to find those markers of meaning that enable a life to be lived with purpose. Desires like those of Mr. Ramsay to live forever are exposed for what they are, while Lily's desire to immortalize the moment is cast as healthy due to the fact that she recognizes the greater world in which it is couched: one of inevitable change.

Lily still struggles with impermanence, still laments Mrs. Ramsay's death, still wishes for some connection with another self. Yet she also cherishes her independence. She realizes the fallacies that lie in these limiting views of the self, both its temporality and its boundaries: the

idea that death is an absolute end, or the notion that the self is a fixed entity with a core waiting to be ignited by the touch of another. Much like other characters in Woolf's fiction, Lily is a very flawed work in progress. Nobody overcomes their desires, exorcises their demons, or attains any kind of enlightenment in Woolf's novels. But awareness is half of the battle, and like Clarissa Dalloway, Lily has cultivated it to a great extent. Life will not be easy for her, and the gulf between having selfhood and impermanence negotiated in the intellect versus in one's lived experience is a large one. But regardless, it is certainly an achievement.

In *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience*, Lorraine Sim writes, "Lily expresses "a dual and paradoxical perception of ordinary things that sees them as at once familiar and known, yet miraculous" (127). Lily's quest for meaning and connection culminates in the same attitude towards life as Clarissa: one of receptiveness, openness, and inclusiveness towards experience. Yet this view only becomes tenable once she lets go of this search for the core of another self, and when she stops viewing life's impermanence as something to be fought tooth and nail. Reimagining the meaning of life calls for a similar revision of the self, and it is only after such a rethinking that Lily comes to the insights she does. With its focus on impermanence, *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates the limits of a rigid self-concept in forming meaning throughout time, and the benefits of embracing a more unifying and unstable view of that self.

There Is No Story: Questioning Narratives of Identity in *The Waves*

The Waves, while not her final novel, may be the culmination of Woolf's ideas on selfhood in its many shifting forms. If *Mrs. Dalloway* was about the pitfalls of individual identity and *To the Lighthouse* was about reconciling meaning and life's impermanence, then *The Waves* concerns itself with life's chaos, the desire for order, and the dissolution of the self. While these ideas were present, even prevalent, in her previous novels, Woolf examines them as a central concern in *The Waves* and carries them to greater lengths. Just as the novel can be seen as concerned with all of Woolf's themes, it can also be seen as exemplary of her narrative technique. Like her other novels, *The Waves* shifts frequently between the perspectives of its characters without warning. But unlike her previous works, there is no dialogue whatsoever between characters, replaced instead by an increased focus on inner lives and poetically rendered impressions of reality as it unfolds. Woolf uses this structure to follow a group of friends through their lives as they grow up from childhood to adulthood and react to the untimely, tragic death of one of their own. In doing so, Woolf's "playpoem" presents an approach to life that rejects order or narrative, and instead revels in the possibility of an unbounded life and an equally multi-faceted, unbound selfhood.

The Waves is undoubtedly Woolf's most difficult novel to follow. With its eschewing of plot and dialogue, the reader is sometimes left wondering how to orient themselves as to what is occurring. It is all too easy to get lost in the stream of consciousness of these characters, their thoughts phrased in poetic language that nobody on earth would ever think in. But perhaps this is part of the point; through its constant shifts in perspective and frequent dissolution of identifiable or individual voices, the novel further casts skepticism on the idea of a stable, easily pinned down self. Further, to attempt to assign a narrative to *The Waves* is ironic, in that the novel itself

interrogates the notion of stories themselves. Bernard, perhaps the most important and central figure of the novel, wonders if can one capture life, assign it a beginning and an end, and neatly circumscribe its boundaries. This skepticism towards stories and narratives underlies the novel's central conceit: that identity itself is a sort of fiction we tell ourselves, and that the self's boundaries and constituent aspects can never be set in stone. The novel presents characters trying to come to terms with how the self is constantly redefined through its relation to other individuals and to the external world.

