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Intimacy, Unity, and Shared Consciousness in the Novels of Virginia Woolf

By

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In the novels of Virginia Woolf, the difficulties of deep intimacy are troubled by the limitations of language and the fear of shame and vulnerability. What can characters express, and do words have the ability to appropriately describe their feelings of love and desire? *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* grapple with the penetrability of the mind and the potential for shared thought between characters. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf utilizes Clarissa and her relationship with men to highlight how eroticism and affection are inhibited by shame. To evade the anxieties of articulating romantic feelings and sexual desires, Woolf posits that shared consciousness between characters is an avenue that fosters closeness with others. In *To the Lighthouse*, the intimate relationships between the Ramsays and Lily Briscoe uncover the potential for unity with others and the human desire to know others deeply. Woolf's continued interest in questions of shared consciousness and a communion between reader, writer, and character pervade her novels, as demonstrated in her later novel, *The Waves* which primarily focuses on the potential for unity in body and mind.

Mrs. Dalloway: Impenetrability and Intimacy

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa's impenetrability operates in emotional and sexual contexts and prevents her from developing close relationships with the men in her life. Clarissa's difficulty with intimacy reveals Woolf's larger project to expose the limitations of communication and characters' abilities to deeply know one another. Clarissa's inability to be close with others is in part due to her "coldness, woodenness, [and her] impenetrability," as observed by Peter Walsh, one of Clarissa's love interests from her adolescence (Woolf 52). The emotional barriers present in the novel become especially apparent between Clarissa, her husband Richard, and Peter. *Mrs. Dalloway* sketches a drama fraught with characters attempting

to communicate their love for one another and Woolf explores the multitude of obstacles that inhibit intimacy and desire.

In characterizing Clarissa's sexual impenetrability, Woolf portrays her in religious or virginal terms to highlight her lack of desire for her husband. Woolf describes Clarissa's feelings: "... she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions" (25). Woolf suggests Clarissa is conscious that her sexlessness signifies both a departure from the social world and an isolation that is the condition of aging women. Clarissa, sexually confined and cloistered in the attic where she sleeps alone, undergoes a return to the familiar virginity of her youth. Woolf describes Clarissa's solitude as "an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room" (26). In this cool chamber, evocative of a mother's barren womb, Woolf describes Clarissa's sentiments surrounding her position as a sexually repressed woman. Clarissa "could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet..." and Woolf suggests that Clarissa is not sexually fulfilled in her marriage (27). Woolf's reference to Clarissa's virginal sheets recurs, further suggesting a sexlessness purity: "The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side... Richard insisted that she must sleep undisturbed" (27). Through Richard's implication, readers extrapolate that their marriage is platonic and not erotic, and Clarissa is trapped between these virginal sheets. Under the guise of preserving his wife's health (Clarissa is plagued with chronic symptoms from the Spanish flu), Richard secludes her from their marital bed. Within this framework, Woolf posits that Clarissa is stripped of her sexual agency, therefore becoming impenetrable through her literal and metaphorical isolation in the attic. Woolf describes Clarissa's experience of disembodiment: "she had the oddest sense of being herself invisible... unknown; there being no marrying, no more having of children now... not even Clarissa any

more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (9). Stripped of her identity outside of her role as a mother and a wife, Clarissa feels “unknown,” implying a difficulty in being intimate with others and an inability to connect with her own desires. This reduction of Clarissa’s selfhood further underlines an absence of bodily autonomy, therefore solidifying her sexual impenetrability.

Clarissa’s sexual isolation contributes to what Woolf describes as a “coldness,” which supports Woolf’s project of asserting Clarissa’s emotional and physical impenetrability. Clarissa’s coldness that Woolf identifies is inextricably linked to her position as an aging woman and the sense that she has not fulfilled her wifely duties to her husband: “Lovely in girlhood, suddenly there came a moment... when, through some contraction of this cold spirit, she had failed [her husband]” (27). Clarissa internalizes her frigidity in her marriage as a failure in terms of her womanhood; Woolf suggests that Clarissa’s inability to sexually satisfy her husband plagues her, as demonstrated by repeatedly fixating on her mistakes: “She had failed [Richard], once at Constantinople” (27, 100). Given Clarissa’s frequent contemplation of her faults, Woolf underscores her sense of shame, and suggests that Clarissa’s disappointment is marked by an inability to express her desires and a feeling that she has failed in her role as a wife. Clarissa perceives her absence of sexual feeling towards her husband as “something she lacked” and realizes that “it was not beauty; it was not mind... It was something central which permeated; something warm that broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together” (27). Woolf suggests that Clarissa’s frigidity is inherent in her character and not necessarily related to her aesthetics or her intelligence. However, Clarissa’s perception of herself as “shrivelled, aged, breastless... out of her body and brain which now failed” exposes her anxieties about aging and losing her selfhood (26).

In contrast to my interpretation that Woolf uses Clarissa's solitude and frigidity to reveal her impenetrability to male characters, Phyllis Rose's *Women of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf* theorizes that Clarissa's seclusion has "strategic value... it preserves [her] sense of autonomy and selfhood" (Rose 144). Rose's interpretation complicates Woolf's portrayal of Clarissa's sexual and emotional isolation as essential to aging and motherhood. Further, she argues that Clarissa's choice to marry Richard and not Peter is a liberated one and that her marriage with Richard allows Clarissa "a little license, a little independence" rather than a relationship that is fraught with emotional intensity and a lack of privacy (*MD* 7). Rose suggests that in preserving her autonomy of body and thought, Clarissa reclaims some semblance of her selfhood. Through asserting solitude has benefits for Clarissa, Rose fails to consider how Clarissa's privacy prevents her from developing meaningful, intimate relationships with Peter or her husband. Woolf's characterization of Clarissa and her efforts to facilitate intimacy with others through her dinner party reinforces my argument that Clarissa yearns for closeness with others because she does not feel close to her husband. Clarissa's parties may seem trivial and shallow, but she perceives them as "an offering; to combine, to create," signifying her desire for unity with others (103). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf identifies how the private realm of the individual and the public self coexist, a facet of the novel which Rose does not consider.

While Woolf describes Clarissa's sexual frigidity in her marriage, she stages an enigmatic and orgasmic passage that depicts Clarissa reflecting on her homoerotic desire while in bed alone:

"...she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment.... It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check.... swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture... then for a moment, she had seen an illumination... a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over – the moment" (27)

In imagining intimacy with women, Clarissa's description reaches a heated climax; the image of a match burning in a crocus flower, a motif of fleeting light and heat, is oppositional to the characterization of Clarissa as cold and virginal when reflecting on her attraction to men.

Woolf's use of the crocus flower has ties to homosexual desire as told in the Greek myth of Crocus, the tale of a mortal man who falls in love with Hermes. When Hermes accidentally kills Crocus, his lover turns Crocus into a flower. In an alternate reading, Crocus's story outlines a romance between Crocus and a nymph, another narrative of forbidden love. When interpreted in these two contexts, Woolf implies that Clarissa's homosexuality is prohibited and even punished (as demonstrated by the accidental death of Crocus in the Hermes reading). Additionally, "an inner meaning almost expressed" signifies Clarissa's desire to express her attraction towards women that she cannot vocalize due to her fear of shame and her awareness that this desire subverts heterosexual norms. This "inner meaning" and its inability to be articulated further draws a connection between emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy; physically isolated in her virginal chamber, Clarissa cannot share these homoerotic feelings, producing communication barriers with her husband and Peter, and these obstacles further her impenetrability.

