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'I AM ROOTED, BUT I FLOW':
VIRGINIA WOOLF AND 20TH CENTURY THOUGHT

by

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Emily Hanna

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter 1 – Conceptual Framework	7
Chapter 2 – <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>	22
Chapter 3 – <i>To the Lighthouse</i>	34
Chapter 4 – <i>The Waves</i>	50
Conclusion	63
Works Cited	65

Introduction

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St. Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking... It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.

– Virginia Woolf, *A Sketch of the Past*

Virginia Woolf, born Adeline Virginia Stephen in 1882, spent every summer until 1895 at her family's summer home, Talland House, on St. Ives, where this vivid memory took place. These summers by the sea had a great effect on Virginia, and informed her later fictional and non-fictional work. Memories such as these of the sea and the sound of waves infused her life and work, and informed the conception of her artistic vision. She strove to represent the mind and all of its nuances and transitions of thoughts, feelings, and sensations as acutely as possible through literature, and found that these subtle processes are best described by the water element. Like many thinkers of the time concluded, she found that consciousness is fluid and ever changing, and should be expressed as such.

Growing up, Virginia was a part of a well-connected and literate household, being the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, a notable historian, biographer, and critic. Virginia and her sister, Vanessa, were introduced to the classics and English literature, though they were not formally educated like their brothers at Cambridge. They did, however, benefit from their brothers' contacts from Cambridge, and learned a great deal from their intellectual friends. Vanessa, an artist and member of the Bloomsbury group, later

married Clive Bell in 1907. Virginia loosely based the character Lily Briscoe on Vanessa in her most autobiographical novel, *To the Lighthouse*.

In London, Virginia was surrounded by influential writers, philosophers, artists, and intellectuals as part of the Bloomsbury Group, including John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, G.E. Moore, her sister, and herself. The group reacted against the bourgeois conventions of Victorian life, and was dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, creation, love, and aesthetic experience. Most of the “Bloomsbury set” came from upper middle-class families and formed an intellectual elite. Virginia married a member of “Old Bloomsbury” and fellow writer, Leonard Woolf, in 1912. The two of them founded Hogarth Press, which published Virginia’s works after *The Voyage Out*, and the complete translations of the work of Sigmund Freud. Virginia Woolf’s literary productivity was fairly consistent throughout her life, though she suffered from what is now believed to have been bipolar disorder. She suffered a nervous breakdown when her mother died in 1895 and her most alarming collapse in 1904 after her father’s death. In 1941 at the onset of another depressive episode, she drowned herself in the Ouse River, leaving behind a note to her husband expressing that she feared she was going mad and would not recover this time.

As she stated in her autobiographical piece, *A Sketch of the Past*, Virginia Woolf’s life stands upon this memory at Talland house, listening to the sound of the waves breaking on the shore. The continuous rhythm of the waves was a source of calm and reassurance she would meditate on in a world in which she was vulnerable to emotional upheaval. To express this feeling of “the purest ecstasy” became her life’s work. In pursuit of representing the full spectrum of internal life experience, she

punctuated her characters' stream of consciousness with what she defined as "moments of being;" moments of harmony and unity with the universe. This concept of life being fluid, yet framed by these epiphanies is the common factor between her highly lyrical novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. These works underscore my argument that through her works, she represents life as a balance between autonomy and unity, and fear and tranquility, and that water imagery is used to both represent and facilitate these states and transitions of consciousness.

Chapter 1 – Conceptual Framework

Before unpacking the various ways in which water imagery functions in the novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf, it is pertinent to examine the origins of the Modernist movement, the psychological origins of “stream of consciousness,” and the ways in which Woolf was influenced by “new psychology” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Virginia Woolf was a principal figure of the Modernist literary movement, which was characterized by the disintegration of values, doubt about the existence of a knowable, objective reality, attention to alternative viewpoints and modes of thinking, and experimentation in new forms of narrative. Great advances were made in understanding the nature of the unconscious human mind, most notably by Sigmund Freud in *Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Ego and the Id*. Mark Altschule, historian of psychology, observes, “It is difficult—or perhaps impossible—to find a nineteenth-century psychologist or psychiatrist who did not recognize unconscious cerebration as not only real but of the highest importance” (Altschule 199). This emphasis on the unconscious and experimentation with literary form influenced the stream of consciousness novel.

As a literary term, stream of consciousness appears in the early twentieth century at the intersection of three fields of thought: the developing science of psychology and human consciousness, continuing speculations of western philosophy as to the nature of being, and the trend in the arts that favored the exploration of the subjectivity of consciousness. The psychological term was appropriated to literature to describe a particular narrative technique in which a character’s thoughts and perceptions are

presented without regard to logical sequence, syntax, or distinction between various levels of consciousness. This technique relied upon the representation of the character's mind and the full spectrum of the character's consciousness, as explored through their mental processes such as memories, thoughts, impressions, and sensations. Although examples of stream of consciousness technique can be found in narratives written during the last several centuries, the most notable exemplars of this technique associated within the modernist period of the early twentieth century include Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner. In relation to Woolf, Dorothy Richardson's use of stream of consciousness narrative stands out as possibly the most seminal development of Virginia Woolf's own technique. I will apply the basis of James' and Freud's ideas of the 'oceanic feeling' and Henri-Louis Bergson's theory of *la durée* to Woolf's novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. Virginia Woolf, like these psychologists and philosophers strived to illustrate the inner depths and unconscious processes of the human mind. Woolf writes in her *Essays* that she wanted to penetrate "the source beneath the surface, the very oyster within the shell" of consciousness through her craft (Woolf, *Essays* 15).

As a highly educated writer and member of the Bloomsbury group, there is no doubt that Woolf was both directly and indirectly exposed to the psychological and philosophical theories of her generation. However, Virginia Woolf claimed to have avoided reading Freud until 1939, and any "knowledge of psychoanalysis, she repeatedly declared, came not from 'study' but from 'superficial talk'" (Abel 13). It is possible that she was exposed to the work of Bergson when "her sister-in-law wrote a short book on Bergson's anti-intellectualism," "although, she stated that she never read Bergson's

works” (Graham 70). What is remarkable is that her developing literary method of capturing the character’s thought processes parallel what psychologists and philosophers of the time were concluding about the nature of human consciousness. Rather than scientifically or theoretically picking apart the fluid nature of the mind, Woolf represents the continuous flow or sense-perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and memories through literature. While other mediums of art such as music and painting can express the breadth and depth of human emotions, literature has the unique capacity for character development and limited subjectivity. In a novel, the reader is lead in and out of characters’ thoughts and memories, without explicit exposition from the narrator, to represent the fluid nature of the mind, whereas other mediums are not so easily directed. Ultimately, Woolf created her own literary psychology using these rhetorical patterns of fluidity emerging at the turn of the century, most notably with her use of the stream of consciousness literary narrative in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

William James’ psychological theory of “stream of consciousness” is a way to understand the evolving narrative style Virginia Woolf utilizes in her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and differently in, *The Waves* (1931). James “discovered that memories, thoughts, and feelings exist outside the primary consciousness,” or perceptions of the exterior world (Humphrey 5). In turn, this focus on experience outside of direct sensory perception led to James’ theory of a fluid consciousness. In *The Principles of Psychology*, Chapter IX, “The Stream of Thought”, James writes,

“Consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as “chain” or “train” do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A “river” or a “stream” is the metaphor by which it

is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life” (James 239).

I want to draw attention to James’ use of the word “stream,” and the fact that he finds it to “most naturally describe” the phenomenon of a fluid consciousness. A stream, like consciousness, is ever flowing, and always changing. A stream is never the same one second to the next, just as a consciousness is not the same one second to the next. A person’s awareness and perspective is constantly changing, not static or changing every so often. Stream of consciousness, from a psychological perspective, describes metaphorically the phenomenon—the continuous and adjoining flow of sensations, impressions, images, memories and thoughts—experienced by each person, at all levels of consciousness, and which is generally associated with each person’s subjectivity, or sense of self. There is little exposition between these transitions, thus allowing the “stream” to flow seamlessly. For example, the opening paragraphs jump from present to past without the narrator indicating this transition. The novel begins:

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning-fresh as if issued to children on a beach. What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. (Woolf, Dalloway 3)

The narrative transitions from the present, when Mrs. Dalloway is buying flowers, to her memory from her young adulthood at Bourton, with little exposition. Woolf allows the character’s consciousness to flow from one thought to the next, without the narrator indicating how or why the transition happened. This is meant to represent how in real life one is not necessarily aware of how their thought travels, but it is an unconscious, seamless process. This “river” or “stream” model of consciousness in psychology made

its way into literary narrative in various “stream of consciousness” techniques. The stream of consciousness novel can be defined, according to Robert Humphrey in his book, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*, as “novels which have as their essential subject matter the consciousness of one or more characters, that is, the depicted consciousness serves as a screen on which the material in these novels is presented” (Humphrey 2). The stream of consciousness novel may not always appear to have a coherent structure. The plot and actions weave in and out of time, place, and character and the reader follows the character’s subjective experience. The “new novel” concentrates on the subjective reality of its characters, and the nature of life as dynamic flux. In progression from *Mrs. Dalloway* to *The Waves*, Woolf moves towards a greater withdraw from objective reality. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is little exposition when merging into memory, but in *The Waves*, there is no narrator outside of the six voices. The text, except for the chapter transitions, consists entirely of what the voices individually see and feel and examine in hyperawareness of their conscious process, whereas in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the narrative offers some information outside of the characters’ consciousnesses. *The Waves* is Woolf’s attempt to write pure consciousness – to break the surface of the human shell in a way she felt had not been adequately achieved by her contemporaries.

Dorothy Richardson was the first English novelist to consistently use stream of consciousness narrative. However, Virginia Woolf writes in her diaries that she learned from what she considered the “failures” of Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce.

Virginia Woolf wrote that Dorothy Richardson was “concerned with states of being and not with states of doing” but that she ultimately fails because “we still find ourselves

distressingly near the surface” (Woolf, Diary 52). Woolf’s use of stream of consciousness narrative is to delve beneath the surface, to explore the various ways people experience the world subjectively. Stream of consciousness is concerned with mental and spiritual processes, and both how and why they emerge. Woolf is preoccupied by moments that are seemingly spiritual, and exist outside the confines of time, disrupting the flow of consciousness. A primary aspect of the stream of consciousness novel relates to the philosophical notion of the subjectivity of time, or *la durée*, versus measure time, *étendu*. In each of the three novels by Woolf I will explore how these two facets of time are put in dialogue.

