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“DECORATE THE DUNGEON WITH FLOWERS AND AIR-CUSHIONS:” VIRGINIA

WOOLF AND WAR

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

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I will carry a love and appreciation for Virginia Woolf for the rest of my life, and I am extremely grateful to have read her work.

Virginia Woolf's work covers a wide range of topics, from gender and sexuality, consciousness and intimacy, biography, to abstract concepts of time. Woolf is frequently self-referential; one can trace themes and symbols across all her works as they develop through her career. Woolf was deeply interested in topics of war, in how it affects lives and the fabric of society, how people are meant to live during terrifying, devastating, and incomprehensible circumstances. Woolf was born in 1882 and died by suicide in 1941 and she lived through World War I and the beginning of World War II. She was committed in many of her works to show the atrocities of war through multiple perspectives. In "War and Gender," Margot Norris writes, "Arguably the most famous woman writing about World War I may have been Virginia Woolf, although one rarely thinks of her as a war novelist" (Norris 246). While some works focus on war more than others, it is a topic that touches all her work. Woolf uniquely places her works about war at home, not on the battlefield. Only one of the novels takes place during active war time, and the setting remains in the city with a focus on the civilian experience of war, especially how it affects women. Through this focus on the atmosphere of war, how it impacts women, the connections to the patriarchy, and the continuation of life during war, Woolf not only solidifies herself as a war novelist, one that approaches the topic with empathy and shows multiple perspectives.

Mrs. Dalloway: "It was her disaster—her disgrace"

Mrs. Dalloway was published in 1925 and follows a group of characters over the course of a single day in 1923 London. An unidentified narrator shifts the central focus and perspective of the novel from a variety of characters. The novel begins with Clarissa Dalloway gathering supplies and preparing for a party held at the end of the novel. Septimus Smith, a World War I

veteran who has fallen into a deep depression is also a focus of the novel. Woolf creates a dichotomy between Clarissa and Septimus, as Clarissa initially seems on the surface to be handling the post-war moment successfully and focusing on her party, while Septimus is unable to cope with his trauma and depression from the war. As put by Margot Norris in “War and Gender,” a chapter from *War and Literary Studies*, “*Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates how ordinary life in a city, on an ordinary day, can begin to erode, and finally explode, in the imagination of a war veteran” (Norris 255). The characters intersect at the end of the novel after Septimus commits suicide and Clarissa learns of it at her party and allows herself to reflect on her feelings of deep connection with Septimus. It is a novel that is primarily impacted by the lingering effect of war on everyday life and begins Woolf’s use of the domestic sphere to write about the atrocities of war.

The novel opens with Clarissa going to buy flowers for her party and as she walks through her neighborhood, she observes life in London in this post-war moment. She thinks:

For it was the middle of June. The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven—over. It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace. (*MD* 5)

The mention of the war is notable in this passage, but ultimately brief. Clarissa quickly shifts her focus to how the war specifically impacted the people she knows in her domestic world. To Clarissa, the war only exists in how it has affected her daily life, the people she interacts with and how it changed their lives. Clarissa arrives at the flower shop and begins to look around at the selection. Her thoughts of the flowers are interrupted by the sound of car backfiring in the street, initially described as the shot of a pistol. The sound of the car causes a shift in the narration as it moves to Septimus, who is in the street outside the flower shop. Before the shift

fully to Septimus, the narration takes on the role of the surrounding civilians, describing the conversation after the car is suspected to be carrying a celebrity:

Yet rumours were at once in circulation from the middle of Bond Street to Oxford Street on one side, to Atkinson's scent shop on the other, passing invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud, swift, veil-like upon hills, falling indeed with something of a cloud's sudden sobriety and stillness upon faces which a second before had been utterly disorderly. But now mystery had brushed them with her wing; they had heard the voice of authority; the spirit of religion was abroad with her eyes bandaged tight and her lips gaping wide. But nobody knew whose face had been seen. Was it the Prince of Wales's, the Queen's, the Prime Minister's? Whose face was it? Nobody knew. (*MD* 14)

The initial reaction of shock around the sound has worn off at this point, and the civilians are concerned with the status of the person in the car. Like Clarissa's focus on the war as it affects her domestic sphere before turning to the Royals, Woolf is showing the people as for the most part unaffected by what is at first described to be a gun shot. They have "heard the voice of authority," and are under a kind of spell trying to decipher who it could be, so fixated on the possibility of being around someone of influence. This reaction is not entirely unbelievable for the status of the civilians, who after realizing it was not the sound of a pistol are quick to focus instead on the figure in the car. However, when contrasted with the reaction of Septimus, it creates a clear image of his mental state and trauma from the war.

Septimus hears the sound as well and has an entirely different reaction to the shoppers and Clarissa. He is essentially frozen in his place, unable to process what has happened:

Every one looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated. And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose?" (*MD* 14-15)

At the sound of the car, Septimus stops completely in a sort of trance created by the sound, and in response to what he initially believes is a gunshot, triggering his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He thinks that the gathering together of the people on the street is something terrifying, as though it suggests that something horrible is about to happen the “world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames.” By the end of the passage, he is aware of his presence blocking the street, but is still anchored to his place, unable to move. He reverts, in a way, to his role as a soldier, waiting to be told his orders and purpose after hearing what he believes to be the firing of a gun. Compared to Clarissa Dalloway and the rest of the people on the street, Septimus has a completely different reaction to the event, not thinking of the identity of the figure in the car. In a chapter from *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, Roger Poole writes about one of Septimus’s roles as character in the novel, “There is something of Septimus Smith in every one of us—the second part of the name, Smith corresponds to this universality—we have all had some fundamentally unsettling experience which causes us, temporary or permanently to drop out of communication with others. But is of the very nature of unsettling personal experience that others do not want to share it” (Poole 83). Much of Septimus’s depression is shown through his inability to speak to others, especially his wife Lucrezia about what he is feeling. As Poole writes, this lack of communication is a mark of his traumatic past and serves to draw a larger divide between himself and the rest of the characters. What Poole is describing is also crucial to Rose Pargiter, a character in the later novel *The Years*, and is one of the ways Woolf shows trauma response in her work.

Pages later, the characters of the novel are again entranced by another event, in this case an airplane skywriting an advertisement for toffee, as people attempt to decipher its meaning. The narration shifts to Septimus’s wife Lucrezia, as she points out the airplane to Septimus

because the doctor treating Septimus “had told her to make her husband (who had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself” (*MD* 21). Lucrezia’s belief that Septimus has nothing seriously wrong with him and comparing his depression to being “out of sorts” is interesting, especially in the context of his PTSD and how it is seen to be medically treated in the novel. Although Lucrezia may believe there is nothing wrong with him, she appears to be trying to help him, even though the advice she is receiving from the doctor misunderstands and diminishes Septimus’s mental illness. Septimus looks up at the airplane, “So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty” (*MD* 21). As it is present in Woolf’s other novels that involve war, aerial warfare was introduced in World War I, and in theory seeing the airplane would cause Septimus to have a similar reaction to hearing the car backfire, in a moment of PTSD that is leaving him unable to fully process the situation. In contrast, he sees the airplane as a symbol of the beauty of the world, as though it was sent to remind him of it. Like the car, however, he believes the plane again to be a something intended for him, he is waiting to be told his purpose.