Patricia Morgne Cramer's *Virginia Woolf and Sexuality* identifies that Woolf's symbolic use of the crocus flower is emblematic of her depiction of sexual desire as transcendent and mystical. Cramer asserts that "Woolf's poetic style seeks equivalence (the 'outline not the detail') for emotional states whatever the occasion: a match in a crocus for women's sexual, spiritual epiphanies" (Cramer 187). For Woolf, the union of the mind and the body exemplifies the pinnacle of women's sexuality as ethereal and subverts traditionally masculine conceptions of eroticism as possessive and objectifying. While Peter observes a group of young soldiers marching on the streets of London, he reflects: "they don't know the troubles of the flesh yet..."

all that I've been through," revealing his disillusioned view of sex (44). This interpretation contrasts with Woolf's depiction of women's sexuality as powerful and transformative. Indeed, as in *Mrs. Dalloway*, eroticism embodies a mystical element for the female characters in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*.

In Peter's limited understanding of feminine sexuality, he struggles to comprehend Clarissa, and because of his misinterpretation, he labels her as cold. He identifies her frigidity as a barrier to an emotional and sexual connection: "[Clarissa was] cold, heartless, a prude... [she] never could understand why he cared" (7). Woolf establishes a link between Clarissa's emotional coldness and her sexual frigidity, further delineating connections between the mind and the body. Further, in Peter's description of Clarissa, he reveals a fundamental misunderstanding between them; he believes that Clarissa did not comprehend the depth of his love for her, implying that they mutually misunderstood one another. As a result of Clarissa's rejection of Peter, he bitterly describes her coldness, and while Peter's judgments of her reveal his lingering disappointment at their failed romantic relationship, they also uncover the limitations of intimacy between them. Because Clarissa "knew directly [Peter] criticized her," Woolf suggests that Clarissa feels she cannot be close with him, even decades after their romance (51). Woolf suggests that Peter's disapproval of Clarissa is evidence of his bruised ego; if he recognizes her faults, he can recover his wounded manhood. Clarissa, in her awareness of Peter's criticisms of her, feels the need to protect herself. When Peter unexpectedly arrives at Clarissa's house, she "made to hide her dress, like a virgin protecting chastity, respecting privacy," suggesting an inherent connection between Clarissa's desire to guard her physical body and her interiority from Peter; his unanticipated presence makes Clarissa feel sexually and emotionally exposed (34).

Like Clarissa, Peter grapples with how she views him, suggesting an innate fear of criticism and an awareness of his self-image. Indeed, Peter becomes self-conscious when Clarissa observes him: “She’s looking at me, he thought, a sudden embarrassment coming over him” (34). Woolf suggests that Peter’s discomfort with Clarissa’s gaze signifies his deep-rooted anxieties of her ability to penetrate his consciousness, therefore revealing his desires for her. In *Social Minds in the Novel*, Alan Palmer analyzes the prevalence of shared thought in novels, especially those written by women. While Palmer does not reference Woolf specifically, his theories illuminate the incidence of telepathy in her work. He describes the importance of characters looking at one another to communicate their deeper feelings: “For minds to be public and available, it is necessary for characters to look attentive at each other in order to pick up the sorts of cues I have been describing” (Palmer 113). Using Palmer’s framework, Peter’s fear of Clarissa’s gaze reveals his anxieties that his interiority may be penetrable to her. Additionally, in his avoidance of speech and his fear of being “seen,” Peter relies on another sense: touch. Peter’s hands are “positively trembling” when he reunites with Clarissa and “takes both her hands [and] kisses [them]” (34). Woolf asserts that Peter’s dependence on physical touch with Clarissa further demonstrates his failure to express his affections towards her verbally and his shaking hands expose his insecurity and anxiety.

Through revealing Peter’s dependence on touch as an alternative to verbalizing his affections for Clarissa, Woolf uses Peter’s knife to imply his desire to penetrate Clarissa’s physical body. As he talks to Clarissa, Peter nervously fidgets with his knife: “‘And what’s all this?’ He said, tilting his pen-knife towards her green dress” (35). The symbol of the pocket knife implies phallic violence as he opens and closes it, gesturing towards her. The knife becomes a fetish object, “some inanimate object in some demonstrable relation to the person whom it

replaces... and is generally hardly appropriate for sexual purposes,” as defined by Freud in *Three Essays on Sexuality* (Freud 16). The knife represents a displacement of Peter’s desires for Clarissa, and it becomes a violent and inappropriate substitute for the phallus. In utilizing the fetish object, Peter avoids verbalizing or acting on his desire for Clarissa and instead, attempts to assert his control over her. Woolf suggests that Clarissa notices the phallic violence that Peter harnesses and seeks to usurp power in response:

“What an extraordinary habit that was, Clarissa thought; always playing with a knife. Always making one feel, too, frivolous; empty-minded... But I too, she thought, and, taking up her needle, summoned, like a queen whose guards have fallen asleep and left her unprotected (she had been quite taken aback by this visit – it had upset her) so that anyone can stroll in and have a *look* at her... her husband; *her self, in which Peter hardly knew now*, all come about her and beat off the enemy” (37), emphasis mine

Clarissa similarly arms herself with her sewing needle, implying that both characters want to protect themselves from judgment and penetration into their conscious minds. Clarissa is especially concerned with feeling visually exposed and criticized by Peter, underlining her deep fears of revealing her true feelings for him. Clarissa, in her defensiveness, states that Peter does not “know her now,” and this assertion reveals that she feels she must guard herself from his penetrating judgment. However, despite Clarissa’s fears, Peter’s assessment of Clarissa’s life is cursory at best; he cannot ascertain her feelings for him because they both struggle to verbalize their desire for one another out of fear of rejection and judgement.

Despite Peter’s attempts to hide his feelings for Clarissa, Woolf suggests that his unexpected display of emotion during their reunion reveals the unpredictability of vulnerability and the consequences of emotional repression. In his inability to connect intimately with Clarissa, he internalizes his failures as shortcomings of his masculinity and social standing. Peter thinks: “Shall I tell her... she would think me a failure... in the Dalloways’ sense... he was a failure” (37). Woolf implies that Peter’s unwillingness to share his feelings with Clarissa is

inextricably linked to his conception of manhood and social standing, especially in relation to Clarissa's husband who is a prominent politician. Peter's insecurity about his societal position becomes a barrier to expressing his desires for Clarissa because he feels inadequate in his masculinity. Although Peter tries to suppress his feelings, he breaks down: "... I know what I'm up against... running his finger along the blade of his knife, Clarissa and Dalloway.... and then to his utter surprise, suddenly thrown by those uncontrollable forces... he burst into tears; wept; wept without the least shame, sitting on the sofa, the tears running down his cheeks" (39). Peter's surprising display of emotion represents a powerful catharsis and Woolf suggests that vulnerability, though rarely depicted in her novels, cannot always be controlled, or repressed. Woolf solidifies yet another link between emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy; Peter's outburst reveals his frustration as he struggles to penetrate Clarissa's interiority and her physical body. Peter, despite his best attempts to disguise his love for her, cannot repress his emotions, leaving him vulnerable to judgment and embarrassment.

This emotional episode is humiliating for Peter, and he struggles to interpret the event and heal his wounded masculinity. After leaving Clarissa's house without "looking at her," Peter feels "overcome with shame suddenly at having been a fool; wept; been emotional... Clarissa refused me, he thought" (41-42). In Peter's avoidance of Clarissa's gaze, Woolf suggests that he attempts to recover from his tears, protecting himself from Clarissa's judgment. Coded within Peter's shame, Woolf notes the tension between emotional expression and masculinity; Peter identifies that his outburst is "foolish," and he identifies this emotional expression as inherently feminine. However, the irony of this scene is that Peter fails to verbally articulate his feelings. Peter asks Clarissa: "Tell me... are you happy, Clarissa? Does Richard —" (40). Before he can complete his question about Clarissa's marriage, he is interrupted by the presence of Clarissa's

daughter, evidence of a marriage that has been consummated, something Peter cannot accomplish. As Peter reflects upon this event, he asserts that “jealousy was at the bottom of it... holding his pocket-knife at arm’s length... she had reduced him to a whimpering, snivelling old ass” (68). Clarissa’s rejection emasculates Peter, and once again, he relies on his knife to regain some semblance of dominance and control. Holding his knife as if he is preparing for an attack, Peter reveals his defensiveness as he tries to reclaim his fractured masculinity. Freud posits that violence and aggression are inherent to male sexuality and that “an inclination to overpower” is evidence of a type of masochism that overcomes “disgust and shame” (20). Woolf uses Peter’s shame as representative of unconsummated male desire – something that is innately aggressive, which prevents deep intimacy with others.