The novel opens with multiple characters describing their experiences with their friends throughout their youth, mostly narrating their experiences at play and at school. While Woolf's other works discussed mindfulness, here it is presented directly within the structure of the opening pages. Characters narrate as the moment unfolds, describing their experiences poetically and renewing each new description with "now," to signify the birth of a new instant worthy of exploration. Bernard notes how he feels each rock separately as his feet touches them, demonstrating his attentiveness to the present (10). Individual voices coalesce as the distinctions between them are blurred. The descriptions of phenomena come from different perspectives, but each are written with the same voice:

> 'The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears,' said Susan. 'A shadow falls on the path,' said Louis, 'like an elbow bent.' 'Islands of light are swimming on the grass,' said Rhoda. 'They have fallen through the trees.' 'The birds' eyes are bright in the tunnels between the leaves,' said Neville. 'The stalks are covered with harsh, short hairs,' said Jinny, 'and drops of water have stuck to them.' (9)

Here Woolf establishes some of the novel's central themes: an intense concentration on the present moment, and the lack of a distinct self separated and independent from others. This

repetition in sentence structure and similarity in voice between characters suggests their existence as almost a singular being, and such a characterization is not far from how they see themselves. They each seem aware that they are constituted not only as unique entities, but also through their interactions with one another. Bernard later wonders what part of his supposed self is truly his: "I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (276). Yet at this early point, this fact does not seem to bother the characters.

In each of the novels examined thus far, Woolf has had one character who seems more receptive, more insightful, or more attuned to the realities of life and the self; here, it is Bernard. Bernard's friend Neville notes how "Bernard says there is always a story. I am a story. Louis is a story" (37). Bernard recognizes – at least in some manner – how much of the self is a necessary fiction. At times, he thus seems uniquely capable of letting go of a search for order and fixity, and of embracing numerous selves and life's complexity rather than fighting it. Comparing his own outlook to that of his friend, Bernard thinks, "if life, [Neville] thinks, could wear that permanence, if life could have that order - for above all he desires order, and detests my Byronic untidiness" (90). But like Lily Briscoe's desire to finish her painting and have her vision in *To the Lighthouse*, Bernard is always in search of a perfect story to tie life's loose ends together – the "one story to which all these phrases refer" (186). In some sense, then, Bernard wants to have it both ways. He realizes how much of his own self is composed of others, grasps that life cannot be boiled down into a constrained order, and occasionally delights in this fact. Yet he also harbors a desire to do exactly that: to find a grand narrative, a greater explanation, a unifying pattern. This artistic struggle also represents one of Bernard's attempts to find meaning – but Bernard is not the only character in this novel to struggle with meaning or selfhood.

Bernard's friend Louis is also an aspiring writer of sorts; specifically, he wants to become a poet. His outlook in this novel shares some interesting similarities with those of Mrs. Ramsay or Lily in *To the Lighthouse*; Louis wishes to "fix the moment in one effort of supreme endeavor," noting the moments in time that "shall endure" (39). Reflecting on history and its leading up to the present, Louis declares his intent to "state, if only in one unwritten line of poetry, this moment" (66). He feels himself at once to be "clear–cut and unequivocal," but also to have "lived thousands of years" through history (167).

At first glance, then, Louis may seem to harbor the same sort of openness to experience that someone like Bernard espouses; he can see how interconnected he is with other people, and is aware of how one might approach experience constructively through an awareness of the moment. But upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that Louis has many demons that haunt him. Intensely self-conscious, he fears he exists as "some insatiable mouth […] trying to get the clerks to accept him" (201). He feels as though he is constantly struggling for acceptance from others, as if he holds "a pyramid on his shoulders". He worries that people "observe maliciously [his] pursed lips, [his] sallow cheeks and [his] invariable frown" (219).

Of interest here is the contrast between how Louis handles these concerns versus Bernard. Instead of finding possibility in life's disorder like Bernard, Louis sees it as an oppressive force; his language regarding it is couched in negativity: "I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation and despair". Bernard feels his self is "made and remade continually," with "different people [drawing] different words from [him]" (133). Reflecting on this fact of the world and self's continual rebirth, he finds a sense of joy: "There is no stability in this world. […] To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities" (118). This "emptiness" of the self and of experience,

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche asserts, arises as "the ultimate reality that allows us to liberate ourselves from fixed and fabricated identities" (83). This liberation from fixed identity allows Bernard to find "significance in the stories he tells, even if he cannot sum up and complete them, that is, find the one complete and coherent narrative line that connects all his different observations and experiences" (Jonsson 133). It is Bernard's willingness to recognize and, more importantly, to embrace the instability, fluidity, and ultimate emptiness of existence that allows him to break free of such limiting concepts.