In *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*, Paul Saint-Amour explains the multiple schools of thought about the airplane in this scene, some seeing it as of significant for the military context of aerial warfare, and some interpreting it as a sign of the increasing commercialization of the time. Saint Amour writes about how the specifics of the plane are less important compared to what this very uncertainty means:

But the tendency in the novel’s critics to assign the airplane either a military or commercial significance confirms the scene’s power to transmit the characters’ dire uncertainty to its readers, delegating to them the anxious work of assigning a value to a dangerously ambiguous object—the work, that is, of distinguishing between a true and false alarm. Having depicted the skittishness of the interwar urban civilian, *Mrs. Dalloway* also inflicts that skittishness on its readers by placing them among war

survivors in a scene of high-stakes reading: standing on the ground amid the onlookers, the reader struggles alongside them not only to parse the gnomic skywritten message but also to ascertain the intentions of the writing machine. (Saint-Amour 115)

Mrs. Dalloway and Woolf's other war novels, including *The Years* and *Between the Acts* use uncertainty to show a version of the stakes in pre and post wartime, and the time in between World War I and World War II. It cannot be entirely certain what the intention for the plane was, and how it should be correctly interpreted. It is masterfully created for the reader's experience to mirror the response of the civilians after seeing the airplane, like the response after the car backfires. The civilians are concerned with the status of the person in the car, and Septimus is fixed in a state of PTSD with the military implications of hearing a shot, and Saint-Amour is point out that some interpret the plane as a symbol of commercialization, while others see it as a military presence in the novel.

Soon after his observation of the beauty of the plane, Lucrezia takes on the narrative again, describing her own difficulties in being Septimus's wife with his condition:

For she could stand it no longer. Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he were dead! She could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible; sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down; all were terrible. And he would not kill himself; and she could tell no one. 'Septimus has been working too hard'—that was all she could say to her own mother. To love makes one solitary, she thought. She could tell nobody, not even Septimus now, and looking back, she saw him sitting in his shabby overcoat alone, on the seat, hunched up, staring. And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now. She put on her lace collar. She put on her new hat and he never noticed; and he was happy without her. Nothing could make her happy without him! Nothing! He was selfish. So men are. For he was not ill. Dr. Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him. She spread her hand before her. Look! Her wedding ring slipped—she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered—but she had nobody to tell. (*MD* 23)

The image of Lucrezia created in this passage is one of near complete loneliness and solitude, even as she is seen in the novel spending time with Septimus, she is not necessarily physically alone, but mentally. She emphasizes that she does love him, and that is making her more alone,

as she loves Septimus too much to tell anyone around her the truth about his condition, and she knows that without him she would be unhappy. The Septimus she now knows is different than the one she used to know, he is selfish, and she sees him as cowardly as he ideates about suicide. She is completely alone in this suffering; she does not have anyone she can tell that would be sympathetic. It is also possible that Lucrezia feels unable to share her feelings about Septimus to others with the concern that they would dismiss her emotions and thoughts when compared to the devastation that Septimus witnessed in the war. These two struggles are difficult to compare, the atrocities of war experienced by Septimus are understandably more traumatic and have directly led to his feelings of depression and suicidal ideation, but it is clear Lucrezia's feelings cannot be dismissed. She plays an important role in the novel as Woolf can show through her and Clarissa Dalloway how the repercussions of the war affected those that were not on the front, specifically women.

Lucrezia's role in the novel is a crucial aspect in understanding how Woolf is writing the female characters as figures that also suffer from the aftermath of the war, even though they did not have to physically fight on the front. Further, her character is indicative of Woolf as a war author, and her commitment to showing the experience of women in a post-war moment. In a chapter from *War and Literary Studies*, "War and Gender," Margot Norris focuses on Woolf as a war novelist, and specifically how this experience is gendered in comparison to other male writers. Norris looks at *Mrs. Dalloway* and how Lucrezia's character is depicted in her struggles. At the end of the novel, after a visit to Septimus's doctor, Lucrezia begins packing a bag to send Septimus away in her concerns about his desire to commit suicide. Soon after these passages, Septimus jumps from the window and takes his life. Norris writes about Lucrezia in this scene and the novel as a whole, "Rezia's husband is of course no longer at the front – literally, at any

rate – but on that day in the middle of June in 1923, she is the central living person in his life and Septimus’s condition inflicts post-war suffering not only on him, but also on her” (Norris 256).

Norris is noting a crucial aspect of the novel which is placement five years after the end of World War I, and where that placement finds the characters. Septimus is still struggling to comprehend what happened in the war, specifically to his friend Evans who died in front of him. Although he is unable to communicate about his depression, his feelings are not solitary, in the way they affect those around him, especially Lucrezia.

Lucrezia’s inability to speak about her pain mirrors Septimus’s inability to communicate but is rooted in her place in a patriarchal society, rather than her time in war. Masami Usui, in “The Female Victims of the War in *Mrs. Dalloway*” for *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, centers Lucrezia and looks at her pain and grief alongside Septimus’s. Usui writes:

Women’s grief and pain originate from their oppression under the burden of patriarchal values. Under the male-dominated Victorian and Edwardian societies, women could not openly express their anger and agony; a woman’s true emotions were untold and unknown. [...] The women who could do nothing but wait for their sons’, husbands’, and lovers’ return are finally confronted with their deaths, yet have to continue to live with grief and pain. The war, therefore, embodies patriarchy, which oppresses women’s true selves and deprives them of their voice. (Usui 152)

Usui is recognizing Lucrezia’s pain and validating its place in the novel alongside Septimus’s. Although different from his PTSD, the pain of women not only in the novel but in the greater historical context, is also crucial to the novel and the post-war experience therein. It draws a distinct line from the oppression of Victorian and Edwardian societies to one of the reasons why Lucrezia feels unable to speak about her experience. In moments of unfathomable anxiety waiting for the men to come home and grief when they did not survive, these women were unable to speak of this pain, as Usui explains. For Lucrezia living after the war, Woolf

understands that her pain is just as important. Usui cites portions of Woolf's notebooks, where she wrote about Lucrezia's character stating that Woolf wanted Lucrezia, "'to be a real character' (Novak 123). 'Why should she suffer?' 'Why should she be exposed?' (73); it is because she is a woman and an outsider. Septimus could express his agony of the divided self by speaking, crying, and writing what he wanted to" (Usui 57). Lucrezia's character was created by Woolf with the specific intention to make her more than simply Septimus's wife, a character with suffering notable enough that it becomes as important as his. While they may have similar suffering, Septimus is able in some ways to express how he feels, even though he struggles to do so. He can tell a doctor, or if he was able to express to those around them, he would be met with at least some understanding. The doctor he visits does not validate his mental illness in a way indicative of the time but compared to Lucrezia's inability to tell anyone how she feels it is clear her inability to communicate is directly a result of her position in society as a not only a woman, but a woman far from her home country, an "outsider."

The novel concludes with the end of the day, when Clarissa is throwing her party, and it gets interrupted by the news of Septimus's suicide, bringing the two characters together indirectly for the first time in the novel. Clarissa is in the middle of her party when she hears the news about Septimus, and her first reaction is, "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought" (*MD* 183). While simple, this first reaction from Clarissa is indicative of the entire novel, as well as Woolf's later work that incorporates the idea of war and death interrupting the rest of life, in *To the Lighthouse*, *The Years*, and *Between the Acts*. Clarissa is not taking a selfish outlook on hearing of his death necessarily, it is understandable that she would think of her party first, as it represents her duty as a political wife and what she has been preparing and perfecting the entire novel. This reaction serves as her more "public" one,

although it is thought to herself, and she must leave the main party to have her private reflection. She begins to think of Septimus's suicide as she feels it connects to her, and she begins to feel a deep connection with him. She thinks, "Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success" (*MD* 185). Clarissa seems to take on a certain blame for Septimus, calling it "her disaster" and her "punishment," especially as she stands in her dress throwing a party during such grief and death. She feels as though the interruption of his death is her fault, for being what she believes as disrespectful to the state of the world. Although Clarissa's feelings have validity with her character, when connected to the analysis of Lucrezia, her proclivity to throw parties even in a time of suffering cannot be taken as her punishment. As a woman and as a wife, her duties of the time lie in hosting these parties and attempting to bring people together in a time of uncertainty after the war. In Clarissa's last reflection before leaving the room, she thinks:

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. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room. (*MD* 186)

By the end of her thoughts on Septimus, Clarissa is revealing how close she feels to him because it can be interpreted that she has also had suicidal ideation, even if she maybe is not able to conceptualize it for herself, stating she "somehow" feels very like him. She also seems to be able to understand why Septimus's has done this, noting that she does not pity him, perhaps because

she finds it difficult to continue living in the world of suffering and death. Feeling in a way as though she is glad that he has committed suicide, perhaps to show her a new appreciation for her life and those around her, snapping her out of the moment and back to her duty as a hostess.