Woolf asserts that Peter’s inability to possess Clarissa sexually is related to his struggle to access her interiority. In Peter’s failure to understand Clarissa, he describes her as “so transparent in some ways, so inscrutable in others,” implying that parts of her are unintelligible to him (66). Indeed, much of *Mrs. Dalloway* is devoted to Peter’s attempts to decode Clarissa – but Woolf asserts that though much is left unexpressed between Clarissa and Peter, “they always had this queer power of communicating without words” (51). This unspoken dialogue between them sets the stage for revealing the communication barriers that exist within the novel and the methods which characters utilize to circumvent these barriers. In their attempt to avoid articulating their desire for each other, Peter and Clarissa share a telepathic conversation:

“‘I often wish I’d got on better with your father,’ he said.
 ‘But he never liked anyone who – our friends,’ said Clarissa; and could have bitten her tongue for thus reminding Peter that he had wanted to marry her.
 Of course I did, thought Peter; it almost broke my heart too, he thought; and was overcome with his own grief, which rose like a moon looked at from a terrace [at Bourton] ... And as if in truth he were sitting there on the terrace he edged a little toward Clarissa... she too seemed to be sitting with him on the terrace in the moonlight.
 ‘Herbert has it now,’ she said. ‘I never go [to Bourton],’ she said” (36)

Clarissa and Peter's conscious minds merge, further demonstrating their capacity to communicate without words as they respond to one another and mutually reflect on their romance at Clarissa's childhood home at Bourton. While this unspoken conversation may simply imply a familiarity or intimacy with one another, Woolf suggests that this phenomenon is essential to understanding the function of shared consciousness and Clarissa's ability to know others. Woolf highlights this tension of epistemology by suggesting that Clarissa's "only gift was knowing people almost by instinct" (7), whereas Peter "never knew what people thought" (134). Peter's impression that he misunderstands others is not entirely accurate – as emphasized by his ability to communicate with Clarissa telepathically. Simultaneously accessible yet inaccessible to one another, Clarissa and Peter use these moments of shared consciousness to avoid the possibility of embarrassment and shame that speech poses.

Woolf's implication that Clarissa is especially gifted in accessing the interiorities of others is investigated in "Is Clarissa Dalloway Special?" by R. Lanier Anderson, who asserts that Woolf, through Clarissa's knowledge of others, highlights the function of shared consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Anderson asserts that Peter and Clarissa experience "extended mind consciousness," the idea that one mind can "blend into another" and that "one person [can] experience the thoughts of another directly and feel something of herself in the other person" (Anderson 234). Anderson's interpretation of *Mrs. Dalloway* illuminates the central questions that Woolf grapples with in the novel: is it possible to deeply "know" the inner worlds of others and what barriers prevent intimacy? Anderson argues that Clarissa's unique ability to penetrate other characters' thoughts demonstrates the social function of consciousness in the novel: "Clarissa's power is most apparent with Peter Walsh" because of how they "experience extended consciousness with mutuality," suggesting that Woolf's project to highlight shared consciousness

is a communal and an innately human experience (241). Anderson's argument begs the question: does the telepathic connection between Peter and Clarissa suggest familiarity with one another, or is Woolf exploring something more metaphysical in their ability to think and communicate in unison? Based on the recurrence of shared thought in Woolf's fiction, I postulate that Peter and Clarissa's shared consciousness reveals both their intimacy with one another, and it highlights Woolf's experimentation with form and narration in her work. Anderson, in his analysis of shared thought between Clarissa and Peter, fails to consider that this textual phenomenon is not exclusive to Clarissa or *Mrs. Dalloway* but permeates *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and her other texts. In Woolf's novels, telepathy is simultaneously mystical yet emblematic of the intrinsic human ability to read others, just as we as readers have the privilege of accessing characters' interiorities in the novel.

In conceptualizing the peculiar telepathy between Clarissa and Peter in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Palmer's *Social Minds in the Novel* provides insight into Woolf's depiction of shared consciousness as symbolic of the connections between individual and shared thought. Palmer defines social minds in the novel as "public, embodied, and so available to [others] without the need for speech," and with this definition, we can situate the ability for Clarissa and Peter to instinctually communicate without dialogue (2). This social phenomenon is pertinent to *Mrs. Dalloway*; Peter and Clarissa's minds unify momentarily; their thoughts seamlessly merge, and this amalgamation is representative of the intimacy they experience. Palmer describes this telepathy as "reciprocal; there is a conscious and fully intended sharing of thought, and so people will know that others know what they are thinking" (47). The social mind and the particulars of shared consciousness as they function in the novel facilitate intimacy between characters – because Peter and Clarissa struggle to verbally communicate their desires, intimacy is fostered in

what is unsaid, or rather, what is said in the mind. Palmer also identifies that “fictional mind-reading tends to involve characters often in moments of crisis” who are grappling to “interpret the opaque intentions and motives of others” (24). Applying Palmer’s theory, it is not coincidental that in the novel, telepathy occurs when Peter is emotionally vulnerable and seeking to decode Clarissa’s thoughts and feelings about him. To cope with his emasculation and the limitations of language, Peter employs mind reading to regain power and to demystify Clarissa, granting him greater access to her subjectivity.

Woolf suggests that these scenes of unspoken dialogue between Peter and Clarissa facilitate intimacy and allow them temporary access into each other’s conscious minds. While Peter and Clarissa cannot verbalize how they feel about one another, Clarissa states that “She [and] Peter lived in each other” and explains that “with Peter everything had to be shared,” implying an amalgamation of their interiorities (8). Woolf’s assertion may seem paradoxical; while Peter and Clarissa grapple with barriers to closeness, there are instances in which they are intimate, even if it is unspoken. Peter is aware of this contradiction, and when reflecting upon his reunion with Clarissa, he feels he has “told her everything,” despite not explicitly stating his desires for her (42). Peter’s cognizance of his penetrable interiority is further revealed when he thinks, “pray God that one might say these things without being overheard,” suggesting an awareness not only of Clarissa’s ability to know his conscious thoughts but also that the reader can penetrate his thoughts (67). Palmer asserts that the telepathy that occurs in novels is sometimes “*inadvertent*: someone may reveal their thoughts without meaning to” (47). Further, the transparent quality of the mind exposes characters’ thoughts to the reader, given the form of the novel. Palmer’s assertion that minds are penetrable relates to Peter’s fears of being “overheard,” suggesting that despite his best efforts to guard his feelings, the possibility for

exposure is possible and inherent in fiction. Peter's awareness of his mental penetrability reveals Woolf's meta-novelistic project to collapse the distinctions between reader, writer, and character. Woolf's narrative, like the shared thoughts of Clarissa and Peter, gives us access to the minds of the characters, allowing us as readers to "overhear" their thoughts.

Woolf describes the metaphysical relationship between writer, reader, and character in her essay "Character in Fiction." She states that the writer's responsibility is to "get into touch with the reader but putting something before him which he recognizes, where therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to cooperate in the far more difficult business of intimacy" (431). Woolf places the onus on the writer to create work that is comprehensible and relatable to readers, therefore disintegrating the divisions between readers and characters. In Woolf's view, writers must depict characters that are familiar; we must be able to see ourselves in the novels to deeply connect in the "difficult business of intimacy." Through writing a character like Clarissa, a figure who grapples with communication barriers, sexual and emotional intimacy, and navigates problems of selfhood and consciousness, the readers become attuned to her struggles. To read one of Woolf's novels, readers have the challenging task of "engaging in a Clarissa-like activity of keeping track of the intersecting minds and characters that make up the net of consciousness around her," therefore illuminating the intimate connections that readers and characters share (Anderson 262).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the emotional and sexual impenetrability of Clarissa Dalloway represents the challenges of unspoken desires and unfulfilled cravings for intimacy. Woolf uses Peter and Clarissa's struggles to communicate with one another to pose questions of intimacy.