Henri Bergson’s theory of *la durée* or subjective time, directly relates to the representation of time in Woolf’s novels. In “Mind, Moment, and Memory: A Study of the ‘Stream of Consciousness’ Novel,” Helen Dorner writes about why the flexibility of time goes hand-in-hand with the mind in flow, or “stream of consciousness.” She quotes Bergson declaring that “we change without ceasing, and the state itself is nothing but change’ ...’there is not feeling, no idea, no volition which is not undergoing change at every moment: if a mental state ceased to vary, its duration would cease to flow.” The central principle of Bergson’s philosophy is that change along is real; the centre of all change is not static” (Dorner 27). The nature of life is this ongoing change, which Bergson believes is best described through time. In a literary sense, Bergson’s theory of *la durée* was translated to rhetorical narrative style in Richardson’s work, which in turn, inspired Woolf’s later narrative style. Shiv K. Kumar notes in his book, *Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel*, that Dorothy Richardson was influenced by Bergson’s theories: “No doubt, Bergson influenced many mind, if only by putting into words

something then dawning within the human consciousness: an increased sense of the inadequacy of the clock as a time-measurer” (Kumar vii). The nature of time, like consciousness, became a question of philosophy with facets outside measurability. Woolf draws upon the notion of subjective time in order to highlight the greater themes of her work. For example, in *To the Lighthouse*, the first chapter, ‘The Window’ shows the significance of Mrs. Ramsay as a character, and connective factor for all of the people on the island. In the second chapter, ‘Time Passes,’ the death of Mrs. Ramsay and others are mentioned in brackets, as if in passing, highlighting the ultimate insignificance of their lives in the grand scheme of time. While Mrs. Ramsay is a very important person to the lives of those she knew, the mention of her death is allotted very little time in the novel, as if the “fast forward” button were pushed, and the majority of the novel takes place over two separate days, ten years apart. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the entire narrative takes place over the course of the day, though so much of the narrative is memory, overthrowing the linear model of time. *The Waves* covers the mental lives of six people, or “voices,” though the interludes suggest only a day has gone by. These examples just touch upon the way in which Woolf plays with the notion of psychological time, which I will discuss further in subsequent chapters.

La durée is the distinguishing feature of the stream of consciousness novel, in which, following Bergson’s principles, modernist writers present it as something incapable of measurement, and not to be captured by conventional and spatialized representations of time. Indeed Woolf abandoned the conventional plot and the conception of time as a linear sequence of events, and by means of an extremely lyrical and evocative language, rich in suggestive and beautiful images of transitoriness and openness, and based on a fluid and scattering syntax, she articulated her great novels *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and especially *The Waves* (1931) around the rhythm of her characters’ thoughts, sensations, perception and feelings, all of which constitute this stream of consciousness, this fluid *durée*. (Sánchez-Vizcaíno 2)

Time in Woolf's novels is made subjective, or flexible in the way one actually experiences time. The subjectivity of time is in direct relation to one's engrossment, so that ten minutes on a treadmill may seem like an eternity, while ten minutes writing an exam can "fly by". Kumar makes an important point about Woolf's presentation of time: "Life, as Virginia Woolf conceives it, is not a predetermined and precisely patterned thing. Since its determining aspect is *la durée*, it has no spatial symmetry or cohesion. Life is experienced, as she states, 'not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.' Such a statement, obviously, implies the supremacy of intuition and flux over logic and determinism" (Kumar 101). In Woolf's literary world, a whole novel can encapsulate a day, whereas many years can be described within a few pages. This is in an attempt to "humanize" time, or represent it in the way in which one experiences it. "For Bergson, time is not chronometric but experiential, and any attempt to quantify it – through subdivision or categorization – has already dehumanized it. Independent of the divided, discrete world of extension, which our superficial selves inhabit, it is the realm of *durée*. A zone of pure continuity and heterogeneity, where the *moi fundamental* resides. The true, qualitative experience that is *durée* is not based on a transcendental notion of time, as it is not a presuppositional condition for experience; rather, it *is* that experience, immediate and intuitive, and it provides a pathway to the absolute" (Sheehan 123-124). *Durée* is based on the individual's experience, not any measured notion of time. "Durée has been called 'psychological time', but it might more accurately be termed 'soul time.' As Bergson writes, 'in the simplest [states of consciousness] the whole soul can be reflected.' Events do not take place in a

homogeneous medium, measurable by instrumental means; they are coextensive and permeable, stored as memory below the level of consciousness. Measurability means that beings are unaware of *durée*. Because they are caught up in 'spatial' time, or *étendu*. "To rehumanise time, therefore, is to retemporalise it, to recognize it as that which cannot be recovered, hence cannot be measured" (Sheehan 124). In *To the Lighthouse*, *durée* is exemplified through the allotment of space in the novel to each chapter.

To the Lighthouse...is limited to the space of ten years. In the three sections of the novel, we have three corresponding aspects of time covering about two-thirds of the entire narrative Virginia Woolf describes an intense human experience in a mere cross-section of a September evening from six o'clock to supper time. Therefore, whereas the clock covers only a couple of hours, it is only through *la durée* that we are enabled to participate in the inner experience of various characters. In Mrs. Ramsay time becomes a symbol of inner expansion because she fills it with love, hope and understanding; Mr. Ramsay's inordinate egotism, on the other hand, contracts time; to James it is synonymous with "tomorrow" and the promise of a visit to the lighthouse; to Lily Briscoe time is a symbolic process of intaking of sensory impressions and memories, *La durée*, as suggested in this novel, is a living organism. It is discrete moments of experience. "...how life," says Mrs. Ramsay, "from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, become curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it..." (Kumar 76-77)

As mentioned in the quote above, time becomes a symbol to Mrs. Ramsay who understands its value. She and the other characters of the novel are keenly aware of time, to the point that it is feared because of its reminder of life's impermanence. Helen Dorner writes, "Mrs. Ramsay is aware that time flows and that it has stability; that duration is the 'continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future.' I will address this next scene again in my discussion of *To the Lighthouse*, but it is a defining example of how Virginia Woolf captures the subjective nature of time in relation to memory. During the dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay muses on the nature of eternity:

Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself for the moment...). Just now she had

reached security she hovered like a hawk suspended, like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body...all of which rising in this profound stillness...seemed now for no special reason to stay there like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was all round them. It partook she felt...of eternity...There is a coherence in things, a stability something, she meant, is immune from change and shines out...in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby...Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 104-105)

This passage exemplifies the subjective nature of time, and in particular, the phenomenon when a moment feels connective and suspended in time. This is Mrs. Ramsay's art – giving shape to life experience. I will further explore this phenomenon in the chapter detailing *To the Lighthouse*. This passage also exemplifies my next topic of interests in Woolf's novels what Freud describes as 'religious, oceanic feeling,' Woolf exemplifies represents in literature through moments such as the one above, where a character feels they have 'reached security' in 'profound stillness.' These are moments where one loses awareness of time. Throughout my discussion, I will address these "moments of unity" as "moments of being," "epiphanies," or as described in *The Waves*, "drops" and "mystical moments" that are analogous to the 'oceanic feeling' described by Freud.

These moments of "eternity" correlate to the "oceanic feeling" of religious experience introduced to Freud by Romain Rolland. The "oceanic feeling" of religious experience is a heightened state of consciousness, or awareness, of one's connection to the world. Woolf often represented this state of awareness to be achieved through the mundane, though significant, moments of life, such as when Lily finishes her painting, Mrs. Dalloway learns of Septimus Smith's suicide, or simply when a character thinks on their mortality. Romain Rolland was a French dramatist and mystic with whom Freud began a correspondence in 1927. In a letter written to Freud on December fifth, 1927,

Rolland asked Freud to consider “the simple and direct fact of *the feeling of the ‘eternal’* (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were)” (Parsons 36). It is Rolland, not Freud, who originally chooses the term ‘oceanic’, which was then adopted by Freud in his own descriptions in his book, *Civilization and its Discontents*. He writes of this “peculiar feeling” in the opening chapter of the book:

This consists in a peculiar feeling, which never leaves him personally, which he finds shared by many others, and which he may suppose millions more also experience. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of ‘eternity’, a feeling as if something limitless, unbounded, something ‘oceanic’. It is, he says, a purely subjective experience, not an article of belief; it implies no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious spirit and is taken hold of by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into definite channels and also, no doubt, used up in them. One may rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even though one reject all beliefs and all illusions. (Freud 8-9).

Freud notes “one might rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone” – it is not necessarily attributed to any specific religion, but to the very essence of subjective religious feeling itself. It is a feeling of unity with a greater source, whether it is God, a spirit, nature, or mankind itself. As Rolland says, this phenomenon is not actually eternal, but it is a *feeling* of transcendence. He attributes this feeling to the ocean because of the ocean’s seeming boundlessness, great distance, and unfathomable depth. It is a wide, open space for discovery, and source of perspective. William James also explored this idea of “oceanic” religious experience, and describes it to be a “peak experience; a feeling of unbounded unity with the wider cosmos and an apparent dissolution of the boundary between self and world” (McVittie 1). This “dissolution of the boundary,” or losing oneself in a greater scheme, is what Woolf attempts to describe as a sense of unity or completion. This will be relevant to my chapter about *To the*

Lighthouse in reference to the dinner party scene. In Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, he writes, "If I have understood my friend aright, he means the same thing as that consolation offered by an original and somewhat unconventional writer to his hero, contemplating suicide: 'Out of this world we cannot fall'. So it is a feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole" (Freud 9). This "indissoluble connection" is what is explored throughout Woolf's novels, as "moments of being" or "epiphanies" that disrupt the flow of consciousness, and draw attention to unity amongst people and the world as a whole. Oftentimes, these moments are inspired and facilitated by the sea, coming back to Freud's original term, the 'oceanic feeling' or feeling of unboundedness and unity that finds its image in water.