The connection between Clarissa and Septimus is one of the most compelling portions of the novel, as the characters never physically meet directly, and yet Clarissa seems to feel the most connected to him than any of the other characters she does interact with. Usui writes of their duality, bringing in the criticism of Elaine Showalter in *Female Malady*, who “remarks that both men and women were oppressed under the image of manhood and womanhood respectively in Victorian society, and the Great War was ‘a crisis of masculinity and a trial of the Victorian masculine ideal’ (*Female Malady* 171)” (Usui 151). As stated earlier with Lucrezia, Usui is again bringing in ideas of Victorian society impacting the characters of the novel, and their historical moment. The comparison of the war to masculinity and masculine ideals will also be crucial to Woolf’s later *Three Guineas*, which takes up a similar topic of war through the lens of the tyranny of a patriarchal society.

Usui’s analysis of Lucrezia also focuses on where she is left after her main tie in the novel, Septimus, is gone. After his suicide, “Lucrezia is left alone, childless, and homeless now in a foreign country. She is now confronted with the difficulty of returning to Italy, which was already under Mussolini’s fascist control. Lucrezia’s double inability to express herself as a woman and as an Italian is as strong and profound as Septimus’s shell shock” (Usui 158). From Usui’s perspective, Woolf creates an incredibly bleak character in Lucrezia, one that can be overlooked when focusing solely on Clarissa and Septimus. She has no real home now, feeling as an outsider in London, and unable to return to Italy with the rise of fascism, both topics that are taken up in *Three Guineas*. Usui is careful not to diminish Septimus’s PTSD completely,

merely stating that Lucrezia's pain, as well as other female characters including Clarissa, should be taken as seriously.

In "War and Gender," Norris describes the overall representation of the characters in the novel, directly how Woolf portrays them as individuals that have been affected by the war. Norris writes, "What war produces in all three works is not only physical death and injury in soldiers, but also psychological pain and sadness in both men and in women" (Norris 258). Woolf can depict the specific emotional trauma of women in this post-war period, specifically focusing on that gender divide while also keeping Septimus's struggles as a crucial aspect of the novel. The female characters of the novel are not peripheral to the main suffering of the soldiers on the front, while the women work as nurses or wait at home, with little regard for their pain. She is holding them together in the novel, in a way that allows the novel to show a multitude of experiences. Poole argues that, "There is a case for regarding *Mrs. Dalloway* as the finest 'war novel' that World War I produced. Its empathetic reconstitution of a mind thrown off balance by the experience of sheer horror has not been attempted with such success anywhere else to my knowledge" (Poole 79-80). Poole is making a strong claim, but a strong one for the way Woolf is uniquely able to depict an array of characters with a myriad of different experiences and trauma from the war, and she does so with such empathy and understanding. In this way *Mrs. Dalloway* works as an introduction to Woolf as a war novelist, and how she can create a unique mode of narrative about war.

The Years: "We Shall be Free"

The Years, published in 1937, follows a single family from 1880 to the ambiguous "Present Day," likely the late 1920s. It was initially combined with *Three Guineas* and would

have comprised the novel portion of the novel essay that eventually became the two separate works. The novel is broken into sections that depict the lives of the characters in a specific year, although Woolf does not strictly move through the years chronologically, there are large time gaps between the years. *The Years* is largely different from Woolf's other works, it is her longest novel and has a more conventional family epic structure reminiscent of novels from the Victorian and Edwardian periods. The novel is largely an experiment in realism, Woolf attempts to show how human lives change over years and how families develop over generations, while also living through historical moments. Patricia Cramer, in "Loving in the War Years': The War of Images in *The Years*" from *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth* writes about some of the misconceptions about the novel, "Although early readers misread *The Years* as a failed experiment in realism, in fact Woolf succeeds beautifully in achieving her aim that this novel combine the real and the visionary, the political and the spiritual" (Cramer 203). Cramer is in a sense defending Woolf's experimentation in the novel, explaining that she is successful in her weaving together of her realism experiment with the historical contexts, while including her political ideology seen further in *Three Guineas*. Cramer writes on the connections between the works, noting that in *Three Guineas*, "Woolf recommended women work in secret building outsider societies committed to developing a new culture based on women's values. In *The Years* she works "in secret" by threading matriarchal subplots within the historical narrative" (Cramer 203). World War I has a significant role in the 1917 section of the novel, and although war is not an explicit theme in the majority of the novel, Woolf is still able to incorporate her ideas about war and gender, as she does in *Three Guineas*, and the rest of the novels covered in these sections.

The 1914 section begins in the spring, months before the start of World War I. The upcoming war looms hauntingly over the section, as the reader knows that the war is imminent, but it is unknown to the characters. The section begins the same way as the other sections, with a description of the weather. Notably, Woolf begins the section with a description of the life in London on that spring day, as full of life and almost cartoonish joy among the upper class, “It was a brilliant spring; the day was radiant. Even the air seemed to have a burr in it as it touched the tree tops; it vibrated, it rippled. The leaves were sharp and green. In the country old church clocks rasped out the hour; the rusty sound went over fields that were red with clover, and up went the rooks as if flung by the bells. Round they wheeled; then settled on the tree tops” (*The Years* 224). As is true throughout the novel, the weather description is important to understanding the feelings and tone Woolf wants to convey over the course of the section, in utilization of the pathetic fallacy. For this section, this spring day creates an image of universal happiness and prosperity across the city, specifically in the upper classes. There is especially an economic prosperity in place, as the moment is described as, “Everybody seemed light-hearted and irresponsible, sallying out of their houses, flaunting along the streets with pennies for the organ-grinders and pennies for the beggars. Everybody seemed to have money to spend” (*The Years* 225). While these lines chronicle a moment of success, Woolf strategically includes that though some are economically thriving, there are still beggars, this success is not as universal as it may seem on the surface, not everyone is benefitting from this moment of prosperity. The seemingly idyllic scene of the spring day in London is creatively broken by Woolf with a description of the clocks in the city, “The great clock, all the clocks of the city, seemed to be gathering their forces together; they seemed to be whirring a preliminary warning. Then the stroke struck. ‘One’ blared out. All the sparrows fluttered up into the air; even the pigeons were

frightened; some of them made a little flight round the head of Queen Anne (*The Years* 227). Clocks representing something foreboding has been seen across Woolf's fiction, most notably through Big Ben's tolls in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In this scene, it can be read as an early sign in this section that it is taking place so close to the breakout of World War I, that even if the state of the city seems perfect, there is something looming in the warning of the chimes. The reader knows 1914 is a significant year because it is associated with the start of the war, but to the characters it is just another year, they have no understanding of what is to come. The reader can relate to the more general feelings of the characters in the section, but they will always have the knowledge of the upcoming war in mind and there is a disconnect between the reader and the characters in a way that breaks the realism slightly.