Can one really know another person? Peter reflects on this very idea:

"It is Clarissa herself, he thought, with a deep emotion, and an extraordinarily clear, yet puzzling, recollection of her, as if this bell had come into the room years ago, where they sat at some

moment of great intimacy, and had gone from one to the other and had left, like a bee with honey, laden with the moment. But what room? What moment?" (42)

Woolf, through Peter's "extraordinarily clear yet puzzling" understanding of Clarissa, reveals the limitations of closeness between characters. Peter's inability to comprehend Clarissa, penetrate her physical body and her interiority is incredibly frustrating for him, causing him to question his masculinity and the depth of their relationship. Their brief moments of intimacy through what is unspoken, however, are fleeting. Asking himself, "But what room? What moment?" reveals that Peter, despite his best efforts to decipher Clarissa, questions the very notion of intimacy; can he ever truly know how Clarissa feels about him, or if intimacy between them is possible given the many barriers that prevent closeness? Woolf suggests that although verbal communication often fails, moments of intimacy are possible, even if unarticulated. While Peter grapples to uncover Clarissa's consciousness, her presence satisfies his desires for closeness, even if that moment of intimacy is ephemeral: "For there she was" (165).

To the Lighthouse: The Desire for Intimacy and Unity

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf similarly depicts characters who grapples with obstacles to knowing others, even those they are closest to. The novel follows the domestic drama of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their struggles to communicate their desire for intimacy. As Woolf demonstrates in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* also suggests that intimate relationships with others, even with our spouses or our closest friends, are not exempt from the possibility of shame or mental impenetrability. In the novel, the desire for unification with another is exemplified by the relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, a young artist whose unconsummated love for Mrs. Ramsay reveals the repressed nature of homoerotic desire. The intimate relationships in *To the Lighthouse* allow Woolf to highlight an important tension between physical proximity and intimacy.

In understanding the relationship between closeness and distance from others, Lily identifies the problem of “knowing others.” Lily’s attachment to Mrs. Ramsay allows Woolf to pose questions to the reader: what are the methods we can employ to know others more deeply?

Through Lily, Woolf posits an idea about intimacy with others:

“Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? Or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? *For it was not knowledge but unity that she desired*, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, *but intimacy itself, which is knowledge*, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knees” (51), emphasis mine

In Lily’s desire for closeness with Mrs. Ramsay, Lily claims that unity and not knowledge is the key to intimate connections with another person. For Lily, complete access to Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts would not only be impossible but undesirable because it would represent a violation of Mrs. Ramsay’s privacy. In Lily’s desires for unity, Woolf alludes to another important aspect of intimacy in the novel; how does proximity factor into closeness with others? Lily, “with her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knees,” suggests that physical closeness is essential to their bond and contributes to Lily’s desire for her. For Lily, “so much depends upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us,” and Lily’s struggle to become one with Mrs. Ramsay is contingent upon her ability to be close to her physical body (191). As Lily describes, the feelings of the body cannot be articulated in “any language known to man,” because these feelings are intangible and like Clarissa and Peter, Lily struggles with the semantics of desire.

Embedded in the above passage about unity and knowledge, Woolf characterizes Lily as a figure who desires bodily unification with Mrs. Ramsay to attain greater intimacy with her. Lily questions: “Could loving... make her and Mrs. Ramsay one?” and this aspiration has erotic implications as she questions the possibility for a physical union with Mrs. Ramsay. Further, Lily’s attraction towards Mrs. Ramsay is representative of self-imposed barriers; she is conscious

that she cannot vocalize her feelings for Mrs. Ramsay and represses her feelings: “Had much ado to control her impulse to fling herself (thank Heaven she had always resisted so far) at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee and say to her – but what could one say to her? ‘I’m in love with you?’ No, that was not true. ‘I’m in love with this all,’ waving her hand at the hedge, at the house. It was absurd, it was impossible” (19). Woolf identifies Lily’s conception of intimacy and love as something that transcends the erotic – her desire for closeness is mystical and extends to the objects that surround her and Mrs. Ramsay. Lily’s “love with this all” suggests her understanding of love as something sublime; it is a “love that never attempted to clutch its object...it was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain” (47). Lily, while in communion with Mrs. Ramsay and everything that surrounds them, becomes tied to both the material and spiritual worlds, elevated beyond corporeal or possessive desires. In Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting,” published in a book of her essays *The Death of the Moth*, Woolf writes that objects are laden with “the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience,” and this assertion informs Lily’s powerful, mystical connection to the world in the context of her memories with Mrs. Ramsay (21). Through Lily, Woolf suggests that there is a unity between people and objects: “she felt... that community of feeling with other people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin... it was all one... the stream, and chairs, tables, maps, were hers, were theirs...” (113-114). In Lily’s understanding of the world, the walls of the partition which divides bodies deteriorates through the union she experiences with the objects around her. Indeed, Woolf’s project to place the material and the transcendent on the same plane is a contradiction Lily faces: “one wanted... to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply, that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle,

it's an ecstasy" (202). Woolf links objects and bodies together, symbolizing an amalgamation of the material and the human – of the mundane and the profound.

Within Lily's struggle to communicate her elevated desires for Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf identifies that to verbalize her transcendent idea of love is difficult because her definition exceeds feelings for one person – it is more abstract and disembodied. Woolf posits that language poses challenges in expressing emotions and desires, as exemplified when Lily asks: "For how could one express in words these emotions of the body?" (178). Lily identifies a disconnect between body and mind as she struggles with the semantics of articulating her attraction towards Mrs. Ramsay. In Lily's inability to describe her desire for Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf recognizes the need for a new type of language that expresses feelings of the body in her essay "On Being Ill." Woolf asserts that these new words must be "more primitive, more sensual, more obscene," and that once this language is formulated, the frustrations that Lily articulates will dissipate (196). Indeed, Woolf states in her speech "Professions for Women," that she struggles with her "own experiences as a body," hence explaining her difficulty and frustration with depicting corporeality in her fiction (241).

The language of desire that Lily grapples with also reflects Woolf's challenges in depicting romantic and physical attraction between characters. In writing about sexuality, like her characters, Woolf often relies upon metaphors or suggestive language in her work to suggest subtle eroticism. Woolf, in describing the stream of light of the lighthouse, personifies it in sexual terms: Mrs. Ramsay, "to help [herself] out of solitude... [laid] hold of some odd or end, some sight or sound," and she fixates on the lighthouse's "stroking with its silver fingers... it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled" (65). Woolf stages Mrs. Ramsay's desires for intimacy and sexual gratification in anthropomorphic and sensory language. Given

the phallic nature of the lighthouse, Woolf suggests that Mrs. Ramsay achieves some sort of sexual release: “the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough!” (65). In utilizing suggestive language, Woolf avoids divulging Mrs. Ramsay’s arousal in explicit terms.

To understand why Woolf relies upon metaphor and refrains from graphic descriptions of women’s sexuality, her essay “Professions for Women” illuminates her fears of portraying eroticism. Woolf describes how the “Angel of the House came between me and my paper when I was writing,” suggesting that Victorian ideals of femininity and purity prevented her from depicting bodily desires (236). Further, Woolf’s awareness of a male audience influences her writing, stating that women writers are “impeded by the extreme conventionality of the other sex” and that “the consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions roused her from her artist’s state of unconsciousness” (240). Woolf identifies that language, male criticism, and the traditional expectations of female sexuality are obstacles to her writing that she attempts to overcome, and, in *The Waves*, she seeks to surpass these impediments that prevent the depiction of women’s desire.