This 'oceanic' state of consciousness is altogether different from the mind as a "stream," but sets up differentiation between states of consciousness that I will explore later in my chapter on *To the Lighthouse*:

These two images, the stream and the ocean, can be seen as complementary features in an ontology, or rather a 'hydrography' of consciousness; at one extreme the subject is defined by the path of their individual stream; delineated, bounded, and temporal. At the other extreme the subject dissolves into a larger substrate, an all-encompassing, atemporal ocean. These two terms for particular radically different states of consciousness are entailments of an extended metaphor in which the operation of the mind is compared to the behavior of a liquid. (McVittie 1)

These differing states of consciousness can be thought of as different levels of awareness or connection to the world. These moments when one "dissolves into a larger substrate" are juxtaposed by the stream of normal consciousness, or states of "non-being". Another example of a "moment of being" is the conclusion of the novel, *To the Lighthouse*, when Lily Briscoe realizes her artistic vision after coming to terms with Mr. Ramsay simultaneously as James reaches the lighthouse, and thereby reconciles his childhood

feelings of resentment. Both characters experience an “epiphany” looking out from opposite sides of the shore, and feel a sense of connection to the vastness of the universe. Woolf often describes these moments of heightened consciousness in connection to the ocean that acts as a source of perspective. These “moments of being” seem to stretch out one’s view both literally and figuratively, simultaneously affirming life and reminding one of their mortality. In *Virginia Woolf and the “Lust of Creation”: A Psychoanalytic Exploration*, Shirley Panken notes, “the sea is a major symbol in Woolf’s life and fiction, represent[ing] the rhythmic nature of existence, the inexorable cycle of building up and destroying, the nonhuman life of which she feels so much a part. Equated with the imagination, states of “trance,” and the fluidity of life – the water element was never far from consciousness” (Panken 17). In Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness novel, *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf echoes Rolland, Freud, and James’ sentiment that the ocean facilitates, or defines, a sort of “religious, oceanic feeling.” In literary terms, this is a feeling of unity that cannot be described using any other element but water. Religious feeling is a feeling of connection to the something greater than oneself, and in Woolf’s novels, this connection is translated into a spiritual experience. In her novels, these epiphanies usually are moments when a character reconciles an inner conflict, artistic vision, or gains a greater understanding of their connection to the world.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, the sea and seascapes, play an important role in the development of each character’s consciousness and interaction with the outside world. In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf uses stream of consciousness narrative technique, though there is an omniscient narrator in both to describe what is happening outside of the characters’ consciousness. With *The Waves*,

however, Woolf takes this exploration of the representation of consciousness a step further, and writes consciousness without narrative. She strips the idea of the “novel” down to the bare minimum, with the monologues of six voices that are hyperaware of their perceptions and mental processes. The “voices” do not describe things how one would categorize what they see and feel to others, but describe their perceptions in the purest way they perceive the world around them. In this way, Woolf progresses from representing consciousness to *writing* consciousness. In the following chapters, I will use these concepts as a mode of discussion for the use of water imagery and stream of consciousness literary technique in Woolf’s novels.

In the following chapter about *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf symbolizes fear and disillusionment as a result of World War I in England in the form of water. The topography of London is described as a seascape, and its inhabitants as sea-dwellers. The way in which the main characters are described define the way in which that character copes with their fear of mortality, and the seascape symbolizes the all-pervasive fear that binds the autonomous London inhabitants together in collective consciousness. Time, as well as space, is made fluid with the “flooding” sound of Big Ben, drowning the characters in the reality of passing time. In my third chapter about *To the Lighthouse*, I will examine water imagery as a symbol for unity, and the sea’s physical and spiritual effects on the characters’ consciousnesses. As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, “moments of being” disrupt the flow of consciousness in *To the Lighthouse*. These transitions in perspective offer needed balance for the characters to find harmony between involvement and detachment, and peace with their awareness of mortality. In my fourth chapter about *The Waves*, I will focus on the way in which Woolf moves from stream of consciousness

novel to the experimental playpoem stripped of narrative to represent “a mind thinking”. Woolf symbolizes six voices as individual “waves” of autonomous thought that collect and fall into the greater ocean, or “collective consciousness”. The voices undergo symbolic transformation to describe their perceptions in their purest form, though they describe what they experience as if they are observing their thought processes, unattached. I will apply the conceptual concepts explained above to Woolf’s “literary psychology” and use of water imagery.

Chapter 2 – *Mrs. Dalloway*

‘Fear no more the heat of the sun’

Virginia Woolf began to use stream of consciousness literary technique in her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in May 1925, to express the subjective experience of her characters in the wake of post World War I England. *Mrs. Dalloway* details a day in the life of an upper class, London housewife, Clarissa Dalloway, and focuses on the meaning and significance behind life’s daily occurrences such as buying flowers or walking through a park. On a larger scale, *Mrs. Dalloway* explores the psychological realities of postwar England caused by the damage and disillusionment of the British Empire.

Clarissa is preparing to host a dinner party, and goes about her errands in the city while meditating on her past, the danger of life, and the inevitability of death. While running her errands, Clarissa is reminded of her of her youth at Bourton, and her rejection of her past love, Peter Walsh. She wonders if she made the right decision to marry her husband, Richard Dalloway, who provides security and needed space, over Peter whose love was passionate, but difficult. The narrative weaves in and out of each character’s consciousness, as well as between past and present. Clarissa’s “double” in the novel is Septimus Warren Smith, a veteran of World War I who suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He spends the day in the park with his Italian wife, Lucrezia, and has hallucinations of his friend, Evans, who died in the war. The thoughts and perceptions on mortality of Clarissa and Septimus often parallel one another, obscuring the boundary between sanity and insanity. This fear of death permeates the novel, and manifests itself in the form of water. The stroke of the parliamentary clock, Big Ben, as well as water in

its various forms, is haunting to the characters coping with the reality of their own mortality. The novel is infused with water imagery to the point that London and its inhabitants are described as part of a world submerged under water. The external topography of London and each character's internal consciousness are defined by the protean element. Woolf also uses water imagery to convey the fluid, dynamic nature of perception, whether it is perception of city life, a person's thoughts, the passing of time, or the way in which thoughts vacillate between past and present. In the novel, water is ultimately of a dual nature; it is calming and regenerative, and constant reminder of death and the lifecycle. Its use is to express the disillusionment of post World War I England, and to indicate how a specific character grapples with their fear of mortality as either, as noted by Garvey, a "diver," "buccaneer," or "drowned sailor". I will draw upon Juliane Schmalfluss' book, *Psychological Symbolism in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath*, and Johanna X. K. Garvey's article, "Difference and Continuity: The Voices of *Mrs. Dalloway*" in my analysis.

In the novel, water reflects the cyclical nature of life and death, and unity and destruction. In this double capacity, water is both threatening, and a source of assurance. In the following passage, Clarissa Dalloway is sewing, and is reminded of the collecting and falling of waves by the gathering of the fabric into folds:

So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all" more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, that is all. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively, for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. (Woolf, *Dalloway* 39-40)

This passage takes on a rhythmical quality similar to the repetition of waves rising and falling. This collecting and falling of the waves mimics the cycle of life, and is an

assuring presence. The sea is also a symbol of unity for its absorption of all human sorrow. Collecting and falling of the waves quiets Clarissa, and allows her fears to “fall,” “committing [her] burden to some sea”. The meditation of the waves causes her “heart in the body” to take solace in the pattern reflecting life and death. She, as well as Peter Walsh and Septimus Smith, struggle to live life knowing death is inevitable. When she does come to terms with her own mortality towards the end of the novel, she “repeat[s], Fear no more the heat of the sun” – a quote from Shakespeare’s “Cymbeline” that Septimus hears from the ocean as well (Woolf 186). Schmalfluss writes, “the waves become a vessel for the sorrows the individual experiences and also indicates an underlying comforting force in life which is only to be contacted by the true self, the soul” (Schmalfluss 78). In this way, the sea is calming because it gives perspective on the cyclical, grand scale life and nature is on, allowing the viewer to look beyond individual human suffering. The sea “sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall,” uniting all sorrow. In this way, the swelling and collapsing of the waves is a reminder that all things come to an end and begin anew, including human life.

In the novel, Woolf describes the topography of London as a seascape to metaphorically reflect the connective and fluid nature of the city and its inhabitants in a haunted, post-World War I setting. Despite the city of London being a place of urban modernity, the people of London are deeply connected to one another on a subconscious level. This connection is a common national identity that is now characterized by fear, and a breakdown of social values and norms. Woolf represents the city in the image of water because of the subconscious connection between the London inhabitants in common fear and disillusionment. The narrator, as well as Clarissa and Peter in

particular, describe the city as a seascape through their individual perceptions. These images reflect the fluidity of the spatial realm in addition to fluidity in the internal realm of consciousness. Garvey writes that water permeates Woolf's novel in two major ways: "comparisons drawing upon water imagery continually present both urban topography and internal experience from unique perspectives. The narrative creates not a strictly mimetic representation of London and its inhabitants but a flowing procession of impressions, sensations, and visions, interrelated, joined in their participation in a floating, diving, surfacing—life as in a marine setting" (Garvey 64). Instead of representing people merely walking down the street, she describes London sometimes as a river, stream, or ocean, and its inhabitants traveling by ship. This is, of course, not what Clarissa, Peter, or the narrator "see," but it is the impression of constant motion and fluidity that these images represent. Clarissa also finds escape in her "parallel world" characterized by water. She "had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (Woolf, *Dalloway* 8). This "parallel world" is a space in which Clarissa feels separated from life, but is highly aware of the threat of destruction. This metaphorical space is a seascape to illustrate Clarissa's hyperawareness of mortality, loneliness, and lack of control, as if she is "far out to sea". "The escapist notion Clarissa plac[es] the experience of the sea outside the ordinary realm of life, creating a parallel world to which only the highly sensitive like herself and Septimus have access. ... [and] this image of being unaffected in a world of one's own is set against the "ebb and flow of things" (MD 11) in the real world, implying that both objects and subjects are in constant motion" (Schmalfuss 77). By creating a "parallel" world in which she is alone, looking in

on the “ebb and flow,” Woolf is juxtaposing the stillness and separation in one’s internal world, simultaneously involved in the outer world of constant motion. In the next passage, the city is described as a connective, watery surface when traffic accumulates and the cars must stop to let through the car of “the Queen Prince or Prime Minister,” causing a “ripple” in the fabric of the city (Woolf, *Dalloway* 16). Everyone stops what he or she is doing to see who is in the car, and draws his or her attention to the Empire:

The car had gone, but it had left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors’ shops on both sides of Bond Street. For thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way—to the window. Choosing a pair of gloves—should they be to the elbow or above it, lemon or pale grey?—ladies stopped; when the sentence was finished something had happened. Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire. In a public house in a back street a Colonial insulted the House of Windsor, which echoed strangely across the way in the ears of girls buying white underlinen threaded with pure white ribbon for their weddings. For the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound. (Woolf, *Dalloway* 17-18)

The effect of the car is likened to the effect of a disturbance on water; a “ripple” that sends vibration through the city, creating “surface agitation” from “the passing car as it sunk”. London is transformed into lake, which connects all of its inhabitants in fluidity and the breaking down of spatial boundary. They are all bound by one thought: “the dead, the flag, the Empire,” in reference to national identity. Disparate “strangers looked at each other” in unity of their common fears. When a Colonial insults the House of Windsor, his words are echoed to “the ears of girls buying white underlinen;” while each of these people live in their autonomous “parallel world,” they are inherently a part of a connective tissue of the city life. Space, and in particular, city, is therefore represented through water to illustrate the connective nature of daily interaction brought upon by

common fear. Each person is in his or her own world, but connected by the “ripples,” or presence, of others. Woolf represents London submerged in water as a metaphor for the pervasive fear felt by the city-dwellers, and to express the connective, unified quality of the city and its inhabitants bound by fear and disillusionment. They are each in their own separate worlds, “out to sea,” or as described by Mcvittie, they are individual streams that meet at an “atemporal ocean”. London becomes a hydrography of consciousness, as it is composed of individuals who are a part of a collective, post World War I consciousness.