While navigating the seemingly mundane experience of sitting on a train with other passengers, Bernard experiences a moment of connection with those around him not unlike those of Clarissa Dalloway or the dinner scene from *To the Lighthouse*. Despite the joy he feels in such a moment, it soon comes to an end when the train stops and the passengers must depart. Thinking about the dissolution of that unity he has experienced with the others aboard a train, Bernard feels that he does "not want to feel that hate and rivalry have resumed their sway; and different desires" (111). He "[does not wish to] assume the burden of individual life" (112). Describing this phenomena, he notes, "Individuality asserts itself. They are off. They are all impelled by some necessity. Some miserable affair of keeping an appointment, of buying a hat, severs these beautiful human beings once so united" (113). Having experienced a moment, like Mrs. Ramsay, in which personalities fell away, Bernard is reluctant to rebuild his ego and emerge from the stream as an isolated subject. Rather, he wants to "unclasp [his] hands and let fall [his] possessions, stand here in the street, taking no part, watching the omnibuses, without desire; without envy" (112). This retreat into "omnipresent, general life" offers solace and arises as a liberating force for Bernard, fitting his idea to be "carried along by the general impulse" and to have the surface of his mind "slip along like a pale-grey stream reflecting what passes" (115).

Again, Bernard's capacity to let go of the social self lends him a capability to view life in unique ways. He wishes to remain mindful not of himself, but of all experience; to focus not on his own insular struggles and the problems unique to him, but on the ties that bind him to everything around him. Perhaps this fact is most strongly present in his reaction to the death of a close friend, Percival.

From the outset of the novel, Percival seems to function as a glue that ties the self-concepts of his group of friends together. As such, his significance to them cannot be understated. Bernard reveres Percival, at one point thinking: "He rides on; the multitude cluster around him, regarding him as if he were – what indeed he is – a God" (136). Jinny expresses her desire to "hold it for one moment, love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this glove whose walls are made of Percival" (145). Perhaps most importantly, Louis notes that "it is Percival […] who makes us aware that these attempts to say 'I am this, I am that' […] are false" (137). In what is likely a deliberate callback to *Mrs. Dalloway*, Percival is identified with the sort of anti-essentialist notions of selfhood that appear in *The Waves*. He emerges as a balancing, binding force around which the other friends stabilize and order themselves and their lives. But this stability cannot last; during a trip to India, Percival is thrown from his horse and is killed. As soon as news of Percival's death reaches the friends, their worlds are shattered. Neville states, "All is lost. The lights of the world have gone out. There stands the tree which I cannot pass. […] My past is cut from me" (151). Louis cannot smooth Percival's death into order; he fears that "if [he] cannot nail these impressions to the board and out of the many men in him make one, […] then [he] shall fall like snow and be wasted" (170). But Bernard has a tellingly different reaction.

Upon learning of Percival's death, Bernard, like the others, is devastated. But within this devastation, he strives to take note and observe the world around him: "this then is the world that

Percival sees no longer. Let me look" (153). Thus, Bernard's reaction embodies "what Evelyn Underhill describes as 'that spiritual life' which 'is not a consoling retreat from the difficulties of existence; but an invitation to enter fully into that difficult existence.'" (Lazenby 45). Bernard does not try as the others do to find an order, a meaning, or an explanation to his friend's passing. He simply notes that "the machine then works," that despite tragedy life still goes on, and seeks to reenter that life – because Bernard "wants life round [him]" (158). He knows his life is irrevocably changed, that he has lost something of great value, and that things will never truly be the same again for him. Yet Bernard also recognizes his friend is not truly gone: he thinks to Percival, "you have gone across the court, further and further, drawing the line between us. But you exist somewhere. Something of you remains" (155). Like Clarissa Dalloway, Bernard knows that death is not an absolute end. Something of Percival remains in Bernard, in all of their friends, in the places and memories that they shared. Bernard's realization of this fact is not a cure-all for suffering, but it does grant him a perspective that others lack – as well as more constructive methods for healing from such a traumatic experience.