In avoiding articulating Mrs. Ramsay’s specific sexual experiences, Woolf characterizes eroticism as a transcendent and mystical experience, and it symbolizes the connection between the body and the mind. Cramer’s *Virginia Woolf and Sexuality* asserts that “Woolf’s sexual impetus is consistently toward that which expands, alleviates, thaws, fertilises, opens, frees,” and we see this through Mrs. Ramsay’s “swelling” which represents an expansion of her spiritual mind (188). Woolf describes that Mrs. Ramsay is “hypnotised,” and it is as if the light were “stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain,” further suggesting the inherent connection between the body and the mind (65). Rather than simply focusing on the corporeality

of Mrs. Ramsay, Cramer theorizes that Woolf's "attention is on the intensity and quality of sexual emotion rather than specific acts... her indirection in sexual matters is not motivated by her sexual fear or prudery, but, at least partly, by her mistrust of merely graphic representations of all kinds of fiction" (186). In Woolf's avoidance of explicit depictions, she elevates women's sexuality as incredibly spiritual and transformative. Despite these elevated portrayals of eroticism, in *To the Lighthouse*, desire is inhibited, especially if homosexual in nature. Woolf, in the final section of the novel, depicts Lily grieving Mrs. Ramsay's passing and coping with her unfulfilled desire: "Mrs. Ramsay!" she cried, feeling the old horror come back – to want and want and not to have... [Mrs. Ramsay] sat there quite simply in the chair... there she sat" (202). In Lily's memory, Mrs. Ramsay is reconfigured and embodied. Lily's mental image of Mrs. Ramsay sitting next to her allows Woolf to emphasize the important connection between physical closeness and intimacy, even if that experience is rendered in memory and not in reality.

Just as Lily reconstructs Mrs. Ramsay in her memory as an attempt to be close to her, Woolf uses Lily's portrait of Mrs. Ramsay to explore questions of memory, knowledge, representation, and intimacy. Woolf utilizes Lily's aesthetic project to symbolize the ways in which we attempt to understand one another and as an artist, Lily's fixation on unification, cohesion, and meaning are personified in the portrait she creates of Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf further delineates a link between artistic representation and knowledge when Lily uses artistic terms to describe her desire to know others: "This was one way of knowing people, she thought: to know the outline, not the detail," implying that comprehending the minutiae of another's personality is undesirable because it violates the privacy of the individual (195). To ascertain one's outline, Woolf suggests, is more reasonable and perhaps even more symbolic; as Lily watches the

Ramsays, she infuses their bodily outlines with meaning: “the meaning... descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative... [the Ramsays were] the symbols of marriage, husband and wife. Then, after an instant, the symbolic outline which transcended the real figures sank down again, and they become, as they met them, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay” (72). Woolf stages a dichotomy between representation and reality: what are the limits of Lily’s desires to know the Ramsays intimately? Is her understanding of them superficial and merely representational, and can she surpass these obstacles to depiction? Woolf, using Lily’s conception of intimacy with others, emphasizes that a certain distance is necessary to allow people their privacy and solitude, as represented through her desires to paint Mrs. Ramsay. Lily states that her portrait “must be a tribute” to Mrs. Ramsay and that she subdues “all her impressions as a woman to something much more general” rather than depicting her in exact detail (53). Indeed, Lily’s objective to accurately paint Mrs. Ramsay is a question of knowledge and unity, and she fears that any divisions in her painting may disrupt “the unity of the whole,” drawing a connection between the ideas of art, unity, and knowledge of others (53).

The desire for unity yet the shortcomings of human relations and communication are similarly exemplified in the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. In their marriage, power is harnessed through withholding verbal affection towards one another. In Martha Nussbaum’s “The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” she identifies that the novel’s primary subject is the “drama of thought, emotion, perception, and memory. Very little of this thinking and feeling finds expression in language” (Nussbaum 733). Through recognizing the limitations of language as one of the many tensions in the novel, Nussbaum highlights that the Ramsays' relationship exemplifies the deficiencies of human communication in expressing deep feelings of love and intimacy. Woolf highlights how Mr.

Ramsay experiences this frustration with language and emotional vulnerability: “He turned and saw her... he could not interrupt her... he would let her be, and he passed her without a word, though it hurt him that she could look distant, and he could not reach her... and again, he would have passed her without a word” (65). Mrs. Ramsay’s physical and emotional distance are a barriers to communication between the couple and in Mr. Ramsay’s inability to reach his wife, Woolf highlights the necessity of physical and emotional vulnerability to foster deep intimacy. Through withholding their affections for one another, the cycle of hurt and the desire for privacy repeats infinitely. These patterns of concealment, Nussbaum argues, are “a way of getting power” and an attempt to “cover shame” (Nussbaum 738). In their reticence, both struggle to understand their feelings for one another.

Mrs. Ramsay, like her husband, withholds her feelings for him, and Woolf suggests that this avoidance to share one’s private thoughts is emblematic of human relationships and our desires for privacy of the mind. In the powerful last scene between the couple, Mrs. Ramsay refrains from expressing her love for her husband: “... but she could not do it; she could not say it... he knew that she loved him. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it; yet he knew (124). This moment between them parallels the scene of shared consciousness between Peter and Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* in which they have an intimate and telepathic connection. In Hermione Lee’s *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, Lee explains that this scene between the Ramsays “gives the impression that both minds are simultaneously revealed to each other in silence, even though the narrative is really centered on Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness. Thus, although [Mrs. Ramsay] dominates the moment, it creates a moving sense of unification” (Lee 123). Woolf reveals the shared consciousness between husband and wife and despite their inability to verbally articulate their love for one another, in this instance of physical closeness, they unify through

shared thought and mutual understanding. Shared consciousness bridges the gaps between characters in Woolf's novels and assuages some of the tension between desires for closeness and simultaneous privacy of the mind. As in *Mrs. Dalloway* when Woolf describes "a solitude [that exists] even between a husband and wife, a gulf," applies to the Ramsays (*MD* 101). Like most representations of marriage in Woolf's fiction, the Ramsays grapple with this fissure that separates them.

Despite the novel's focus on the potential for intimacy and characters' yearnings for greater access to the feelings and thoughts of others, Woolf, in "On Being Ill," asserts that these desires eliminate the potential for mystery and complexity in human relationships. Woolf writes that "always to be understood would be miserable," and that there is beauty in misunderstanding because it highlights the intricacies of human emotion and thought while also allowing for privacy of mind and solitude (198). For Woolf, complete comprehension or knowledge of others is not only implausible but also undesirable because it alleviates the mystery of human consciousness, or the "mist between the people [one] knows best" (*MD* 8). Woolf states that "we do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way," implying that total access of one's interiority is not achievable, even for fictional characters in her novels ("On Being Ill" 198). For Woolf's characters, deep knowledge of oneself and others is unattainable; their inner thoughts and their transparent minds are not always available to others or indeed, themselves.

In addition to the barriers that communication poses, the divisions between the Ramsays are also influenced by systems of patriarchy that prevent meaningful and equitable relationships between men and women. For Mrs. Ramsay, an obstacle to closeness with her husband is the pressure to perform her wifely duties while maintaining autonomy of her body and her life.

These gendered expectations create an unequal and transactional relationship with her husband and Woolf suggests that the patriarchal expectations that women must forge connections between others take a toll on Mrs. Ramsay, and she describes the immense pressure to facilitate closeness at her dinner party: “Nothing seems to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it” (83). Woolf suggests that the wish for unity is innately feminine (as exemplified through Lily), and that men’s “sterility” inhibits their ability to foster intimate relationships. Woolf troubles the expectation that women are solely responsible for mediating the social connections between people and suggests that this epistemological project is bound to fail because intimacy is often fleeting. Like Clarissa’s view of her parties as an opportunity “to combine and create,” Woolf represents Mrs. Ramsay as more disillusioned with these gendered expectations of unity (*MD* 103). Mrs. Ramsay feels frustrated that her husband is not facilitating human connection and “wished, looking at her husband at the other end of the table, that he would say something. One word, she said to herself. For if he said one thing, it would make all the difference” (95). Mr. Ramsay fails to contribute to the conversation, leaving his wife feeling dismayed and abandoned by him and this disappointment is amplified in the context of the larger social group that witnesses their dysfunctional relationship.