Experiential time is made fluid so as to highlight its subjectivity, while measured time also a constant, haunting reminder of the passing of time. The novel itself takes place over the course of one day, though the allotment of time and depth given to a specific thought, memory, or occurrence is not representative of literal time. It is represented in *la dureé* the way in which people experience time subjectively rather than literally. Time, like space, is described as water – fluid and dynamic. As Clarissa Dalloway is sitting at her desk, the sound of Big Ben “flooded the room with its melancholy wave; which receded, and gathered itself together to fall once more” (Woolf, Dalloway 118). The sound of time is said to “flood” the room rather than to sound in it. This measured time stops psychological time with its disruption of flow, and punctuates the passing of time with authority. The ringing of Big Ben, like water, is a reminder of death, mortality, and the passing of time. The sound of Big Ben also highlights the simultaneous, connected nature of the lives of the characters. Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith never meet, though Septimus’ suicide has a profound effect on Clarissa. Clarissa struggles to come to terms with aging and death, and her own life decision to marry Richard. Septimus is trapped in his own mind, unable to interact with the world in

a socially acceptable way. The world is threatening and ugly to Septimus, and so he decides to kill himself so as to return to a superior world. Simultaneously, Clarissa is hosting her party so as to engage in a life-affirming experience. Woolf brings the two characters together at the end of the novel when Clarissa learns of Septimus' suicide:

The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! The old lady had put out her light! The whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. (Woolf, *Dalloway* 186)

At this moment, Clarissa watches her elderly neighbor “put out her light,” and lets go of her fear of death. It is now that she “felt somehow very like” [Septimus], the young man who had killed himself”. She respects his decision, having been faced with the same one herself. His decision to kill himself has a profound effect on Clarissa; he has made her appreciate life. Throughout this passage, the striking of the clock is heard in the background, drawing attention to the passing of time. However, it does not threaten Clarissa. The striking of the hours is now comforting like the waves, and she recalls the quote from Shakespeare once more. “The clock striking the hour, one, two, three” not only communicates the passing of the hours, but its measurement gives perspective to the fact that life is simultaneously being experienced by different people, bound together by time. The narrative is written to express the psychological time experienced by the characters, and the clock is what brings their disparate experiences of time together. Clarissa and Septimus have never met, yet his death has such a profound effect on her present, breaking down the barriers of space and time.

Throughout the novel, the characters are described in roles associated to a marine setting that establishes the way in which they combat their fears of life and mortality.

Garvey writes,

The characters themselves are also often transformed through comparisons to persons, objects, even animals associated with the aqueous element. These changes occur in several ways; a character may perceive him-or herself in oceanic images: one character sometimes views another as part of a marine setting; or the narrator may present the metaphorical relationship. The source of the perception is not always as important as the image it produces, however. The relationship of consciousness to water explicitly illustrates how we are to understand a character. Moreover, the water imagery establishes a triadic structure—three principal ways of reacting to life in general, twentieth-century London in particular. Thus emerge a diver, a buccaneer, and a drowned sailor. (Garvey 67)

Peter Walsh falls under “buccaneer,” Septimus Smith, “a drowned sailor,” and Clarissa, a “diver”. Clarissa plunges into her fears head on, whereas Peter describes himself as a “lone traveler,” constantly distracting himself by moving to India, or following a pretty girl in the park. Septimus, on the other hand, cannot endure life, and commits suicide.

Clarissa Dalloway

Clarissa’s decision to endure life is reflected in her ability to thrive in the water element.

In the opening paragraphs, Clarissa Dalloway recalls the mixture of excitement and fear she experienced as a young woman at Bourton, “diving” into the June day:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear so, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling, standing and looking. (Woolf, Dalloway 3)

The eighteen-year-old Clarissa “plunges” into the day at Bourton as if it were an aqueous space, in the same way that the present-day Clarissa Dalloway’s “plunges” into memory. In this way, “time, as well as space, continually turns into water” (Garvey 67). Clarissa is therefore at one with water, “plunging” into it head-on rather than running away from her fear of death the water presents. Garvey writes, “The central image of Clarissa as diver implies her familiarity with the ocean, a knowledge of and delight in the chaotic element, and also a direct confrontation with passing time, a recognition of the inevitable end” (Garvey 68). While Clarissa grapples with her fear of aging and death, she ultimately chooses to invest in life-affirming experiences, and thrives in her element, throwing parties to create unity. Clarissa’s fear and fascination of life is reflected “as she stood hesitating one moment on the threshold of her drawing room, an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break, but only gently split their surface, roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn over the weeds with pearl” (Woolf, Dalloway 30). In this passage, again, Clarissa is described as a diver, and shows her simultaneous fascination and fear of life and death. The sea darkening and brightening shows water’s dual nature as threatening and calming, and the pearls among the weeds suggest that there is beauty in what one fears. The waves that “roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn over the weeds with pearl” remind one of the tides, and the turning over of death and decay. Ultimately, this passage exposes Clarissa’s fascination and fear of life, and the duality of the water element.

Peter Walsh

Peter Walsh is a self-proclaimed “buccaneer,” or lone traveler, living a rootless existence and denying societal norms:

...he was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring, indeed (landed as he was last night from India) a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned proprieties, yellow dressing-gowns, pipes, fishing-rods, in the shop windows; and respectability and evening parties and spruce old men wearing white slippers beneath their waistcoats. He was a buccaneer. (Woolf 53)

Peter Walsh, like Clarissa, appreciates life, though he does not contemplate and accept his fears. Instead, he is constantly running – after Clarissa refused to marry him, he “went away that night,” with the intention to never come back (Woolf, *Dalloway* 64). He travels and lives in India, and then returns to London, only to be disturbed by past regrets and feelings, and the reality that he has aged. Upon leaving the Dalloway’s house, Peter walks around London and feels “He had escaped! Was utterly free...I haven’t felt so young in years! Thought Peter, escaping (only of course for an hour or so) from being precisely what he was, and feeling like a child who runs out of doors” (Woolf, *Dalloway* 52). He regresses to a sense of childlike adventure as opposed to facing his reality. While walking around, he follows a young girl he finds pretty, though he has no intention of approaching her. He escapes into a fantasy world Instead of dealing with his feelings for Clarissa, and chooses to stay at the surface of his fears and emotions. When meeting Clarissa, he stops himself from delving into the past, and chooses to stay in the present to avoid getting hurt: “‘Yes,’ said Peter. ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ he said as if she drew up to the surface something which positively hurt him as it rose. Stop! Stop! He wanted to cry” (Woolf, *Dalloway* 43). This memory he “drew up to the surface” is from the depths of his

emotion that he refuses to face. Instead, he is characterized as a buccaneer, or a traveler living a rootless existence.

Septimus Warren Smith

While Clarissa chooses life, her foil Septimus, embraces death. Before killing himself by jumping out of a window, he finds himself feeling as if he is drowning in water, though finds peace in the sensation:

Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting-room; watching the watery gold glow and fade with the astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wall-paper. Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more. (Woolf, Dalloway 139)

He sees his surroundings turn to water, and he, “floating, on the top of the waves”.

Because he cannot assimilate to life, suffering from hallucinations, he is symbolically “drowned” by life. The water “says” to him what Clarissa also hears, “fear no more,” from Shakespeare. He and Clarissa are faced with the same question – to endure life, or to end it – and choose to deal with their fears differently. Schmalfluss writes, “Clarissa’s perspective reveals the more life-affirming power of the waves. Remember her youth at Bourton, the memory of ‘the kiss of the wave’ (MD 5) brings back to her the uncertainty and eagerness with which she started into her life. It partially scares her but what eventually prevails are ‘waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved’ (MD 9). (Schmalfluss 78). Ultimately, Clarissa thrives in the water element, while Septimus is drowned by his fears. Peter Walsh, the third of the triad, is constantly running away from

his fears without contemplating their depth. He, therefore, is a “buccaneer” in his symbolic relationship to water. In Virginia Woolf’s later novel, *To the Lighthouse*, the characters are faced with similar fears in the wake of post World War I. As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the characters must cope with the awareness of their own impermanence, and strive to make life lasting and meaningful.