It is clear that viewing the self as isolated and fixed in its roles and relations to others brings pain; Louis' internal struggle against himself, as well as all of the friends' reactions to Percival's death, bring this to light. Bernard's embracing of change allows him to avoid or minimize such pains. But this realization of the self's constructed, unfixed nature is different from not inhabiting a self at all. While it may be a fiction, Rhoda's situation makes the case for the necessity of some kind of self-concept. Rhoda, even before Percival's death, appears as an antisocial character with a fragmented self. She suffers from an inability to find her own identity amidst the ebb and flow of life as a whole. There are echoes of Septimus Smith in her state; just as Septimus embodied Clarissa's notion of the intensity of experience taken to a destructive

degree, so too does Rhoda embody Bernard's ideas of the self to an extreme degree. Sadly, Rhoda also shares another attribute with Septimus: her eventual death via suicide.

Rhoda is unable to inhabit the social self at all, with her claim that she "hates all the details of the individual life" (103). But unlike Bernard, Rhoda's independence from the social self does not grant her peace or comfort. Even though Bernard describes his return to the social self as a somewhat painful experience, it is clear that he views it as a necessary part of existence. Rhoda, unwilling or unable to straddle the line between these social and more universal modes of inhabiting the self, feels as though she is "broken into separate pieces" in social occasions (105). She cannot find "the substance in which repeated moments are embedded," and as such feels her self and her existence in time as destabilized, fragmented, and undefinable (150). Lacking any notion of a self, Rhoda feels unable to act at all: "there is the puddle […] and I cannot cross it. What then can I touch? What brick, what stone? And so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely?" (159). Rhoda's sense of displacement speaks to the fact that individual identity, whilst containing the potential to bring one harm, is also a crucial aspect of human existence. With complete self-negation, Rhoda has thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Yes, the stable, unchanging self is a mental construct – but mental constructs are still important! While characters like Bernard or Clarissa have learned to navigate this contradiction and embraced the balancing act that is selfhood, those like Rhoda are left grasping for some sense of stability.

It would appear, then, that Bernard has the self figured out. Unlike Louis, he embraces the self's shifting qualities rather than fighting them. Unlike Rhoda, he can still inhabit the social self when the need arises. He has found that sense of balance that so many others like. But it is among Bernard's final revelations that one finds another of the novel's key points: an anti-

essentialism that extends from the novel's conception of the self to the human tendency to tie events together into a cohesive story or narrative. Reflecting, Bernard tries to take account of his life. "Let us pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe that we turn about in our fingers. Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one matter is dispatched – love, for instance – we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next" (251). All throughout the novel, Bernard – despite his aforementioned untidiness and openness to experience – has nonetheless been searching for one story that ties all the others together, a sort of grand narrative to unify his experience. But here Bernard finally recognizes the futility of such a pursuit: "there is nothing one can fish up in a spoon; nothing one can call an event" (256). One can try and make a story out of a life, and it may be a convenient and useful fiction. But Bernard recognizes that "when [he tries] to break off […] what [he calls his] life', it is not one life that [he looks] back upon; [he is] not one person; [he is] many people" (276). Identity and the self cannot be neatly partitioned, and neither can anything in life. There is nothing inherently more meaningful, the novel suggests, in one moment versus another. There is no event except life itself as it unfolds.

Thus, while *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* were not narrative-driven works, *The Waves* stands as a novel opposed to the concept of narrative. Narratives of the self in which one claims "I am this" or "I am that" are exposed as harmful constructions. Similarly, the idea that human lives can be approached as separate from or unaffected by those of others is sharply critiqued. Through a skepticism towards the confines of identity, then, Woolf's novel points towards "an ultimate order of experience, which can be achieved only through a momentary embrace or immersion in that dark, often frightening world outside the self" (Naremore 189). But as scholars have noted, such a world is not only one of danger. Writing on Bernard's ultimate

acceptance of identity's artificiality, Dennis Young writes, "Like Buddha, with the sword of his mind Bernard has to pierce the bubble of the many masks he has assumed, and thereby shatter them into nothing. But the miracle is that though all his masks explode, all is thereby renewed, revivified, awakened" (103). As Bernard realizes, the fact that there is no underlying essence beneath the self and our experience of life is not to be lamented. It instead points to capacity for positive change, spontaneity, and creativity – as well as the recognition that just as everything changes, it is never truly gone either.