After the end of the 1914 section, there is a gap of three years before the next one begins in 1917. It shows the lives of the characters during active war time, something thus far that is uncharacteristic for Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway* depicts life five years after World War I, *To the Lighthouse* shows time before and after the war, and *Between the Acts* takes place before World War II. This section shows life during war time, although it still takes place in London, rather than on the battlefield, in keeping with Woolf's focus on the effects of war at home. The section mainly focuses on Eleanor Pargiter visiting her cousin Maggie and her Irish husband Renny, and her sister Sara joins later. Nicholas, Maggie and Renny's friend who is openly gay, is also at the dinner. The first explicit mention of the war in this section occurs three pages in, when Eleanor says to everyone shortly after arriving:

“Coming along in the omnibus tonight,” she began, “I was thinking about this war—I don't feel this, but other people do...” She stopped. He looked puzzled; probably she had misunderstood what he had said; she had not made her own meaning plain. “I mean,” she began again, “I was thinking as I came along in the bus—”
But here Renny came in. (*The Years* 282)

This mention of the war is notably brief, and it is hard to tell from Eleanor's dialogue as well as the dialogue surrounding it what she was going to say about the war as though it is not important enough to remember. The brief mention is interrupted by Renny's entrance, subtly establishing a common theme of interruption in this section, as well as Woolf's other works when describing how war interrupts. While the group eats, they begin to hear a distant siren indicating an air raid. They move their plates to a cellar in the house to wait out the raid, doing so with little to no indication of fear or stress, Nicholas asks Eleanor:

“D'you mind air raids?” Nicholas asked, looking at her with his inquisitive expression. “People differ so much.”
 “Not at all,” she said. She would have crumbled a piece of bread to show him that she was at her ease; but as she was not afraid, the action seemed to her unnecessary.
 “The chances of being hit oneself are so small,” she said. “What were we saying?” she added. (*The Years* 289)

Nicholas asks Eleanor about the raids as though they are something just to “mind,” as though he was asking her whether she minds something banal like a household chore, rather than the war happening over their heads. It is understandable why she would feel this way, as she is able to feel safe in the cellar away from the bombs, and in her words the chances of getting hit herself are small. The characters having lived in the war for a few years may also have grown accustomed to the raids, and they no longer carry the frightening aspect they maybe once did.

The portion in the cellar is brief compared to the rest of the chapter, feeling as though it is simply a short inconvenient interruption from the rest of the dinner. In the cellar, after the group has attempted to make small talk about the children, everything goes quiet, “There was profound silence. Nothing happened. [...] The Germans must be overhead now. [Eleanor] felt a curious heaviness on top of her head. One, two, three, four, she counted, looking up at the greenish-grey stone. Then there was a violent crack of sound, like the split of lightning in the sky. The spider's web oscillated” (*The Years* 290-291). Although the group is continuing their dinner and working

to keep some aspect of their daily normal life alive, there is still something palpable causing them to be silent, they cannot completely forget their circumstances. The sentence “Nothing happened” is especially notable because outside the room, there is a war happening overhead, but within the safety of the house and the cellar it feels as though nothing is happening because nothing is happening to them. They understand what is happening, they are not choosing to completely ignore everything. In a way, they are accepting that there is little they can individually do to stop the raid and stop the war, so the most they can do is try and maintain some normalcy.

When the raid is over, the group exits the cellar and tries to continue the evening as it was before the interruption, while they are focused on ideas of what the world will be like after the war. They raise a toast to the “New World” without giving any initial context to what this could mean, assumedly they are referring to how the world will change after the war is over. Eleanor reflects to herself in the aftermath of the raid:

Everything seemed to become quiet and natural again. A feeling of great calm possessed her. It was as if another space of time had been issued to her, but, robbed by the presence of death of something personal, she felt—she hesitated for a word; “immune?” Was that what she meant? Immune, she said, looking at a picture without seeing it. Immune, she repeated. It was a picture of a hill and a village perhaps in the South of France; perhaps in Italy. There were olive trees; and white roofs grouped against a hillside. Immune, she repeated, looking at the picture. (*The Years* 293-294)

Eleanor and the rest of the group were able to get through the raid completely unharmed, almost entirely out of danger. Even in active war time, Eleanor feels calm, as though she has been given the chance and the privilege to be in a place to survive the raids. She is not literally immune, if she were on the frontlines or outside during the raid, she would be in danger, it is not as though the war is a global disease that affects everyone except her. Her feelings of immunity are likely due to her ability to hide from the raids and because as a woman, she did not have to go to the

front lines. Eleanor's feelings are notable to this portion of the novel, as well as Woolf's other war novels for the way she is showing a group of people that are not in direct danger of the bombs, speaking more generally to how she portrays the continuation of daily life during periods of great tumult. It is important to note, as seen further in *Three Guineas*, that although Eleanor feels this immunity from the war because of her situation, there are aspects of the patriarchal society she lives in that she is crucially not immune to, it is not as though she is entirely privileged in her ability to stay home. In *Tense Future*, Paul Saint-Amour writes of Eleanor's feelings of immunity, "The immunity that matters here [...] can only arise in the presence of death, against the threat of thought's extinction. To think at all is to think in a raid" (Saint-Amour 125). This observation is crucial in explaining Woolf's war novels, how the war can never truly be removed from daily life or daily thoughts, it will always be ingrained in everything.

After the raid is over and dinner has finished, the group sits together and attempts to sum up what has happened, Nicholas says, "I have spent the evening sitting in a coal cellar while other people try to kill each other above my head," he said suddenly. Then he stretched out and took up a paper" (*The Years* 295). Nicholas's summation of the evening in his first line creates a sort of distance between himself and the events of the war, and it also makes the entire concept of the war seem almost childish and fruitless, by reducing it to simply "other people try to kill each other." He thinks of himself as an "other," an outsider to those participating in the war, as though it has nothing to do with him. As a civilian, there is some truth to his sentiments, there is likely little he could do to prevent the war from occurring, so he feels as though he is not involved in it. Cramer in "Loving in the War Years" observes Woolf's choice of characters to bring together during this raid and their status as outsiders:

[...] Woolf strengthens her outsiders' resistance to male violence by gathering together the characters who have most fully developed matriarchal values. The outsiders are

Eleanor, Sara, Renny, Maggie, and Nicholas. Woolf momentarily unites her outsiders during a bombing raid to create a liminal moment when the barriers to speech and matriarchal consciousness momentarily dissolve. Once again, Woolf uses contrast to augment the passion for another way to live. [...] This chapter reiterates the pattern of expulsion of evil and impulsion of good by juxtaposing the horror of war with the outsider's collective vision of a new world" (Cramer 213-214)

Cramer's observation is integral to understanding the 1917 chapter, especially as it relates to Woolf's arguments about the patriarchy and war in *Three Guineas*. By bringing together three women, a foreigner, and a gay man, Woolf is showing a group that would likely feel the most external and estranged from the country, in a time where national identity is of great importance. They are also notable as characters that envision and celebrate the creation of a world better than the one before the war, because they have the most change to hope for.

Eleanor then asks Nicholas about the "New World" that they toasted to earlier, and whether he thinks they will improve. He says yes, and when Eleanor asks how he replies:

"It is only a question," he said—he stopped. He drew himself close to her—"of learning. The soul..." Again he stopped.

"Yes—the soul?" she prompted him.

"The soul—the whole being," he explained. He hollowed his hands as if to enclose a circle. "It wishes to expand; to adventure; to form—new combinations?"

"Yes, yes," she said, as if to assure him that his words were right.

"Whereas now,"—he drew himself together; put his feet together; he looked like an old lady who is afraid of mice—"this is how we live, screwed up into one hard little, tight little—knot?"

"Knot, knot—yes, that's right," she nodded.

"Each is his own little cubicle; each with his own cross or holy book; each with his fire, his wife..."

"Darning socks," Maggie interrupted.