Chapter 3 – *To the Lighthouse*

'But I beneath a rougher sea'

To the Lighthouse, Virginia Woolf's most autobiographical work of fiction, takes place on the Isle of Skye where the sea is a constant presence of unity and destruction that acts on the consciousnesses of the characters. Each of the main characters is trying to come to terms with some aspect of their life; Mrs. Ramsay struggles to find meaning, feeling her life has already been lived, and strives to maintain a balance between preserving herself, and giving her husband the needed love and sympathy he requires. To cope, she enjoys bringing people together to make memories and connections, may it be through marriage, or hosting a dinner party. Mr. Ramsay struggles with his philosophical work, feeling he can never make a significant contribution to the progression of thought. He is described as logical, detached, and egotistical, yet requires the involvement of his wife and children to enjoy life on a smaller scale. Their youngest son, James, wants to go to the lighthouse, and Mr. Ramsay tells him it will not be possible. Mrs. Ramsay indulges James' hope, and the reader begins to see James' growing resentment towards his father's realism. Lily Briscoe, an unmarried artist, can be thought of as the opposite of Mrs. Ramsay. Both envy the other for different reasons, though Lily struggles with being unable to make satisfying human relationships. She feels there is always a boundary, which stops her from giving into Mr. Ramsay's demand for sympathy after the death of Mrs. Ramsay. In the second chapter of the novel, 'Time Passes,' the degradation of the house reflects the destruction of unity between the inhabitants of the house. After ten years pass, the same group meets together (minus Mrs. Ramsay and other characters who died), and they each come to terms with Mrs. Ramsay's death and restore the unity that

was lost without her unifying presence. The sea is a symbol of unification that inspires epiphanies, or “moments of being” in the characters that disrupt the flow of what Woolf describes as “non-being,” or normal consciousness. Additionally, the physical and spiritual qualities of water illustrate a characters’ shift in perspective from that of involvement to that of detachment, and vice versa, and change in their emotional perspective towards one another. Ultimately, the sea and other water images are symbolic of unification that reflects the characters’ struggle to find meaning and connection in the world. I will discuss how the sea and water imagery operate in relation to the particular consciousnesses of Lily Briscoe, Mrs. Ramsay, and Mr. Ramsay. I will draw upon Norman Friedman’s essay, “The Waters of Annihilation: Symbols and Double Vision in *To the Lighthouse*,” and Lisa Larsson’s thesis, ““that fluidity out there” – Epiphanies and the Sea in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*” in my analysis.

In the novel, the sea acts in a double capacity as preserver and destroyer. The rhythmical sound of the ocean can be a calming, assuring force as well as a threatening, ticking clock of mortality and destruction. For example, the ocean has a soothing effect on Mrs. Ramsay: “The children playing cricket, had ceased; so that the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, “I am guarding you-I am your support” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 15). The ocean has a similar nurturing effect on Lily, who hears “messages of peace breathed from the sea to the shore” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 142). In its function as protector, the sea takes on many qualities of a mother, and reflects the maternal qualities of Mrs. Ramsay. While out at sea, Cam remarks, “I

don't feel a thing there...looking at the shore, which, rising and falling, became steadily more distant and more peaceful. Her hand cut a trail in the sea, as her mind made the green swirls and streaks into patterns and, numbed and shrouded, wandered in imagination in that underworld of waters where the pearls stuck in clusters to white sprays, where in the green light a change came over one's entire mind and one's body shone half transparent enveloped in a green cloak" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 182-183). Mrs. Ramsay used to wear a green cloak, a symbol of protection, which she would often use to cover up unpleasant things for her children. When Cam could not sleep because she was afraid of the boar skull hanging on the wall, Mrs. Ramsay "quickly took her own [green] shawl off and wound it round the skull, round and round and round, and then she came back to Cam and laid her head almost flat on the pillow beside Cam's and said how lovely it looked now; how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird's nest; it was like a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 114-115). Through the sea's transparent "green cloak," it takes on the same maternal, nurturing qualities as Mrs. Ramsay who shields her children from unpleasant images. The sea has this protective quality and capacity to evoke calm, however, the same image can incite the opposite emotion. When involvement in a domestic task, Mrs. Ramsay heard the sound of the sea: "no such kindly meaning, like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea" and "made [Mrs. Ramsay] look up with an impulse of terror" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 16). The sound of the ocean acts as a metronome of time, both assuring, and a consistent reminder of the passing of time, and the threat of destruction.

The dual relationship of the ocean as protector and as destroyer is keenly weaved into Lily and Mr. Bankes interaction with the sea. They “came [to the shore] regularly every evening drawn by some need. It was as if the water floated off and set sailing thoughts which had grown stagnant on dry land, and gave to their bodies even some sort of physical relief. First, the pulse of colour flooded the bay with blue, and the heart expanded with it and the body swam, only the next instant to be checked and chilled by the prickly blackness in the ruffled waves” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 20). Not only does the water physically restore them, it rejuvenates their minds, allowing thoughts to form and flow freely. The double-edged sword of this vitalizing force is its “prickly blackness in the ruffled waves,” or annihilating qualities. While the sea excites and unites Lily and Mr. Bankes, the vastness of the view also reminds them of their insignificance in the grand scale of nature: “They both smiled, standing there. They both felt a common hilarity, excited by the moving waves; and then...with a natural instinct to complete the picture...both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness-because the thing was completed partly, and partly because distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 20). Here, the sea evokes almost diametrically opposed feelings – ones of excitement and rejuvenation, and feelings of sobriety and sadness. The sea is a balancer of feelings, allowing the characters to perceive their place in life on a large and small scale. Throughout the novel, each of the characters cope with the knowledge of their impermanence, symbolized in water, in different ways. Ultimately, the sea acts in a

double capacity as preserver and destroyer, and restores needed balance in the characters between detachment and involvement.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the ocean promotes change in each character's perspective, whether it be visual, emotional, or one's state of consciousness. It is both a constant reminder of one's mortality, and source of comfort in its rhythmic, timeless quality. Its meaning is built upon dichotomies, but it is this quality that makes it a balancing factor to the characters of the novel. Water imagery is used to embody these shifts of consciousness within a character. This may be from one of objective-detachment to one of subjective-involvement, or vice versa. This surrender to the opposite perspective creates a "double vision," as noted by Friedman who describes this phenomenon:

The point is, as we shall see, that a dialectic order is achieved by those who manage to focus their apprehension of the nature of reality simultaneously from two different perspectives—that of subject, or involvement in flux, and that of object, or detachment therefrom—and that "the nature of reality," through which one must pass in making his transition from one perspective to another, finds its image in *water* as a symbol of surrender. From whatever viewpoint one regards life, then, whether it be that of the detached philosopher ironically contemplating from a height man's smudge and his smell, or that of the busy mother and housewife frantically involved in the fever and fret of daily routine, one must give it up in favor of the other, becoming immersed in the waters of transition, and emerging with a double perspective. To lose this perilous balance, to keep out of the wet, is ultimately to give way to the chaos of a black and lonely darkness on the one side or to the disorder of a terrifying and senseless force on the other. (Friedman 63)

The transition from one perspective to the other is marked by water as "a symbol of surrender." The character may undergo transition by hearing the sound of the waves, or the transition itself may be illustrated by a watery image. A dialectic order is created when one can see from both perspectives - that of detachment and that of involvement. Both perspectives are necessary to people, as best conveyed through the character of Mr. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay is a person that imposes detachment for his philosophical work, yet

also requires involvement and sympathy provided by his wife's "feminine waters". Mr. Ramsay is hyper-aware of his own mortality, and looking at the sea brings out his fatalistic, detached perspective. However, balance in perspective is needed and Mr. Ramsay dives into a consciousness of involvement. Friedman notes, "As we have seen, this standpoint becomes ultimately sterile without a periodic immersion in the feminine waters of life. Or, to take it the other way round, his withdrawal from the life around him into his abstracted solitude finds its image also in immersion" (Friedman 72). Friedman argues that his surrender to the "feminine waters of life," or involvement, is marked by diving. However, I find that Mr. Ramsey "dives" into confinement, and that water is not directly "feminine" in this text. After quarrelling with James and Mrs. Ramsay, he seeks out a better mood, and "dived into the evening air which, already thinner, was taking the substance from leaves and hedges but, as if in return, restoring to roses and pinks a luster which they had not had by day...he [was] trying over, tentatively seeking, some phrase for a new mood...He was safe, he was restored to his privacy" (Woolf, Lighthouse 32-33). He had tried to appeal to James after telling they would not be going to the lighthouse tomorrow, but his failure to engage James caused him to retreat, or "dive" into detachment once more. Mr. Ramsay requires a balance between involvement and detachment. His need for involvement surfaces in a search for sympathy after Mrs. Ramsay's death. After Mrs. Ramsay dies, he is deprived of what Friedman calls the "female waters" of creativity and intuition, and seeks sympathy from Lily Briscoe. Friedman writes, "We discover another aspect of the water imagery in connection with Mrs. Ramsay-that of the fountain as a symbol of feminine creativity to which the male must resort in order that his fatal sterility be redeemed. The intellectual husband becomes

immersed in the waters of human sympathy and devotion figuratively issuing from the intuitive wife. Emotionally exhausted and depleted, however, by this effort of consolation, she sinks back down into herself, her fountain pulsing feebly” (Friedman 70). I do not read water as a traditionally “feminine” symbol, however, because when Mr. Ramsay seeks sympathy from Lily, *he* himself metaphorically turns to water. Therefore, I think water operates as a symbol of unity – the very thing Mr. Ramsay requires. Without the sympathy he siphoned from Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay loses balance between involvement and detachment and takes on the form of water himself, symbolizing his imbalance. He seeks sympathy from Lily Briscoe: “His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 152). Lily instinctively recoils from Mr. Ramsay’s intrusive attempts to immerse himself in her sympathy. Lily does not want to deplete herself of her own sense of self, of “feminine waters” as she witnessed in Mrs. Ramsay. While she learns to admire all that Mrs. Ramsay provided, she cannot bring herself to involve herself with Mr. Ramsay despite his need for comfort and reassurance. This is a source of resentment towards Mr. Ramsay that Lily must come to terms with in order to achieve her own balance between detachment and involvement.

Mrs. Ramsay, who busies herself in life's daily tasks, also undergoes a transition in consciousness as described through water imagery. In the midst of a household task, the sound of the ocean evokes terrifying thoughts of engulfment and destruction: “At other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when [Mrs. Ramsay’s] mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like a

ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow-this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror” (Woolf, Lighthouse 16). The sound of the ocean takes her out of the concrete task at hand and changed her perspective to one of abstract thoughts, feelings, and fears. The cycle from involvement to detachment and back to involvement again completes itself when she hears Mr. Ramsay chanting a poem off in the distance, rhythmically soothing her once more like the sound of the ocean back to domestic involvement: “One moment more, with her head raised, she listened, as if she waited for some habitual sound, some regular mechanical sound; and then, hearing something rhythmical, half said, half chanted, beginning in the garden, as her husband beat up and down the terrace, something between a croak and a song, she was soothed once more, assured again that all was well, and looking down at the book on her knee found the picture of a pocket knife and with six blades which could only be cut out if James was very careful” (Woolf, Lighthouse 16). The cycle completes itself, and Mrs. Ramsay is once more in a state of domestic involvement. The sound of the ocean, however, creates another dialectic relationship between the sea as a soothing source and force that threatens destruction and mortality.