It is in *The Waves* that Woolf's characters struggle most profoundly with questions of the self; her characters grasp at the roots of phenomena and other selves, even as they experience the sense that there are no roots to be found in themselves or others. Taking solace in moments where the individual ego away, they nevertheless return to their isolated personalities – a process Bernard describes as painful – and resume a fiction of separation. *The Waves* also shows most clearly how these ideas of the self govern an individual's behavior and sense of life's significance. Bernard's reaction to his friend's death is meaningfully different from those around him; while others retreat from life, he embraces it more fully and seeks to immerse himself back in the "machine". Woolf's work points out how individual approaches to grieving differ, but also how such a view can help one deal with life's transience and impermanence. Above all else, *The Waves* examines how letting go of the need for one true story – of one's life, of one's friends, of the world, or of the self – and instead embracing multiplicity can be a healing and liberating act.

Conclusion

Woolf's novels certainly never shy away from life's biggest questions. Her work brings into light entire worlds – not just the external world in its constant state of flux and uncertainty, but also the inner worlds of the human psyche. Dissecting this experience moment by moment, Woolf probes into *how* one simultaneously responds to that external world and reimagines it through the filters of the thoughts that constitute one's sense of self and worldview. By bringing these inner worlds to life on the page, Woolf confronts the reader with how we make sense of who we are. Where do we draw the line between ourselves and others, and why? What makes us think we are so separate, so disconnected from others? From where do we derive our certainty about our categories of identity and experience? Woolf's work invites one to wrestle with such questions, and to reexamine our assumptions about them.

Delving into these existential questions, Woolf undermines some common wisdom concerning these beliefs about the self. Always skeptical of the categories of identity and their effects on how we conduct ourselves, Woolf presents characters bound by such beliefs in a fixed, easily identifiable self. In comparing Woolf's more aware characters to those who suffer more with the self – the Clarissas versus the Kilmans, or the Bernards versus the Rhodas – the idea is not to cast judgment. As Woolf's novels demonstrate, self-knowledge and insight are not qualities that one either possesses or not; they are processes towards which one aspires, with countless leaps forward and setbacks along the way. Everyone in her novels is a work in progress, and even the more insightful characters frequently come crashing back down into ignorance.

Rather than condemning them, Woolf extends sympathy to her characters, rendering their lives in all their vivid struggles and emphasizing their subjective wants, needs, and desires.

Woolf does not judge, but she does show how the few characters who open themselves up to a broader kind of self-definition – one in which identity is recognized not as a solid mandate but as a fluid fiction – undoubtedly seem more fit to face life's change, its chaos, and its occasional cruelty. Freed from the desire for a personal legacy, freed from the notion that our lives are self-contained, definable events, and aware of the deeper links that extend from one self to the physical and social world around it, Woolf's more inquisitive characters are able to better appreciate and experience life as it unfolds. Characters like Clarissa, Lily, and Bernard learn to accept and even affirm impermanence, to find moments of beauty whilst also recognizing each moment unique and valuable in itself. In short, they develop the mindfulness and introspective qualities that allow them to connect more deeply with the world and people around them. Abandoning the search for the roots of another self or for a stable narrative of the world or the self, they can admire the endless potential in such a view of life.

With *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf creates one of her most human characters: Clarissa Dalloway, a woman who feels at once trapped by her social roles whilst being aware of their artificiality. With her distancing from others, her inner life can feel cold, even loveless. But with this rejection of passion comes a sort of clarity of insight that others lack. If Clarissa's inner privacy can allow her to cherish the beauty of the everyday, to feel intimately connected with the world around her, then it can also allow her to work towards a greater sense of balance in terms of her relationships with others. As Septimus' death compels Clarissa to reenter into life, Woolf suggests a reawakening to life's beauty and a more balanced sense of selfhood. The fact that the self is a mental construction with no essential core does not mean one can make it through life with no sense of self. Identity is crucial for interpersonal relationships and for one's own mental health, but so is the recognition that it lacks a stable foundation. In this sense, the novel

advocates for an attitude of appreciation for even the least glamorous of life's everyday events, and for an awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of competing views of the self.