Woolf suggests that the barriers that prevent intimacy are gendered; the household duties and sacrifices expected of women (such as Mrs. Ramsay and her dinner party) inhibit intimacy. Woolf uses the metaphor of musical notes to imply a lack of domestic harmony between the Ramsays:

“Every throb of this pulse seemed, as [Mr. Ramsay] walked away, to enclose [Mrs. Ramsay] and her husband, and to give to each that solace which two different notes, one high, one low, struck

together, seemed to give each other as they combine... and then to hide the small daily things, and the children seeing it, and the burden it laid on them – all this diminished the entire joy, the pure joy, of the two notes sounding together, and let the sound die on her ear now with a dismal flatness” (39)

Woolf asserts that the burden of motherhood and the masculine expectation to provide and protect the family strain the Ramsays’ relationship and prevent deep closeness. The unity of the “two notes sounding together” is shattered by the “small daily things” and the responsibilities of domestic life. In *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*, Rachel Bowlby claims that *To the Lighthouse* reveals the disunion resulting from traditional heterosexual relationships. She argues that the novel uncovers the lack of “harmony in human relationships... [and it] explores the untenability of the prevailing constructions of masculine and feminine identities, showing us how the two are neither complementary, making a whole, nor ever reached in their imaginary completion” (Bowlby 74-75). Like notes of music, the Ramsays’ ability to combine or unify, in an emotional and sexual sense, is ephemeral because their dynamic is perpetually restrained by a gendered hierarchy that creates divisions between them.

However, to circumvent the difficulty of expressing their feelings for one another and their dissatisfaction with married life, the Ramsays’ intimacy with one another is demonstrated through their reliance on shared thought. At the dinner party, the Ramsays communicate without speaking: “[Mr. Ramsay] had said nothing, he would have [Mrs. Ramsay] observe... Mrs. Ramsay demanded (they looked at each other down the long table sending these questions and answers across, each knowing exactly what the other felt). Everybody could see, Mrs. Ramsay thought” (96). The Ramsays, like Peter and Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, speak to one another without verbalization, suggesting an intimate connection between them. Palmer’s theory that the gaze between characters makes the mind penetrable becomes clear in this passage at the dinner party, and within their mutual look is the familiarity and intimacy that exists between married

couples, and we see how the Ramsays rely on bodily and facial clues to communicate. Their avoidance of articulating their emotions allows Woolf to reiterate that language has deficiencies and often fails: “Words fluttered sideways and struck objects too low” and that characters are caught in “perpetual apprehension” because they lack the vocabulary to describe their feelings (178). As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, characters’ interiorities in *To the Lighthouse* are temporarily penetrable to one another and to readers: “All of them bending themselves to listen thought, ‘Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed,’ for each thought, ‘The others are feeling this’” (94). This fascinating moment of shared consciousness at the dinner party reveals two essential themes in Woolf’s novels: firstly, the characters fear that their thoughts are comprehensible to other characters, and secondly, that their thoughts are penetrable to the reader in a meta-novelistic fashion. This quotation resembles Peter’s fear of “being overheard” by Clarissa and, Woolf suggests, the reader too (*MD* 67).

Although Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay grapple with articulating their affections, Woolf suggests they are connected through unity of the mind and through physical proximity. Woolf describes the Ramsays and their “crepuscular walls of their intimacy, for they were drawing together, involuntarily, coming side by side, quite close, she could feel his mind like a raised hand shadowing her mind” (123). The image of the Ramsays’ “crepuscular walls of intimacy” highlights that like twilight, the bond they share is continually in flux, moving from one stage to the next as the walls of their minds become inaccessible and accessible to one another. As they become physically closer, their thoughts fuse, and Mrs. Ramsay *feels* her husband’s mind and the effect it has on hers, further suggesting that the mind and body are connected, even between other people. Like the fluctuating transparency of their minds, the bodily connection the Ramsays experience is similarly transitory; affection between them is spontaneous, such as the

moment when he “seizes [his wife’s] hand and raises it to his lips and kisses it with an intensity that brought the tears to her eyes, and quickly he dropped it,” demonstrating an anxiety and shame in expressing desire and love (70). Although Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay struggle to deeply connect with one another physically and verbally, the unification of their minds facilitates moments of intimacy: “Their eyes met for a second; but they did not want to speak to each other. They had nothing to say, but something seemed, nevertheless, to go from him to her. It was the life, it was the power of it... he seemed to be saying, don’t say anything; just sit there... it filled him” (119). Even without words, something is exchanged between them. This interaction, Woolf asserts, embodies the insufficiencies of human relationships; the Ramsays fail to communicate effectively with one another, but the momentary amalgamation of their minds and the physical proximity they share does unify them, even if only temporarily.

The Waves: The Body as the Site for (Dis)Unification

In *The Waves*, shared consciousness permeates the novel and occurs between the six voices of the novel: Bernard, Louis, Neville, Jinny, Susan, and Rhoda. *The Waves*, more so than Woolf’s other novels, depicts what Palmer describes as the “social mind” at work in the novel; through the chorus of six voices and the absence of a mediating third person narrator, Woolf delineates how characters’ thoughts fuse through the text. As a result, communication between characters is especially complex: are the characters verbalizing their thoughts while conversing with one another, or are their thoughts linked together through the form of the novel? Woolf’s representation of bodily unification in *The Waves* is similarly mystical, yet embodied, as portrayed through Jinny. Indeed, through Jinny, Woolf more confidently represents corporeality and asserts that the body becomes the site for expression. In *The Waves*, the drama of the text lies in the tension between division and unity: when are characters unified, and what links them?

What disrupts their cohesion? Woolf seeks to unravel these questions through these six characters.

In *The Waves*, Woolf posits sexuality as both dividing and unifying – each character grapples with their own burgeoning sensuality as we track their maturation through the novel. The first chapter portrays the six voices as young children who witness (or experience in Jinny and Louis’s case) the initial instance of sexuality in the garden. Jinny and Louis, as they investigate the nature around them, note the phallic stalks of plants. Jinny describes them as “covered with harsh, short hairs” and Louis identifies with the stalk: “My body is a stalk. I press the stalk. A drop oozes from the hole at the mouth” (11, 12). Before the kiss that they share, Jinny and Louis are linked through a nascent erotic consciousness, as the children explore their bodies in the context of the natural world. The recurring image of the stalk further suggests that these characters, like Peter and Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, experience a unity of the mind as they imagine the same phallic motif. However, when Jinny kisses Louis, the unity that they experience breaks as Louis describes the kiss: “She has found me. I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered” (13). Woolf’s language frames this event as violent, fracturing Louis’s solitude, introspection, and bodily autonomy. The site of the garden as the space for erotic exploration is Edenic; the kiss embodies the loss of childhood innocence and represents Jinny and Louis’s first encounter with adult sexuality. The forced and ephemeral coalescence of their bodies through the kiss is disruptive, splintering the cohesion of the group. When deciding to kiss Louis on the neck, Jinny asks herself: “Is he dead?” and Woolf suggests that with this mythical kiss, Jinny seeks to revitalize him. As Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* and Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, Jinny embodies a mystical sexuality and possesses an innate corporeality in comparison to other characters in the novel.