Lily Briscoe

Lily Briscoe is a young, unmarried woman and painter who, like Mr. Ramsay, fears that her life’s work lacks lasting worth and appreciation. Despite her similarities to

Mr. Ramsay, she wonders, “why he needed always praise; why so brave a man in thought should be so timid in life; how strangely he was venerable and laughable at one and the same time” (Woolf 45). She resents Mr. Ramsay for his egoism, and has mixed feelings towards Mrs. Ramsay who fulfills his need for sympathy. Lily struggles with her identity as a woman who does not conform to gender norms, and her frustration in human relationships, resulting in an artistic struggle to find balance in her painting. She begins a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay and James, but has difficulty completing her vision until the conclusion of the novel. She, like Mrs. Ramsay, attempts to create something that will stand out amongst the fluidity of life. As an artist, “she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 158). Painting, like building on philosophy, or throwing parties, creating social unity and memory, is an attempt to give lasting form to life that is always in flux. Lily embraces this flux by immersing herself, symbolically, in fluidity, and is also inspired when painting by the sea. Lily likens making the first stroke to “irrevocable decisions” and the chaos of the sea. She notes that at a distance, “waves shape themselves symmetrically from the cliff top” – they are simple, whereas the waves “are divided by steep gulfs, and foaming crests” when one is swimming amongst them. Lily “swims” in the complexity of the waves when painting as opposed to keeping a distance; “With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark, a second time she did it—a third time. And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 158). The “dancing,

rhythmical movement” is her “swimming,” or immersing herself in the fluidity and risk associated with making an “irrevocable” artistic decision. Her technique takes on the organic quality of compiling waves. Larsson writes,

While painting, she looks again at the sea, seeing wave following upon wave, just as each stroke she makes creates the need for another one. After a brief moment of doubt something happens, ‘some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties’ is squirted (a telling description) and the wave-like rhythm that she has created is ‘strong enough to bear her along with it on its current’ (174). This epiphany, the shedding of doubt and the feeling of purpose as the painting begins to take shape, becomes a moment during which Lily loses consciousness of the things around her and perceives her mind as a fountain which spurts out ideas over the canvas. (Larsson 13)

The waves and the sea inspire Lily to shed herself of doubt, “lubricating” her mind and allowing for purpose in the painting to take shape. By immersing herself in the element, she loses the anxiety over impermanence that has held her back, and she experiences an epiphany apart from time or sense. However, in order for her to complete her vision, she must overcome her resentment towards Mr. Ramsay. Not only does the sea inspire her ability to create, but also her mind takes on the qualities of fluidity, as a “fountain which spurts out ideas over the canvas”.

The physical vastness of the sea and distance spawns changes in emotional perspective in both Lily and Cam. This transformation is necessary in order for Lily to find unity in her artistic vision. However, in order for her to complete her vision, she must first find unity with Mr. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James journey further and further away towards the lighthouse, Lily ponders, “So much depends then...looking at the sea which had scarcely a stain on it... upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us; for her feeling for Mr. Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further across the bay. It seemed to be elongated, stretched out; he seemed to become more and

more remote. He and his children seemed to be swallowed up in that blue, that distance” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 191). “That blue, that distance,” or sea, not only separates Lily from Mr. Ramsay physically, but it dilutes and distances her ill feelings towards him, similar to the way in which Lily comes to appreciate Mrs. Ramsay after her death. On the other side of the sea, Cam looks back at the shore and finds a new perspective in distance as well: “Distant and peaceful and strange. The shore seemed refined, far away, unreal. Already the little distance they had sailed had put them far from it and given it the changed look, the composed look, of something receding in which one has no longer any part. Which was their house? She could not see it” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 165-166). This physical distance mimics the way in which the past or memory becomes static, or as Cam describes, the view becomes more “composed.” Cam is physically and emotionally detached from the flux of life on land – she “has no longer any part” in it. Cam cannot even point out their house, and describes the distance as “peaceful and strange”. The sea ultimately acts as a space to symbolize the effect distance has on a person’s perception and emotion. It is a stimulus, invoking detachment and distance that causes a change in perspective. Lily has a strained relationship with Mr. Ramsay because of her instinctive withholding of sympathy, but when at sea, these feelings are quelled. To Cam, the distance creates a “changed look” in visual perspective of static land, as well as a feeling of detachment from the flux of life.

Through this change in perspective facilitated by the sea, comes to terms with Mr. Ramsay’s need for sympathy, which also takes symbolic form in water. After Mrs. Ramsay’s death, Mr. Ramsay turns to Lily to fulfill the role of providing him with sympathy. “His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in

pools at [Lily's] feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 152). She avoids contact with water, or involvement with Mr. Ramsay. However, with the physical distance that the sea affords, her perspective towards Mr. Ramsay changes. She is no longer threatened of losing her sense of self from his "flood" of emotion, and she is able to overcome her lasting resentment towards him. Larsson writes, "Even Lily, otherwise reluctant to merge with anyone, has an epiphany to this effect. While painting and looking at the sea in 'The Lighthouse' she realizes that there is a common, human feeling holding it all together: 'she seemed to be standing up to the lips in some substance, to move and float and sink in it, yes, for these waters were unfathomably deep. Into them had spilled so many lives' (Larsson 208). This epiphany is an embrace of her connection to humanity, in the image of water. Her acceptance allows her to fill the empty space in her painting and find balance in her artistic vision. "The epiphany that to Lily yields the feeling of unity with other people is, just as Mrs. Ramsay's, not one that contains a threat of losing oneself: it is simply a feeling that something unites humankind. The sea is present in the entire passage leading up to Lily's epiphany, and is certainly instrumental in constructing the imagery as deep waters" (Larsson 19).

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue. I have had my vision. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 208-209)

This moment happens as Lily is painting this by the sea, while looking out as Cam,

James, and Mr. Ramsay reach the lighthouse. This is a brief moment of shared epiphany amongst the characters. James is able to come to terms with his father whom he holds responsible for dashing his childhood dreams to travel to the lighthouse. When they reach the island, James has an epiphany and finally sees the lighthouse for what it truly is—stripped of childhood fantasy and sense of adventure. Lily learns to not care whether or not her paintings are appreciated by others, and gains the ability to bring her artistic vision to fruition. The sea inspires epiphanies in both James and Lily, allowing them to overcome their respective resentments. This final statement of harmony and Woolf's artistic unity is reflected in the completion of Lily's painting.

Mr. Ramsay

Mr. Ramsay faces similar issues to Lily in regards to feeling his work in philosophy will not be further philosophical thought, or be significant enough to stand the test of time. Nonetheless, he wishes to create something that will outlive him, thus conquering his own mortality. However, instead of “swimming” in the waters of chaos as Lily does, he sees the water as something to be fought and conquered. This is evident when he looks upon the sea:

He reached the edge of the lawn and looked out on the bay beneath. It was his fate, his peculiarity, whether he wished it or not, to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away, and there to stand, like a desolate sea-bird, alone...so to stand on his little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance, how we know nothing and the sea eats away the ground we stand on—that was his fate, his gift. (Woolf, Lighthouse 43)

Here, he contemplates the ignorance of man and his futile attempts to contribute knowledge to a world “which the sea is slowly eating away.” The sea is the “dark of human ignorance,” and his mind and existence the “spit of land which the sea is slowly

eating away.” He has not control over these things, and does not fully come to terms with the fact that his mind and work may not win against the “flood of human ignorance.”

However, he finds solace in the fact that his legacy is his children:

The father of eight children—he reminded himself. And he would have been a beast and cur to wish a single thing altered. Andrew would be a better man than he had been. Prue would be a beauty, her mother said. They would stem the flood a bit. That was a good bit of work on the whole—his eight children. They showed he did not damn the poor little universe entirely, for on an evening like this, he thought, looking at the land dwindling away, the little island seemed pathetically small, half swallowed up in the sea. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 69).

He feels his children will “stem the flood [of human ignorance] a bit,” and improve upon what he contributed to the world. He may not be able to contribute to the advancement of philosophical thought as much as he would have liked, but he realizes when looking at the sea that his family “was a good but of work on the whole” that provide him with the needed attachment and support. Ultimately, Mr. Ramsay’s fear is in the image of water – “the flood of human ignorance,” and he learns to accept that he can only “stem the flood a bit” through the legacy of his children.

Mrs. Ramsay

Mrs. Ramsay is the core of the novel, and a character that has a gift for bringing people together to create lasting memories seem to stop the flow of daily life. It is this talent of hers that unites the characters in the first chapter, ‘The Window,’ most notably during the dinner party. After her death mentioned in the second chapter, ‘Time Passes,’ the characters struggle to maintain unity in the final chapter, ‘The Lighthouse,’ but manage to come together in her memory. At the dinner party, Clarissa is aware that the guests “all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating

rested on her” (Woolf, Lighthouse 83). When she left the room, “a sort of disintegration set in; they wavered about, went different ways” (Woolf, Lighthouse 91, 122). Without her presence, the odd collection of people cannot come together in shared comradery. “Merging” and “flowing” are metaphors for uniting disparate fragments, such as the guests. While seated around the table, the guests are brought together by common fear of the chaos and impermanence of life, they witness outside:

Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle-light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily. Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (Woolf, Lighthouse 106)

Here, the inside scene is “composed” in stability, whereas the outside world “wavered and vanished waterily”. While water is a symbol of unity, the composed indoors represents the stability of memory that the guests are experiencing juxtaposed by the fluid outdoors ruled by chaos and impermanence. Their “common cause” is the fear of the fragility and impermanence of humanity that each of the characters cope with in different ways.

It is an epiphany, important because it is a collective one: as the light changes the vision of the characters they all realize something. The chaotic world, in which we have to find our place, learn to cope and create a sense of stability, is constructed as a fluid ‘other’, an element which has to be mastered. Neither the image nor the passage are, however, quite as simple as that. The sense of being on an island, surrounded by fluidity, in a metaphorical sense is of course echoed by and even affected by the fact that the characters *are* on an island, surrounded by the sea” (Larsson 17-18).

The characters realize they are both literally, and metaphorically surrounded by the fluid ‘other’ to be mastered. Here, they have a collective epiphany, thereby breaking down the

barriers between them, unifying them in a moment of awareness. During the party, Mrs. Ramsay has an epiphany on the subject: “There it was, all around them. It partook, she felt ... of eternity... there is a coherence from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 105). The flowing world and the significance of finding stability are joined here with the word ‘eternity’. Rather than focusing on the moment as a stable point, an epiphany revealing coherence, Mrs. Ramsay believes that it will remain” (Larsson 19). She attempts to create is a stable moment amongst flowing reality, but what she soon realizes is that what she creates is not just a moment, but an eternal memory. Memories are a way of prolonging a moment, and therefore endure beyond space and time. However, she is aware that it is but a moment that this unity can last. “It could not last, she knew, but at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 106). This social unity is her way of coping with the transience of life, whereas Mr. Ramsay finds pieces of him that will last in his philosophical work and children, and Lily Briscoe in her art.