Continuing her trend of investigating identity in *To the Lighthouse,* Woolf examines how one's idea of the self can dictate a sense of meaning and an approach to dealing with the shortness of life. Contrasting the self-obsession of Mr. Ramsay with the inner struggle of Lily Briscoe to connect with others, Woolf shows how recognizing moments of significance does not have to be at odds with recognizing their eventual dissolution in the flow of time. An acceptance that moments, relationships, and entire lives can pass in the blink of an eye does not invalidate them or diminish their preciousness; such a view only increases the preciousness of life in its transience. The novel further forces the reader to confront his or her ideas about impermanence and whether it is truly a negative aspect of life. As the *"*Time Passes*"* section makes clear, change is frightening, but also necessary for the production of new life and possibility. These realizations come easier, the novel suggests, when one taps into that sense of connection with others and abandons the pretense that the impacts and meanings contained in one life are so easily distinguished from those of another.

The Waves further deconstructs the boundaries that mental categories impose on existence. Stephen Batchelor explains these mental boundaries as such:

> We may speak of causes and conditions as though they were things, but if we look more closely they turn out to be processes with no independent reality. The harshness of a barbed remark that haunts us for days is no more than a brief instance isolated from a torrent of events. Yet it stands out in the mind's eye as something intrinsically real and apart. This habit of isolating things leads us to inhabit a world in which the gaps between them become absolute. Clutching at ourselves and the world in this way is a precondition

> for anguish. By regarding things as absolutely separate, we set ourselves the task of possessing something we can never have or of eradicating something that was never there in the first place. (77)

The Waves demonstrates how such boundaries – between subject and object, between selves, between differing aspects of the individual – are constantly breaking down, reforming, and reconstituted, sometimes within the span of a single conversation or moment of experience. The novel rejects the narrativization of a life, instead favoring the innumerable ties one experiences with others and how those ties contribute to the creation of a self. If there is no stable narrative of a self or of life itself, the novel does not despair in this fact; rather, the novel finds the potential, the spontaneity, and the fun in such a conception of existence. A celebration of the possibility for a self and a life to take on new meanings, manifestations, and developments at any time, *The Waves* emerges as a life-affirming novel that finds beauty in some of life's most difficult experiences.

Woolf's work is concerned with subjects applicable to virtually anyone. Life's uncertainty and shortness, the pain of struggling to live up to the dictates imposed on ourselves through our own attitudes or through society, the struggle for a meaningful self – these are the problems she confronts in her novels, and these are the problems faced by anyone in any culture. Woolf's novels show how reworking one's understanding of the self can help one cope with such problems. But above all else, they invite us to appreciate, to reconsider, to question our lives and the meanings we find within.

Notes

[i] Throughout this thesis, "desire" is used in a Buddhist sense: as a sort of craving to prolong pleasure, avoid suffering, and hold onto phenomenon that are inevitably transitory – whether the self, relationships with others, material conditions in our lives, etc

[ii] The Buddhist references in this thesis are mainly secondary sources stemming from the Zen and Tibetan traditions, with Stephen Batchelor as a notable exception. Secondary sources seemed more appropriate here, due to their relative accessibility in explaining concepts that can appear opaque or otherwise difficult in primary texts. Many would consider the Buddhist thought here somewhat Westernized as a part of "Buddhist Modernism" when compared to more traditional texts and sources, though it is hardly inauthentic or "Buddhism-light".

[iii] One could spend multiple lifetimes wading through the extant Woolf criticism; as such, I was not above consulting the godsend that is Google to narrow my search to relevant criticism. I found a great deal of writing on the self and Woolf, as well as a good deal of material otherwise relevant to my interests. However, there is little if any writing on Woolf and Buddhism specifically.

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