Eleanor started. She had seemed to be looking into the future. But they had been overheard. Their privacy was ended. (*The Years* 296)

When the "New World" is first referenced in the toast after the raid, it is unclear exactly what is being described. It can be interpreted that they are referencing what the world will be like in the post-war period, and they are celebrating the potential changes it may bring. Nicholas speaks of an expansion that he believes will occur after the end of the war, in contrast with how he believes

the soul is now. He describes what can be interpreted as an individualist mindset, with everyone concerned with their own “cubicle,” even though the soul desires to expand. He seems to be describing that the New World is a more accepting one, one that is less paranoid and welcoming, although it is not immediately clear what about the end of the war will suggest this change.

Perhaps he believes that after a grand and devastating historical event there will be an evaluation of the world, and change will come from an understanding that the previous way was flawed.

Maggie interrupts their conversation, but Eleanor continues thinking:

Eleanor wished that he would go on talking—the man she called Nicholas. When, she wanted to ask him, when will this new world come? When shall we be free? When shall we live adventurously, wholly, not like cripples in a cave? He seemed to have released something in her; she felt not only a new space of time, but new powers, something unknown within her. She watched his cigarette moving up and down. Then Maggie took the poker and struck the wood and again a shower of red-eyed sparks went volleying up the chimney. We shall be free, we shall be free, Eleanor thought. (*The Years* 296)

Eleanor cannot let go of what Nicholas was describing, she is given a newfound interest and stake in becoming free. She may still feel immune as she did earlier in the section, but now she seems to have had something change in her from Nicholas’s words, that she now feels somehow invested in the world, more than she was before. What seems to have awakened in her is a new feeling of hope, hope that the state of things will get better and that souls are inclined to make this change, to expand and make them free. She repeats it to herself like a mantra, something to hold on to, something to believe in.

Three Guineas: “The egg of the very same worm”

Three Guineas was published in 1938, Woolf’s final book published before her death.

The essay portion of what would have been the novel essay with *The Years*, *Three Guineas* conceptualizes a man writing to Woolf, or an unknown female narrator, asking her to answer the

question of how to prevent war. Woolf takes on this question after leaving the letter unanswered for three years and attempts to answer it while making digressions to write about education, fascism, and culture and how those all are connected to ideas of gender. *Three Guineas* is an especially dense work that lacks the succinct nature of her previous novel length essay, *A Room of One's Own*. While *Three Guineas* is an essay and not one of Woolf's works of fiction, it is crucial in understanding how she writes about war, as the arguments made in the essay are seen across her work. In the introduction of *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, Mark Hussey writes that all of Woolf's work is concerned with war, "from her earliest to her final work she sought to explore and make clear the connections between private and public violence, between the domestic and the civic effects of patriarchal society, between male supremacy and the absence of peace, and between ethics and aesthetics" (Hussey 3). These connections are made even before Woolf wrote *Three Guineas*, back to the gender divides seen in *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf was uniquely interested in war and specifically how it is inextricably linked to patriarchal societies. The novel is a synthesis of Woolf's works, it takes up ideas and themes that have been introduced and explored throughout her works, all coming together to express her beliefs about the root of war and the effect it has on society.

The first section sets up Woolf's arguments throughout the essay, by expressing her initial thoughts in response to receiving the letter and beginning to bring together her thoughts on the root causes of war. Early on in the essay, she establishes a gender divide inherent in this topic, making it clear that it cannot be overlooked when thinking about war, "[...]to fight has always been the man's habit, not the woman's. Law and practice have developed that difference, whether innate or accidental. Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman's rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not by us; and it is

difficult to judge what we do not share” (*TG* 6). This gender divide when discussing war has been seen throughout Woolf’s works, as it is embedded in the fabric of the novels that Woolf is writing from the perspective of a woman that is greatly affected by the war, even though she was not fighting on the front. She establishes that the question of how to prevent war is in a multitude of ways an impossible one to answer, one of which because she cannot understand the “habit” in the man to fight because she does not share it. She continues, explaining that there is no “active” method open to women, they are unable to go fight in the name of peace:

[...] that method is not open to us; both the Army and the Navy are closed to our sex. We are not allowed to fight. Nor again are we allowed to be members of the Stock Exchange. Thus we can use neither the pressure of force nor the pressure of money. The less direct but still effective weapons which our brothers, as educated men, possess in the diplomatic service, in the Church, are also denied to us [...] Thus all the weapons with which an educated man can enforce his opinion are either beyond our grasp or so nearly beyond it that even if we used them we could scarcely inflict one scratch.” (*TG* 12)

This passage establishes much of Woolf’s arguments for the rest of the essay, explaining that to ask a woman how to prevent war dismisses and does not consider a large aspect of this question, which is that women are unable to take what would feel direct and impactful to stop war. Even the less “active” roles, as in using money to influence politics or use the pressure of wealth is not open to them. Woolf is uniquely interested in the concept of influence throughout *Three Guineas*, as she argues that it is one of the strongest weapons that daughters of educated men possess, as in their influence over men. However, she points out that influence would have to “be combined with wealth in order to be effective as a political weapon, and that influence of the kind can be exerted by the daughters of educated men is very low in power, very slow in action, and very painful in use” (*TG* 14). Even the method that Woolf identifies as the strongest that women possess is only effective with a level of wealth, and even then, it is less powerful. All the

ways that men in the past have tried to prevent war are not available, women must create their own methods to attempt to prevent war, as Woolf outlines for the rest of the book.

Woolf then begins to speak at length about how women's education or lack thereof is directly tied to the question of preventing war, a topic that is brought up throughout the rest of the sections. She brings up the idea of using education to prevent war, but ultimately challenges it by comparing what students learn in university to the mindset that leads people in power to start wars. She specifically states how university education open to the daughter of an educated man is not immune from this, explaining again how university education cannot be successful in helping to stop war, "In the first place, what reason is there to think that a university education makes the educated against war? Again, if we help an educated man's daughter to go to Cambridge are we not forcing her to think not about education but about war?—not how she can learn, but how she can fight in order that she may win the same advantages as her brothers?" (*TG* 31). Woolf interestingly takes a slight turn from her earlier points about war and fighting being something inherent in men, and something that she does not share as a woman. If this daughter of an educated man were to go to Cambridge, according to Woolf she would only be led to fight in the face of realizing her inequality when compared to her brothers. Woolf does not necessarily endorse her fighting—she is still making the point that the current state of education leads to war—but she is making the distinction that the women would be fighting to expand their rights to be equal to their brothers.

After the section on education, Woolf takes a turn to looking at the rise of fascism in the world and compares it to the oppression women have faced for years in a patriarchal society, essentially arguing that what wars are started to end has already been a battle fought by women. At the beginning of the second section, Woolf fictionalizes another letter, in this case a woman is

writing to the man receiving Woolf's letter asking for money for a society of daughters of educated men attempting to gain "employment in the professions" (*TG* 41). What follows is a hypothetical response the man could send to the woman, still narrated by Woolf. In the "response" Woolf as the man brings up a quote from the author H.G. Wells (that was also mentioned in her "Character and Fiction" essay) in which he states, "There has been no perceptible woman's movement to resist the practical obliteration of their freedom by Fascists or Nazis." The response continues an analysis of this quote, and how it relates to whether the woman will be granted the money she is seeking:

For as these gentlemen prove in spite of the vote and the wealth which that vote must have brought with it, you have not ended war; in spite of the vote and the power which that vote must have brought with it, you have not resisted the practical obliteration of your freedom by Fascists or Nazis. What other conclusion then can one come to but that the whole of what was called 'the woman's movement' has proved itself a failure; and the guinea which I am sending you here with is to be devoted not to paying your rent but to burning your building. And when that is burnt, retire once more to the kitchen, Madam, and learn, if you can, to cook the dinner which you may not share . . .'" (*TG* 43-44)