Chapter 3 – *The Waves*

‘Something in the universe that one’s left with’

The Waves was first published in 1931, and is often referred to as Virginia Woolf’s most experimental novel, and deemed “her greatest novel” by English novelist, E.M. Forster. However, to call *The Waves* a “novel” would be misleading – its complex form between prose and poetry is more accurately described, in Woolf’s own words, as a “playpoem”. *The Waves* is composed of soliloquies of six “voices”: Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis. The monologues span the characters’ lifetimes, and are broken up by nine interludes, detailing the sea at varying states of a single day, from sunrise to sunset. Each of these interludes corresponds to a time in the characters’ lives, from the sunrise of infancy to the sunset of impending death. The main point of tension in *The Waves* lies in its representation of the coexistence of flowing thought, accented by moments of mystical solidity, unity, and revelation. This tension is directly correlated to the various interludes detailing coastal scenes. Before the “voices” are introduced, “The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it” (Woolf, *Waves* 3). The voices, like the sea and the sky, are at first indistinguishable from one another. As they gain individual personalities or templates of perspective, these “wrinkles” become waves that represent the individuality of the “voices”. However, just as they have individual consciousnesses, they experience moments of a collective consciousness. This collective consciousness is represented by the ocean, or the larger substance they are a part of as “waves”. The character’s consciousnesses collect during “moments of being,” and fall as they become

autonomous in their consciousness. The two major “moments of being” are when the characters collect in their youth before departing on separate journeys, and when they meet again before facing the descent of their lives. The position of the sun in the sky correlates to the time in their life, and after their last collective meeting, the sea and the sky becomes indistinguishable once more when the sun sets, marking their deaths. Therefore, Woolf symbolizes individual consciousness as waves collected, and “moments of being” in collective consciousness that cyclically fall into the ocean.

This relates to Woolf’s representation of consciousness punctuated by moments of unity or “epiphanies” throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. Warner notes an excerpt from Virginia Woolf’s diary, “there was a marked conflict in [Woolf’s] imagination itself: “Now, is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions’ (4, Jan. 1929). This diary entry was written while she was engaged in composing *The Waves*, but the duality suggested here is in fact a central element of Woolf’s imaginative life” (Warner 4). Woolf brought this duality to artistic fruition in *The Waves* – as the six characters, or “voices” meditate on life, Woolf explores the development of thought as individual consciousness accented by moments of collectively attained “mystical experience”. *The Waves* is also a departure from the stream of consciousness narrative – instead of there being an omniscient narrator, the voices simply represent consciousness without narrative or exposition. The playpoem is written entirely in first-person, stripping down the idea of “novel” and is a representation of pure consciousness. I will draw upon Eric Warner’s book, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves* (Landmarks of World Literature), and Ann Landis McLaughlin’s dissertation, “A Fin in a Waste of Waters: A Study of Symbolic Transformation in the Waves by Virginia Woolf,”

William James's book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and Paul Sheehan's book, "Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism" in my analysis.

Dissimilar to both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* is written entirely in the present tense, lending to the representation of, as Virginia Woolf describes, "a mind thinking". As opposed to being written using stream of consciousness technique, *The Waves* is consciousness. Each "voice" is distinct, self aware, and speaks boldly in the present tense as he or she unfolds the sights, sounds, and feelings they experience into thought. Together, the "voices" compose a unified, whole silent central consciousness. Woolf herself wrote in her *Diary* that the six were not meant to be separate "characters" at all, but rather facets of consciousness illuminating a sense of continuity. "Her aim is similarly to experience the emphasis from action to awareness of action, from experience of life to reflection and analysis. The *meditative* pressure in the speeches of *The Waves* is enormous, and largely the result of the style" (Warner 45). The present tense is immediate, yet creates a disassociated distance between the observer and the moment. The word "I" is the most prevalent word in the novel – "I cannot be divided;" "Now I am hungry;" "I think of crusts and bread and butter and white plates in a sunny room;" "I return, like a cat or fox returning, whose fur is grey with rime;" "I go then to the cupboard" (Woolf, *Waves* 70-71). This creates a very direct connection to the present, yet also creates a meditative distance between the voice and their feelings. The hyperawareness of the voice's every thought disimpassions the moment, as if they are studying the moment from afar. The voices inhabit, as Warner says, "a mental state above the material plane of existence. In sum, all these accentuated effects of style compound

the static and unnatural effect, thus helping to displace the book from the time-bound, active, engaged sense of ‘the novel’” (Warner 46). Warner expands,

In a penetrating analysis to which I am greatly indebted, Graham observes that the rare pure present tense (I go, I see) is used throughout *The Waves*, rather than form emphasizes the sense of duration with respect to action, but the unusual grammatical feature of the pure present has the effect of suspending the sense of time with respect to action; and its full-scale use in the book has the effect of removing the characters from direct involvement in the world, of suspending them above the actions they describe. As James Naremore, another capable analyst of the style, puts it: ‘these voices seem to inhabit a kind of spirit realm from which...they comment on their time-bound selves below. (Warner 43)

I will come back to this idea of displacement from the “time-bound” novel later in this chapter, though it is important to first understand the psychological process Woolf means to portray through symbolic transformation in conjunction with the use of the present tense.

The Waves mimics “a mind thinking” by following each voice’s flow of perception as it develops into a symbolic image. To trace “symbolic transformation” in the playpoem, it is telling to note the very first images each of the “voices” describes and how they reflect their individual modes of thought, as McLaughlin does. Bernard sees “a ring...hanging above [him]. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light,” Susan sees “a slab of pale yellow...spreading away until it meets a purple stripe,” and Neville sees “a globe...hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill” (Woolf, *Waves* 4). Each of these first images may seem arbitrary and abstract, yet they contain traces of the characters’ individual, fundamental perspective. For example, McLaughlin notes, “Bernard’s first image – a hanging ring that quivers in a loop of light-suggests his preoccupation with abstract form and with relationship, since he tells us that the ring is above him and hangs within a loop” (McLaughlin 5). Bernard, throughout his

development, is preoccupied with abstract thoughts and images. He is the philosopher of the six voices, which culminates in his final soliloquy. Susan's image of pale yellow meeting a purple stripe reflects her concentration on the literal and definite. She is submissive to the evolutionary process of nature, and sees herself as part of nature and natural movement. She embraces motherhood and feminine nature. Neville's image of a globe is the first glimpse into his adoration of completeness, and wholeness. These first images create a template for the way in which each of the "voices" develop and analyze thought, and portray the way in which people think through differing fundamental perspectives. To explain this process, McLaughlin describes symbolic transformation to be:

the essential activity of the mind. The human brain can be visualized as a giant transformer that changes the current of experience into a stream of symbols that constitute its elementary idea. Since the nature of the human mind is to question, it does not simply transmit signs, but continually transforms perceptions into symbols that help it to conceive and answer its questions. All thinking is perception and all perception involves a conception of the whole. This human process of symbolic transformation thus represents an independent and autonomous movement within the surrounding flow of non-human being. (McLaughlin 1).

By each "voice" stating the symbols they perceive, Woolf illustrates this internal mental process of symbolic transformation, and distills the way in which people experience the world. It is natural for one to perceive something, and try to relate it to something else in order to understand and categorize what they sense, What is expressed in the *Waves* are the interior levels of awareness brought to the surface and analyzed. "[Woolf] has, as it were, inverted her previous technique [as in *To the Lighthouse*], and transformed the silent workings of mental process into overt awareness which the characters boldly announce. At a stroke the intricacies of the luminous halo of consciousness have been

turned into an extreme form of self-consciousness” (Warner 40). In Woolf’s stream of consciousness novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the characters underwent these same mental processes, though the narration did not address it. In *The Waves*, the six “voices” are hyperaware of their mental processes, and analyze and communicate exactly what is happening in their consciousness. This extreme form of hyperawareness also facilitates the playpoem’s second, “mystical” component of thought.

In addition to the individual development of individual consciousness, Woolf explores “mystical moments” of communion through the communal interaction of the “voices”. These interactions take place at various points of the narrative, most notably during the London dinner, and at the reunion at Hampton Court. Woolf deposits these moments to interrupt the flowing, stream of consciousness narrative, and illustrate a moment that stands apart in time. Susan voices this exact phenomenon through symbolic transformation when she says, “I am rooted, but I flow” (Woolf, *Waves* 259). She is capable of being autonomous, and a part of a whole; she is *rooted* in her collective consciousness, or sea, but *flows* as an individual wave of consciousness. She is both herself and connected to the other “voices,” and also constantly evolving. Virginia Woolf’s effort to express this ineffable state of mind was also undertaken by psychologists William James and Sigmund Freud. Though each came to varying conclusions as to the nature of “mystical experience,” their findings parallel each other in many ways. In *The Waves*, Woolf focuses on the coexistence of life in flux, and life accented by “moments of being”. These moments often happen in *The Waves* through a sense of connection between the voices, and sense of merging of the selves. This phenomenon of “merging” is reflected in more tangible means through the unison of

separate sounds, forming to create a sound that transcends its individual components. In the same way that these individual sounds merge to create one a sum of all its parts, the individual “voices” merge and create a unified, transcendent feeling. Louis notes, “The roar of London is round us. Motor-card, vans, omnibuses pass and repass continuously. All are merged in one turning wheel of single sound. All separate sounds—wheels, bells, the cries of drunkards, of merrymakers—are churned into one sound, steel blue, circular” (Woolf 98). In the same way that these individual sounds merge to create one conglomerate sound, the individual “voices” merge to create one unified, transcendent experience. Bernard symbolizes the voices as individuals and as parts of a whole when he symbolizes them as “the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when [they] dined together with Percival,” and notes that “the flower...[has] become a six-sided flower; made of six lives” (Woolf, *Waves* 168). The flower petals symbolize their lives as both individual, and part of a greater whole. In another passage, this idea of “merging selves” is more tangibly illustrated as the blurring of Bernard and Susan’s physical entities. Bernard says that “when [he and Susan] sit together, close... [they] melt into each other with phrases. [they] are edged with mist. [they] make an unsubstantial territory” (Woolf, *Waves* 9). They are no longer separate beings, but are one. This connectedness is essential to Woolf’s definition of “moments of being,” or “mystical experience”. At their farewell dinner in London the six sit around the table and each feels a sense of unexpected interconnectedness, Susan notes, “Something irrevocable has happened. A circle has been cast on the waters; a chain is imposed. We shall never flow freely again” (Woolf, *Waves* 103). This “circle” is the feeling of the moment that binds them. Louis echoes, “‘For one moment only,’ before the chain breaks, before disorder

returns, see us fixed, see us displayed, see us held in a vice” (Woolf, *Waves* 103).