Louis and Susan's violent reaction to the kiss allows Woolf to suggest that this moment of eroticism divides the unity of the six voices, solidifying that sex can exclude and individualize. Susan witnesses the kiss and describes her distress: "Now I will wrap my agony inside a pocket-handkerchief... I love and I hate. I desire one thing only" (13-15). Woolf figures Susan as an outsider, and she is excluded from their embrace; the kiss symbolizes an inevitable division and makes the barriers between the characters tangible. This childhood memory impacts the characters throughout the novel, particularly Louis who in his middle age, recounts that "It breaks... the thread I try to spin... Jinny broke the thread when she kissed me in the garden years ago" (218). This event is formative for Louis because it establishes the simultaneous possibility for disunion and union that sexuality imposes. The kiss temporarily unifies Jinny and Louis's bodies and once complete, it solidifies the divisions between characters; their embrace exemplifies the potential for disunion within the group.

Woolf asserts that like the kiss, marriage and parenthood also produce obstacles between the characters, separating them into discrete units. When Bernard becomes engaged, Susan, Louis, and Rhoda share similar feelings about the implications of marriage. Susan recognizes that "Something irrevocable has happened. A circle has been cast on the waters. A chain imposed. We shall never flow freely again" (142), Louis describes "for one moment only, before the chain breaks... but now the circle breaks... [I feel] pain and jealousy, envy and desire" (142) and Rhoda says, "the circle is destroyed" (143). The characters' shared emotions and recurring thoughts demonstrate that the feelings of exclusion permeate the novel, allowing Woolf to frame marriage as something destructive, "as always a catastrophe" because it interrupts the possibility for intimacy and unity between friends and instead, prioritizes traditional notions of heterosexual love (*MD* 29). She also asserts that Bernard's engagement represents the establishment of a

sexual and gendered hierarchy in the novel; Louis's jealousy reveals his internalization of his own sexual inadequacy. Further, Woolf uses Susan's discussion of motherhood to represent the ways in which heterosexuality isolates women: "I shall let [my children] wall me away from you, from you, and from you" (132). Susan recognizes that maternity insulates women and makes friendship more difficult, therefore disturbing the potential for platonic unification. As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa's socio-sexual isolation post-motherhood is a phenomenon that parallels Susan's predictions of her role as a mother. In *The Waves*, as in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf suggests that traditional notions of marriage and family life are impediments to intimacy and generate barriers which prevent deep, meaningful relationships.

Woolf asserts that as the characters individualize and develop separate lives from one another, it is a painful process, especially for Bernard who seeks to unify the group. Bernard says: "We suffered terribly as we became separated bodies" (241). The fragmentation of the group is traumatic for Bernard more so than the other characters because of his prominent role in the novel to narrate and link the characters. Why is this rupture so painful for Bernard and the other figures in the text? Woolf suggests that this detachment from others is inevitable and integral to the human experience because it continually reinscribes the trauma of separation from the mother, as described by Neville: "We are in the passive and exhausted frame of mind when we only wish to rejoin the body of our mother from whom we have been severed" (233). Woolf's identification of this initial trauma is a precursor to Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage" posited in his book *Écrits: A Selection*, which defines the process in which individuals, to reckon with their separation from their mothers at birth, seek to unify with others to repair their fractured selves (Lacan 2). In *The Waves*, Woolf's project to explore the development of the self in relation to others exemplifies Lacan's theories about individuation and division. Further, in

characters' pursuit of unification, sex has the capacity to serve as a vehicle for emotional closeness, as demonstrated through Jinny.

Woolf depicts Jinny as the first character to initiate erotic intimacy and this is representative of Jinny's ability to use her body to communicate and facilitate closeness with others which distinguishes her from the other voices in the novel. Kevin Moon's "The Two Kisses: Human Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*" suggests that the kiss represents "some element of erotic consciousness in Louis, which in turn agitates [Jinny]" (Moon 323). In contrast to Moon's perspective, I view the embrace shared with Louis as characteristic of Jinny's unique sense of corporeality: "I dance. I ripple. I lie quivering flung over you" (13). In comparison to the other characters, Jinny is more attuned to her bodily passions and views her physicality as a tool to unify with others. Jinny states that "our bodies communicate" and through this communion with another, the "single and solitary mate becomes many... I am admitted to the warmth and privacy of another soul. We are together" (101, 103). Woolf suggests that for Jinny, sex has the potential to both multiply and unify the self on a spiritual level, transcending physical eroticism and language, and unlocking elevated forms of intimacy. Jinny avoids speech and instead, uses her body to merge the divisions that language imposes. Moon characterizes Jinny's desire to individualize as emblematic of her "erotic narcissism," as she utilizes sex to separate herself from the other characters (322). In the novel, Jinny wishes to "be singled out... to be called away by one person who is attracted towards me" (46). What Moon describes as Jinny's "erotic narcissism," I interpret as an intrinsic bodily confidence and comfort – it is no coincidence that Jinny is the initiator of the first instance of physical intimacy in the novel – Woolf imbues her with an innate corporeal awareness and an understanding of her sexual desires. In Jinny's sexual awareness, she identifies herself as more unified and evolved than the

other characters and states: “the torments, the divisions of your lives have been solved for me night after night, sometimes only by the touch of a finger under the table-cloth as we sat dining” (221). She recognizes that the fragmentation inherent in individual human lives are remedied through sexuality. With Woolf’s use of second-person narration in “divisions of your lives,” Woolf identifies that Jinny’s corporeality merges the disunification that the other characters experience and, if read meta-textually, even the readers’ lives. Jinny represents a contradiction that exists in *The Waves*: eroticism differentiates Jinny from the five other voices of the novel while also allowing her to amalgamate with other bodies, even if that unification is ephemeral.

Woolf, through depicting the parallels between Lily in *To the Lighthouse* and Jinny in *The Waves*, identifies a paradigm of women’s experience of sexuality and intimacy. As Lily describes knowing people through “their outline and not the detail” (*TTLH* 195), Woolf uses Jinny to demonstrate an iteration of this method of knowing people: “But we who live in a body see within the body’s imagination things in outline... my body, my companion, is always sending its signals” (176). Unlike Lily who struggles to verbalize her desires for physical intimacy and unity with Mrs. Ramsay, Jinny avoids speech altogether, instead using her body to communicate and facilitate closeness; Jinny’s bodily signals, Woolf suggests, fills the space of language. In another parallel between *The Waves* and *To The Lighthouse*, Jinny and Lily both recognize that intimacy surpasses the boundaries of the physical body and expands to everyday objects. Jinny describes this experience: “Our hands touch, our bodies burst into fire. The chair, the cup, the table – nothing remains unlit. All quivers, all kindles, all burns clear” (140). This passage evokes Lily’s “love with this all,” namely Mrs. Ramsay and the materials that surround them (*TTLH* 19). Through Jinny and Lily’s analogous way of seeing and understanding the world and their intimate relationships, Woolf identifies an important facet of women’s

experience of sexual consciousness; eroticism and corporeality can transcend the physical limitations of the body and can serve as methods for deep intimacy with others.

The Waves, like *To the Lighthouse*, depicts the unification of the body and the mind through the occurrence of inter-textual dialogue. Shared thought occurs throughout *The Waves* and serves as the primary mode of communication between the characters, taking greater precedence over verbalization which distinguishes *The Waves* from *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf blurs the boundaries between speech and thought, creating the space for characters' interiorities to merge and the very structure of the novel embraces the convergences between characters' lives and feelings. Woolf suggests that spoken language in the novel becomes derivative and even habitual, with Neville describing the "artificial [and] insincere" quality of words with their "familiar rhythm" that "lay dormant... now toss their crests, and fall and rise again" (82). Woolf suggests that words, with their wave-like rhythm, are cyclical and often fail to convey the deeper meaning and feelings of the body. Speech is a source of anxiety for characters in *The Waves*, especially Bernard who constantly refers to "unfinished phrases" (283) and states: "how humiliating never to be sure what to say next" and characterizes silence as "dry deserts," devoid of meaning (254). Silence's personification as a desert, in contrast to the conceptualization of words as wave-like, further implicates the important distinction Woolf draws between the two experiences of language; words, when communicated inter-textually, can be generative. Woolf suggests that potentially the reason that characters in *The Waves* grapple with speech is that it is inherently individualized and singular – in spontaneous conversation, it is impossible to speak in total unison with another. With this anxiety of speech in mind, it becomes clear why Woolf utilizes the chorus of six characters to narrate her story. Bernard becomes "drawn irresistibly to the sound of the chorus chanting its old, chanting its almost wordless;

almost senseless song,” and the relief experienced that the song is wordless signifies that speech creates divisions between characters because of the potential for misunderstanding and inherent exclusion (246). To circumvent the barriers of language, the importance of the gaze, as exemplified in Woolf’s other fiction, recurs and Bernard states that “visual impressions often communicate thus briefly the statements that we shall in time to come uncover and coax into words,” suggesting that visual cues precede the formulation of speech (189).