The man in the response seems to be claiming that the woman should not be granted the money she seeks because women's movements have done nothing to prevent war, and thus it is a failure. He will send her money, but only if she uses it to abandon the cause altogether and no longer seek to gain professions. Because this portion of this section is multi-layered, with Woolf narrating what she believes the man should respond with, it can be incredibly complex to determine Woolf's true feelings on the topic. Based on her known views on war and how she writes about war and gender throughout all her work, it can be assumed that she is taking an ironic, almost satirical look at the quote from H.G. Wells, and the "man's" thoughts in response. She is pointing out the ignorance and almost foolish nature of Wells's argument to place some of the blame for war not being prevented on women. By really leaning into the argument Wells is making, Woolf can show it clearer as a hypocritical argument. It could easily be argued that men

have had the vote longer than women, and thus have the wealth that comes with it and have not ended war, or “resisted the practical obligation of your freedom by Fascists and Nazis.” Woolf’s stance on this can also be seen in her earlier lines about women being unable to use the weapons of men to defeat war, an argument that can easily be used to diffuse the one made by the fictionalized man. Even if women tried to use their vote and if they were able to gain money, they would still have little power to make any real change, unlike men’s privilege in the patriarchal society.

Woolf continues her arguments regarding patriarchal society by comparing it to the fascism the country is fighting against. She writes about what the press has to say about the word “Miss” in the context of Whitehall, a term used to describe British government. She says of these quotes that there is:

“[...] the egg of the very same worm that we know under other names in other countries. There we have in embryo the creature, Dictator as we call him when he is Italian or German, who believes that he has the right whether given by God, Nature, sex or race is immaterial, to dictate to other human beings how they shall live; what they shall do [...] Are they not both the voices of Dictators, whether they speak English or German, and are we not all agreed that the dictator when we meet him abroad is a very dangerous as well as a very ugly animal? And he is here among us, raising his ugly head, spitting his poison, small still, curled up like a caterpillar on a leaf, but in the heart of England. Is it not from this egg, to quote Mr. Wells again, that 'the practical obliteration of [our] freedom by Fascists or Nazis' will spring? And is not the woman who has to breathe that poison and to fight that insect, secretly and without arms, in her office, fighting the Fascist or the Nazi as surely as those who fight him with arms in the limelight of publicity? And must not that fight wear down her strength and exhaust her spirit? Should we not help her to crush him in our own country before we ask her to help us to crush him abroad? And what right have we, Sir, to trumpet our ideals of freedom and justice to other countries when we can shake out from our most respectable newspapers any day of the week eggs like these? (TG 53; emphasis added)

In this passage, Woolf touches on one of the most profound claims of the essay. She states that there is the same root in England than in the countries it opposes, or “the egg of the very same worm.” Although the men in the patriarchal society may not see it in the same way the women

do, it is likely because they are benefitting from the system that is holding them up and allowing them to have power. Power, as Woolf argues earlier, that they will only use to keep leading to wars, not to prevent them. She argues that the language that keeps women and other people in their specific place is the same language that a dictator would use in a fascist state, and thus language that would cause other societies to go to war with them in the name of making them more like their home country. Woolf continues this idea later, when she describes how the roots of fascism that are seen in the “egg of the same worm” has now widened its scope to threaten liberties more broadly, and now it is seen as a threat, suggesting that the scope is smaller in England, which has caused it to not grow into a more prevalent threat in the eyes of society. Further, women have been fighting this same problem, and as a result are exhausted and unwilling to keep fighting, while her problems at home are ignored in favor of going to war with countries abroad. Wars that lead to devastating loss and grief and further solidify the social order.

This continues later in the essay, when Woolf again brings up the tyranny at home in relation to the tyranny abroad, and how women for decades have been fighting similar structures to fascism:

They were fighting the same enemy that you are fighting and for the same reasons. They were fighting the tyranny of the patriarchal state as you are fighting the tyranny of the Fascist state. Thus we are merely carrying on the same fight that our mothers and grandmothers fought; their words prove it; your words prove it. But now with your letter before us we have your assurance that you are fighting with us, not against us. That fact is so inspiring that another celebration seems called for. What could be more fitting than to write more dead words, more corrupt words, upon more sheets of paper and burn them—the words, Tyrant, Dictator, for example? But, alas, those words are not yet obsolete. We can still shake out eggs from newspapers; still smell a peculiar and unmistakable odour in the region of Whitehall and Westminster. (*TG* 102)

Woolf directly parallels the fascist state and the oppression of a patriarchal one. This is nothing new, it has been the fight of women going back generations. Finally, there is some reassurance

from men that they seem to be fighting the same enemy in their desire to prevent war. But, as Woolf lightly satirizes in this passage, it is clear from the rest of the essay that it is near impossible for men to fight alongside women, to fully understand the full extent of the problem. Further, the repeating of the same words from the patriarchy would lead to nothing, and more fighting will not lead to the removal of words like Tyrant and Dictator, because their impacts are so deeply embedded. Again, Woolf brings in the image of the eggs, in this case the eggs are letting off a smell that is coming from the British government, suggesting that the roots of tyranny are not only present in the patriarchal society, but they have been in place for so long they have started to rot, and they will be there even after the war is over.

The ideas presented about tyranny at home are continued as Woolf brings in another connected concept about the difference between the brother and sister as seen through the patriarchal society, and the division between private and public societies. She first explains how society establishes the role women are expected to fill explaining society as a bell tolling a sound of “shall not, shall not, shall not. You shall not learn; you shall not earn; you shall not own; you shall not—such was the society relationship of brother to sister for many centuries. And though it is possible, and to the optimistic credible, that in time a new society may ring a carillon of splendid harmony, and your letter heralds it, that day is far distant” (*TG* 105). This repeated “shall not, shall not” looms over the lives of all women living under this patriarchal society, as well as through her own brother, even if he is not fully aware that he is actively prohibiting her, or if he does not intend to. Woolf continues:

Inevitably we look upon societies as conspiracies that sink the private brother, whom many of us have reason to respect, and inflate in his stead a monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned, rigidly, separately, artificially; where, daubed red and gold, decorated like a savage with feathers he goes through mystic rites and enjoys the dubious pleasures of power and dominion while we,

'his' women, are locked in the private house without share in the many societies of which his society is composed.” (TG 105)

By calling the brother specifically “private,” Woolf is creating a dichotomy between the private and public spheres, a topic also seen in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In this case, it specifically describes the change that men undergo when they change from the private to the public self. When his ego is inflated, he becomes a monstrous figure that holds both power and a childlike quality, as he goes around the world and marks out what he wants, fighting to get it. It is used by Woolf as a metaphor for war, as men leave the private sphere and become products of the patriarchal society that keeps their sisters locked away, never able to leave the private home. Woolf’s description here is also reminiscent of her earlier points about the egg, as she argues that the root of the monster is always within the men as they live in a patriarchal society, and it is brought to the surface when the private life ends. The private sphere is where the monster is first created, even on the smaller scale relative to a global war, everything starts with the unequal distribution of power in the home, that is ultimately a main cause of war. As is evident throughout *Three Guineas*, as well as Woolf’s other war novels, this outlook on war is inherently gendered. It is a perspective that the man—though fictional—writing to Woolf could have arguably never considered, and not one that he would not fully accept above other causes.