Similar to moments in *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, this is a moment that is lasting, revealing, and transfixed against a backdrop of the flow of daily life. However, in Woolf’s other novels, the characters did not communicate the same level of awareness though the same phenomenon was illustrated. Once the moment passes, Louis notes, ““But now the circle breaks. Now the current flows. Now we rush faster than before. Now passions that lay in wait down there in the dark weeds which grow at the bottom rise and pound us with their waves”” (Woolf, *Waves* 103). The voices rush back to their individual selves, and life returns to its natural flow. Many years pass where the individual voices undergo “moments of being,” but it not until their reunion at Hampton Court they experience a subtly different feeling than their last meeting.

While together at Hampton Court, silence befalls the six “voices”. Throughout the novel each voice’s consciousness and perceptions have been presented to the reader, but at their reunion, each voice reflects on this collective silence.

‘In this silence,’ said Susan, ‘it seems as if no leaf would ever fall, or bird fly’
‘As if the miracle had happened,’ said Jinny, ‘and life were stayed here and now.’
‘And,’ said Rhoda, ‘we had no more to live.’

‘But listen,’ said Louis, ‘to the world moving through abysses of infinite space. It roars; the lighted strip of history is past and our Kings and Queens; we are gone; our civilization; the Nile; and all life. Our separate drops are dissolved; we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness.’

‘Silence falls; silence falls,’ said Bernard. ‘But now listen, tick, tick; hoot, hoot; the world has hailed us back to it. It heard for one moment the howling winds of darkness as we passed beyond life. Then tick, tick (the clock); then hoot, hoot (the cars). We are landed; we are on shore; we are sitting, six of us, at a table. It is the memory of my nose that recalls me’. (Woolf, *Waves* 165-166)

In this silence, the six of them feel a sense of structure in opposition to the “abysses of infinite space”. They again no longer feel like separate entities, but that their “separate drops are dissolved” in the moment of transcendent communion. They are stripped of all

“civilization”, and left with only themselves. Warner notes that in Woolf’s diary, it is revealed “The key phrases which convey this meditative and “mystical” aspect are “something in the universe that one’s left with” and “the essence of reality,” both of which suggest an element of brooding, impersonal abstraction. (30 Oct. 1926)” (Warner 29). They temporarily leave the outside, time-bound world, but feel a communal sense that something is coming to an end, and they will all face death. They are no longer aware of the outside world or time passing, but only return to their individual selves when they are reminded by the ticking of the clock. McLaughlin notes, “Whereas the moment of communion at the London dinner presented a transcendent design, composed of the six perspectives to which the friends retreated when it disappeared, the moment at Hampton Court presents a transcendent stillness that presages the death that which each knows he must ultimately submit after the drop of the moment falls” (McLaughlin 17). The mood is somber, and the six brood on their individual revelations brought upon by their unity rather than rushing back to their individual selves. Woolf often describes these revelations where the voice realizes life is changing as “drops”. Bernard is the most aware of these “drops,” the passing of time, and his own mortality, and is given the last portion of the novel where the voices face death. He thinks back on the reunion at Hampton Court. In his last soliloquy, he comes to terms with death, and reconciles himself as both an individual, and a part of a whole:

And now I ask, ‘who am I?’ I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know...we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt, ‘I am you.’ This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome...Here on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell. Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eyes fill with Susan’s tears. I

see far away, quivering like a gold thread, and the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt. (Woolf, *Waves* 214)

McLaughlin notes, “The mystical moment that Bernard experiences briefly could conceivably join the two kinds of thought that Woolf has been exploring throughout the novel: individual development and mystical moments, collectively attained” (McLaughlin 19).

These “moments of being” are a theme in Woolf’s work, and while they closely parallel James’ theories, he defines these experiences more in terms of religion. In his book, he defines a mystical state as being ineffable, noetic, transient, and passive. He writes of the ineffable quality; “The subject of [the mystical experience] immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect” (James 380). This is the quality that Woolf tackles in *The Waves* through the collective feelings of the voices. Ultimately, she can represent these experiences through what the voices say of their own feelings, but because it is a state of “feeling” rather than intellect, it cannot be fully expressed. It is clear from the earlier passage from *The Waves* that the voices cannot fully communicate the feeling themselves, but only what it “seems” to them individually. James describes the “noetic quality” as similar to a state of feeling, but also a state of knowledge. “They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time” (James 380-381). In the passage where the voices reunite at

Hampton Court, they each realize that something is ending, and impending death is the next stage of their life. It is clear from Bernard's account that he gained insight and knowledge from their collective moment that resonates with him even after time has moved on.

The next quality James describes is the transient nature of mystical states. He writes that they "cannot be sustained for long...often, when faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory but when they recur it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance" (James 381). Lastly, he notes that these moments cannot be facilitated. "When the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power" (James 381). The voices are not held by a "superior power" such as God, but Woolf is expressing a human experience of feeling a greater sense of connection, lasting revelation, and experience disassociated from time.

The "voices" inhabit "psychological" or "spiritual" time, coined by philosopher Henri Bergson as *la durée*, versus spatial time, *étendu*. Sheehan explains,

For Bergson, time is not chronometric but experiential, and any attempt to quantify it – through subdivision or categorization – has already dehumanized it. Independent of the divided, discrete world of extension, which our superficial selves inhabit, it is the realm of *durée*. A zone of pure continuity and heterogeneity, where the *moi fondamentale* resides. The true, qualitative experience that is *durée* is not based on a transcendental notion of time, as it is not a presuppositional condition for experience; rather, it *is* that experience, immediate and intuitive, and it provides a pathway to the absolute (Sheehan 123-124).

Virginia Woolf's representation of "psychological time" and "spatial time," in many ways, parallel Bergson's notion of *la durée*. As mentioned before, her use of writing each

voice's thoughts as a stream of consciousness centered in the singular moment allows the voices to inhabit a realm detached from spatial time. The clock referred to in *The Waves* that is a symbol of inner duration and expansion is the antithesis to the mathematical time. In the next passage, *la durée* is interrupted in Neville, causing the voices to shift from internal time, to time dictated by the clock:

‘Yes, but suddenly one hears a clock tick. We who had been immersed in this world became aware of another. It is painful. It was Neville who changed our time. He, who had been thinking with the unlimited time of the mind, which stretches in a flash from Shakespeare to ourselves, poked the fire and began to live by that other clock which marks the approach of a particular person. The wide and dignified sweep of his mind contracted. He became on the alert’ (Woolf, *Waves* 84-85).

In this passage, we see that Neville had been “thinking with the unlimited time of the mind” and is drawn out by “that other clock which marks the approach of a particular person”. He experiences, in Bergson’s own words, “Pure duration, [which is] is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states” (Bergson 100). In any given passage, the reader cannot know how long a moment is because it is described by the voice in terms their own inner duration. The only indications of *etendú* are the nine interludes detailing the time of day, marking a new phase of the voices’ lives.

These nine interludes, while indicators of time passing, are also symbolic of circular patterns of thought and nature. Bernard’s first image of “a ring” and Susan’s second image, “a caterpillar curled in a green ring” are one of many circular symbols throughout the novel, which typically symbolize infinity (Woolf, *Waves* 4). They are a way to conceptualize an endless cycle. McLaughlin notes that:

Various kinds of rings and globes appear to the other character as well, Neville sees a globe, which seems oddly disproportionate against a hill, and Susan’s

caterpillar is curled in a ring, Jinny sees bubbles rising in a saucepan and Rhoda stares at a bowl of mackerel, while Louis notes the curls of sleep. The form of the circle, which underlies all these images and occurs repeatedly throughout the novel, is a basic symbol for human thought. The circle is man's attempt to visualize the infinite and impose a form on the endless spaces and movements within nature that he cannot grasp. (McLaughlin 5-6)

This "endless movement" of thought symbolized by the circle mirrors the way in which Woolf utilizes stream of consciousness narrative. As readers, we see into the development of each of the voice's thoughts and stage of life itself, mirroring the cyclical pattern of nature. The rising and falling tides of the coastal scenes, the movement of the sun, and the activity of the birds accentuate the fluid nature of thought that acts outside of these confines. The voices lives from infancy till death are encapsulated in a single day, suggesting that a person's life is like a single day in the scheme of nature. Just as thought is constantly developing, changing, and accumulating, nature follows a similar cyclical pattern.

Conclusion

... the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough!

- Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

In Virginia Woolf's novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, as well as her other fictional works, essays, personal journals, and letters, Woolf uses the water element to illustrate the processes of the human mind. From an early age, the sound of the ocean had a profound effect on Woolf as a meditative and joyful presence that she felt connected to on an inherent level. Her novels tested the limits in which the modern novel merged with poetry, human consciousness was depicted in a new and startling manner, and individuals and their complex social relationships were developed and examined over a period of decades. In the process, she advanced the role of women in modern literature and described a post-war England that was grappling with the loss of Victorian certainties and the inexorable decline of an Empire.

Similar to her characters Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe, Woolf exchanges the fluidity of life for the solidity of art. She plunges into the depths of her fears in order to find an order in chaos. That is what her novels are – life, given form and permanence. She represents the innermost, unconscious processes of the mind, and translates them into an artistic vision, representing the spectrum of human experiences extending from individual, fluid consciousness to the ineffable qualities of “moments of being.” Psychologists and philosophers have attempted to explain the subjectivity of time, transitions in awareness, and subconscious fears, but literature possesses the unique ability for these subtle processes to be both experienced up close and studied from afar.

Woolf tested the bounds of the representation of human experience through her stream of consciousness novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. In *The Waves*, she further distilled human consciousness, and its connection to nature. *The Waves* is the consummation of her literary efforts that stands upon her childhood memory, “feeling the purest ecstasy” listening to the sound of the waves.

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