To grapple with the anxieties of speech and silence, Woolf depicts characters that use shared thought as an alternate form of communication in the novel. As in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, in *The Waves*, the integration of characters’ thoughts unifies them as a collective but also provides the novel with a sense of narrative cohesion. The instances of shared thought dominate *The Waves* as characters’ subjectivities blend seamlessly, oscillating between individual thought and cohesive group thought. Phrases recur throughout the novel and Susan’s statement “I love and I hate” is repeated and appropriated by Jinny, who intuits Susan’s feelings: “It is love and it is hate as Susan feels for me because I kissed Louis once in the garden” (137) and by Bernard: “... better to be like Susan and love and hate the heat of the sun” (266). The phrases that repeat transcend the bounds of time in the novel – Susan’s statement about simultaneous love and hate occurs in the first portion of the novel when she is a child and then is repeated by Bernard as an old man. Shared thought is prevalent in the novel and is made explicit by Rhoda, who describes the process as “disembodied” and states that the characters “enjoy this momentary alleviation (it is not often that one has no anxiety) when the walls of the mind become transparent” (228). When the walls of the minds are permeable, the characters are relieved because they no longer rely on verbalization to create intimate bonds with one another. Rhoda’s statement about shared thought is also laden with meta-textuality; Rhoda’s mind, as

well as the minds of the other characters, are transparent to readers because we have special access to their thoughts, given the form of the novel.

Woolf's characters identify that shared thought liberates them from the anxieties of speech. Like Rhoda, Jinny similarly states: "here we can be silent, or speak without raising our voices... it is so vast an alleviation to be able to point for another to look at. And then not to talk. To follow the dark paths of the mind and enter the past... to break off some fruit. For alas! my mind is a little impeded, it soon tires" (179-180). Both women identify that silence and in turn shared speech, assuage the tensions and barriers that prevent closeness. Through their permeable minds, Woolf suggests that the characters have greater access to the "dark paths" of the unconscious and the thoughts or feelings characters may be too afraid to vocalize. Howard Harper's *In Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virginia Woolf* theorizes that Woolf's utilization of shared thought in her novels "represents the luminous halo of consciousness itself... the transitions from one mind to another, and from individual minds to a larger cultural awareness, enhance the feeling that human consciousness transcends the limitations of individual minds" (Harper 117). Harper's framework underlines the mysticism present in *The Waves*, an element that figures more prominently in this novel than Woolf's other work. Indeed, the shared consciousness that links characters embodies the spiritual aspects in her fiction as characters grapple against the limitations of language and speech.

Woolf's focus on the tension between unity and disunion (in both mind and body) is simultaneously alleviated yet complicated by the novel's conclusion. In the final chapter of the novel, Bernard is the primary narrator as the other voices disappear and he undertakes the responsibility to "sum up... the meaning of my life" and the lives of the other five characters (238). Bernard tells his story to a nameless acquaintance and Woolf uses the listener's anonymity

to clearly link the text to us, the readers. This unidentified character easily becomes a substitute for the reader and in Bernard's role to summarize the text, he becomes a surrogate for Woolf as the barriers between novel and reader blur. Woolf utilizes Bernard to reveal the self-consciousness inherent in her characters – he recognizes his function in the novel to encapsulate the voices in a unified way, like Woolf's responsibility to create a meaningful, cohesive text without third-person narration. The anxiety present within the novel is contingent upon the characters' quest for a figure to integrate their stories and experiences while simultaneously grappling with the need for an audience to create meaning: "... to be myself, I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self" (*The Waves* 116). Bernard's responsibility to conclude the novel and adequately describe the lives of the other characters embodies Woolf's project to merge these disparate lives into a united group. Indeed, the incorporation of reader and author into the fabric of the text simulates the experience of reading *The Waves* as Gillian Beer identifies in *The Common Ground*. She suggests that the "form of the waves is acted out in the actual reading experience," as we follow the currents of characters' thoughts and feelings (Beer 89). In her essay, "Character in Fiction," Woolf asserts that the "division between reader and writer... corrupt and emasculate the books which should be the healthy offspring of a close and equal alliance between us," therefore signifying her trust in the reader to draw meaning from the seemingly disconnected chorus of voices in *The Waves* (436). Woolf views her fiction as an equalizer, challenging the boundaries between writers and their readers.

As Bernard encompasses the multitude of voices, he absorbs the physical experiences of the other characters, further solidifying the connections between the mind and the body in Woolf's fiction. Bernard describes his corporeal sensations: "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, the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt" (289). As he recounts the stories of his friends, he is momentarily connected to them through the body, literally *feeling* their physical sensations. Through Bernard's description, Woolf alludes to the experiences of life and death – the kiss Jinny gives Louis signifies the birth of a sexual consciousness, while the rush of wind evokes Rhoda's suicide, signifying her separation from the group. However, Woolf suggests that death does not divide the characters – Bernard *feels* the experience of Rhoda's jump, like how Lily in *To the Lighthouse* feels Mrs. Ramsay put a "wreath of white flowers" on her forehead as she imagines her after her death (*TTLH* 181). Woolf's characters, despite their deaths, remain unified through memory and physical, embodied experience. Through Bernard, Woolf implies that intimacy and unity with others transcends the body: "Rhoda is dead... we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them" (288). Woolf implies that death is not an obstacle and that despite a character's absence in the text, Bernard can still feel what Rhoda felt in a bodily and metaphysical sense. Seemingly in contradiction with Woolf's view of death is Bernard's assertion that "death is the enemy" which Woolf unravels with the last line of the novel: "*The waves broke on the shore*" (297). This last image signifies a unifying conclusion; the waves symbolize collective motion and sound crashing simultaneously. This motif personifies the chorus of six voices reaching a climatic end, together in unison.

Conclusion

Through *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf embraces the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in human character through her depiction of intimacy and unity. Each of Woolf's novels reveal the impediments that hinder emotional and physical

intimacy with others and offer alternate strategies to closeness. Through these three novels, we can track Woolf's changing depiction of eroticism; *Mrs. Dalloway*, through Clarissa and Peter, depicts sexual shame and repression with scarce moments of mental and bodily union, *To the Lighthouse* and especially *The Waves* portray sexuality as transcendent and mystical.

The limitations of language permeate Woolf's texts as characters contend with articulating desire and love for one another and to evade the challenges in communicating their feelings for one another, they experience shared consciousness as their emotions and thoughts meld. This phenomenon infuses Woolf's fiction with an element of mysticism; characters, in their ability to read the minds of others, especially the thoughts of their loved ones, have increased access to each other's subjectivities, allowing for deeper intimacy. Woolf suggests that in characters' yearnings for access into the minds of others, she identifies that this behavior is emblematic of the human desire to intimately connect with others. The importance and challenges of close relationships between characters pervades Woolf's work and emphasizes the anxieties laden in language and expression. The desire for mental and bodily unification with the collective in Woolf's fiction is representative of the potential for spiritual and mystical human experiences that transcend death and the confines of the body. No matter how difficult or fleeting intimate connection is in her novels, Woolf suggests a solution: "let us abolish the ticking of time's clock with one blow. Come closer" (*The Waves* 181).

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