Before the end of the essay, Woolf writes about the place of a woman in her country and explains her relationship to those fighting. She describes how she feels as a woman in response to war, and whether she feels it personally benefits her and other women like her, “Therefore if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or ‘our’ country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share; but not to gratify my instincts, or to protect either myself or my country” (TG 108-109). As a woman, Woolf feels that

she has no real stake in the war, because she will not be able to benefit from anything that is gained from the war because of her place in the patriarchal society. She feels no sense of belonging or real participation in the war because of this lack of connection to the country that of which she does not consider herself a valued part. She will still live in the tyranny and oppression that has long existed, and she will continue to fight even after the end of the war. It is because of this that she reduces the war to simply a man gratifying a “sex instinct,” because she does not believe that the war is being fought for the benefit for the entire country, it is mainly a part inherent in masculinity and a byproduct of the patriarchy. Woolf creates the idea of the “outsider,” a woman that feels external to her country:

[...] the outsider will say, 'in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.' And if, when reason has said its say, still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England dropped into a child's ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational, emotion she will make serve her to give to England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world. (*TG* 109)

Woolf is encouraging the group of daughters of educated men to come together to form the “Outsiders Society.” She explains before this passage that women are inherently outsiders to their country, because it oppresses them and uplifts a tyrannical system. The second part of the passage that describes a romanticized England shows that Woolf doesn't completely feel as though she can just give up this ideal of England, even if she casts off the country and becomes a woman of the world, she will have that image remaining. It is reminiscent of Septimus's reasons for wanting to go to war, to fight for the romantic idea he had of England that was the country of Shakespeare and a teacher he was in love with. It is clear from the entirety of *Three Guineas* that Woolf would argue that this type of England never existed, especially not for women.

Between the Acts: "An Atmosphere of Terror"

Between the Acts was published in 1941 and is Woolf's final novel. The completed manuscript was published after her death the same year. It is set over the course of a single day in June 1939, months before the start of World War II. Woolf wrote the second draft of the novel in 1940 and began writing the first draft in 1938. Roger Poole in "We all put up with you Virginia': Irreceivable Wisdom about War," writes, "[...] it is clear from reading the Diary for the summer of 1938 that war, the declaration of war, was expected from moment to moment. It was, then, in the actual expectation of the beginning of war that *Between the Acts* was written" (Poole 95). The circumstances in which the novel was written feels embedded into the very fabric of the novel, as it is broadly a novel about the atmosphere present in the anticipation of war. It asks a crucial question inherent across all these works, about how people are meant to live before, during, or after times of war, and how they do the only thing it seems they can do, which is continuing to live. It is also largely a novel about anxiety and uncertainty, something Woolf was specifically familiar with this during the period, as her husband Leonard was Jewish, and they were prominent intellectuals and outspoken activists. Their fear reached a point where they made a suicide pact in the case Nazis invaded England. Woolf's fear is woven into the novel, as it also focuses on the anxiety that comes with the anticipation.

In Woolf's 1936's essay "Why Art To-Day Follows Politics" she explains the reasons why she believes it is essential for art to be embedded in the world of politics, as well as the importance of keeping art in times of turmoil. She writes of why it is natural for writers to include politics and the external world in their work, "...the novelist turns from the private lives of his characters to their social surroundings and their political opinions. Obviously, the writer is in such close touch with human life that any agitation in it must change his angle of vision,"

(Woolf 75). Woolf's thoughts on the inclusion of politics in art, specifically in fiction is crucial to understanding how she sets out to write *Between the Acts*, and her attention to the details within in it when depicting a small town on the brink of the war, and the attention or lack thereof they pay to that fact. The balance between their private lives and the social surroundings, as Woolf puts it, is integral to the novel, as the characters attempt to put on the pageant and are interrupted.

The novel is set in the English countryside where a group of characters are attempting to put on an annual pageant, with the rest of the characters in the audience. The pageant is following an abstracted version of British history, from a Shakespeare inspired scene, through Restoration and Victorian England, concluding with an act that flips the mirror on the audience, called "Ourselves." As the title suggests, the large portion of the plot of the novel occurs before and after the pageant, or "between the acts." The pageant is frequently interrupted throughout the novel, both in the literal sense from disturbances from the audience, and symbolically. The novel's setting in the countryside cements the themes of Woolf's other novels that concern war of before and after war time occurring in the everyday, mundane lives of the characters. War is a force of interruption in *Between the Acts*, in more subtle and overt ways that build up to its appearance at the end of the novel. In this final novel, Woolf solidifies her status as a war author, despite her novels taking place away from the battlefield. *Between the Acts* uniquely takes on this theme, with the nature of World War II making it nearly impossible for the townspeople to escape the war.

The novel begins right in the pastoral setting, as some of the townspeople discuss a new cesspool. They are mainly complaining about where the cesspool will be located, and Mr. Oliver, says, "the site they had chosen for the cesspool was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman road.

From an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars” (*BTA* 4). Mr. Oliver’s primary concern about the cesspool is that it will be placed on what he believes to be a historic road, something that was there longer than any of them, and there is a dismissal of the history in favor of prioritizing the present. This discussion of the sewage is important to the novel’s theme of impermanence.

The theme of impermanence also comes up with mentions of the view of the nature in the town, as the characters remark on its beauty throughout the novel in between the pageant. It serves as one of the various interruptions in the novel, as the view seemingly takes their attention away from the stage. It raises the question of whether there is any material point to the pageant and anything the characters take part in, if it will just become history, overshadowed by the war. Lucy Swithin notices the view and remarks, “‘That’s what makes a view so sad,’ said Mrs. Swithin, lowering herself into the deck chair which Giles had brought her. ‘And so beautiful. It’ll be there,’ she nodded at the strip of gauze laid upon the distant field, ‘when we’re not’” (*BTA* 53). In addition to reflecting on the beauty of the view, Lucy is prompted to reflect on the impermanence of everything around her, the people of the town, the pageant, even her own personhood, suggested by her use of “we.” Earlier in the novel, she is describing her favorite reading, “The Outline of History” that causes her to think about prehistoric life during her every day, and her observation of the view is in her mind against the backdrop of this early history. This is especially pertinent to the pageant that has yet to take place in the novel chronicling British history. It further suggests that the characters are living through a historical moment with the looming war and at least Lucy seems to be aware of their lack of permanence against features like nature. The characters and everyday life of the town will not be remembered in the same

way as the war. Directly after Lucy's musing, her nephew Giles begins his own reflections on the view:

Thus only could he show his irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe—over there—was bristling like....He had no command of metaphor. Only the ineffective word "hedgehog" illustrated his vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes. At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly" (*BTA* 53).

Initially, Giles' thoughts on the view directly contrast Lucy's, believing any time spent thinking of view to be a waste of time and he is angry that anyone would take the time to think of it in a time where the war could threaten their lives at any moment. He also reflects on the impermanence of his surroundings in a similar yet different way from Lucy. Where Lucy thinks of her own impermanence in the face of nature, Giles believes it all to be transient in the face of the cruelty and destruction of war.

He, too, loved the view. And blamed Aunt Lucy, looking at views, instead of—doing what? What she had done was to marry a squire now dead; she had borne two children, one in Canada, the other, married, in Birmingham. His father, whom he loved, he exempted from censure; as for himself, one thing followed another; and so he sat, with old fogies, looking at views" (*BTA* 53-54).

Despite his initial disagreement and frustration upon seeing Lucy observe the view, Giles ends up admitting his own adoration for the beauty of nature in the view. However, he still finds a way to blame Lucy, although he is not entirely sure why, perhaps because she has spent her life taking the time to admire views instead of doing anything that he deems to be notable for the world, she has only been married and had children. This observation is inherently gendered, as he states that his father and himself are safe from this judgment, but Lucy is unable to take time to admire the beauty of the view. He sees little point in looking at a view or, perhaps, putting on a pageant during wartime, he sees them as distractions. He is anticipating that something could happen soon, and spending time to look at views is only biding time.

Giles' feelings toward the view as a distraction is clear and valid when understanding his anxiety about the possibility of another war. However, claiming all instances of natural beauty in the view or community in the pageant are simply distractions would ignore how it may be a source of comfort for the other townspeople by allowing them to have a moment away from solely thinking of what could happen in the future. Woolf writes again in "Why Art To-Day Follows Politics," "Art is the first luxury to be discarded in times of stress; the artist is the first of the workers to suffer. But intellectually also he depends upon society. Society is not only his paymaster but his patron. If the patron becomes too busy or too distracted to exercise his critical faculty the artist will work in a vacuum and his art will suffer and perhaps perish from lack of understanding" (Woolf 76). In Giles's character, Woolf is representing one of many pre-war experiences, as Giles is feeling as though any attempt to cope in daily life is a distraction largely due to his anxiety. But, as Woolf writes, art cannot be just dismissed in these times, it is crucial to continue to support artists and allow yourself to indulge in the "luxury" to not risk losing the art altogether.

Nancy Topping Bazin and Jane Hamovit Lauter write in "Virginia Woolf's Keen Sensitivity to War: Its Roots and Its Impact on Her Novels," "In *Between the Acts*, however, Woolf focuses on the threat war poses to civilization and, in particular, to art. Art is what captures the essence of the individual, the culture, or both, and giving it form renders it 'eternal.' Through writing books that would be preserved in libraries or creating art objects that would be placed in museums, the artist, too, gains a kind of immortality" (Topping Bazin and Lauter 33). Topping Bazin and Lauter further what Woolf describes in her essay, while connecting it to the themes of impermanence present in the novel. While Lucy, Giles, and Mr. Oliver concern

themselves with what will be there when they are not, the novel seems to be showing that art will ultimately outlast as what was used to cope with the devastation in these great times of stress.

Prior to the beginning of the pageant, a group of characters sit outside, and the view comes back into the foreground. The early audience is sitting together, “They stared at the view, as if something might happen in one of those fields to relieve them of the intolerable burden of sitting silent, doing nothing, in company. Their minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough” (*BTA* 65). Again, the view is used as a representation of a distraction, in this case one that is failing to provide a respite from the seemingly tortuous experience of sitting outside before the play begins. In contrast to the two earlier instances of individual characters observing the view, Woolf describes all the characters looking at the view, and all desiring the same relief from it. Although these passages represent the view as a beautiful distraction from the uncomfortable nature of sitting in a group, or from thinking of the early war, it is still indicative of the novel’s larger themes of an attempt to cope with history and war, even if it feels futile.

As the play begins, the threat of the war starts to intervene, both literally and symbolically with the interruptions throughout the pageant, specifically the noise of a machine that builds throughout the rest of the novel. Right as the play begins, the audience hears, “Chuff, chuff, chuff sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong. Some sat down hastily, others stopped talking guiltily. All looked at the bushes. For the stage was empty. Chuff, chuff, chuff the machine buzzed in the bushes” (*BTA* 77). This early sound is enough to draw the attention of some members of the audience, but it is quickly overshadowed by the beginning of the play. Although it is over quickly, it is nonetheless an interruption to the beginning of the play and is foreshadowing the suggestion of war as an

interruption later in the novel. The play begins, and in a moment after one of the acts, William observes the beauty of his surroundings when he is interrupted by the ticking of the machine.

The children; the pilgrims; behind the pilgrims the trees, and behind them the fields—the beauty of the visible world took his breath away. Tick, tick, tick the machine continued.

“Marking time,” said old Oliver beneath his breath.

“Which don't exist for us,” Lucy murmured. “We've only the present.”

“Isn't that enough?” William asked himself. Beauty—isn't that enough? But here Isa fidgeted. Her bare brown arms went nervously to her head. She half turned in her seat. “No, not for us, who've the future,” she seemed to say. The future disturbing our present” (*BTA* 82)

In continuation from the admiration of the view from the earlier passages, William is reveling in what he finds beautiful about the landscape, as well as the children and the play that is being performed. Lucy states that they only have the present, and time does not matter or exist to them. In the last line of the passage, Lucy in a way encapsulates one of the common themes of the novel, of the future interrupting the present. In a way, Lucy is correct in her statement that they only have the present, having already lived the past and not knowing the future. But as she states, this is nearly impossible in *Between the Acts*. Lucy is speaking for herself and the other characters in the novel, but it also mirrors the experience of the reader who may be constantly interrupting the novel's present with their knowledge that the war is set to start months later. It is reminiscent of the 1914 section of *The Years*, in which Woolf depicts a lively spring day months before the start of World War I.

The first act is followed by an intermission in which the characters continue to interact with each other, further showing the continuation of everyday life within the depiction of history. The characters begin to hear music that brings them out of the interval and into the next act. The description of the music ends this interruption from the play and prompts another observation of the beauty of the natural world around them. Before the next act begins, Miss La Trobe, the director of the pageant is preparing for the next act and hears fragments of conversation from the

audience, one of which remarks about the weather, ““And it’s pleasant now, the sun’s not so hot...That’s one good the war brought us—longer days...” (BTA 120). For most of the novel so far, there has not been explicit mention of the war as it is in this line. Even so, this line is largely a dismissible one, it gets lost in the rest of the passage of other conversations. It is only a fragment, and only references the war as something that brought a change in the weather. The weather as such a common topic of small talk banality further contrasts the talk of the war, something so historic and with such weight.

Near the end of the novel, the looming nature of World War II starts to take a more present role. In the interval before the final act, the ticking machine present throughout the novel makes a reappearance as the threat gets closer. The characters in the audience begin to hear the ticking sound again from the bushes and start to lament their dissatisfaction with the play, “They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle. Nothing happened. The tick of the machine was maddening” (BTA 176). The audience’s discontent with the pageant has been referenced throughout the novel, but these lines take a sort of turn in tone. Previously, the audience members have taken a sort of general dissatisfaction with the play, whether it’s with the performance or the content of the scenes, as with Colonel Mayhew. In these lines, they are described to be in almost a torturous experience, trapped and forced to watch, it goes as far as to describe them as prisoners. The shift in tone noticeable in these lines suggest the looming threat of the war intervening on the pageant. Rather than just being trapped and forced to watch the pageant, they are also prisoners of their fate with the war on the horizon. The ticking of the machine suggests an almost countdown to the intervention of the war, and the audience is simply waiting for something to happen as they exist in the period between the two wars. They have nothing in their power as civilians to stop what is coming, and while they do not yet have the full

knowledge to know what will happen, Woolf as the author and the reader are aware that they are potentially in imminent danger.

Pages later during the same interval, a brief rain fall begins, “No one had seen the cloud coming. There it was, black, swollen, on top of them. Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears. Tears. Tears” (*BTA* 180). In this first passage describing the rain, it is notably not referred to as rain, giving it an ominous and foreboding quality, comparing it instead to a shower of tears. “[A]ll the people in the world weeping” also suggests a state of distress potentially characteristic of wartime. The cloud foreshadows what is soon to come in the novel, as the characters do not predict the rain and are not prepared when it falls from overhead. The next passage continues the description of the rain as it stops, “Looking up she [Isa] received two great blots of rain full in her face. They trickled down her cheeks as if they were her own tears. But they were all people’s tears, weeping for all people. Hands were raised. Here and there a parasol opened. The rain was sudden and universal. Then it stopped. From the grass rose a fresh earthy smell” (*BTA* 180). As quickly as the rain suddenly begins it is over before the characters are given a chance to truly process it. Such is the nature of extraordinary circumstances of war, as civilians are in many ways powerless to its occurrence, almost in the way they are unable to control the weather.

The appearance of the rain directly foreshadows the events near the end of the novel, when the threat of the beginning war that has been weaved into the novel in subtle and symbolic ways becomes overt and has a real presence. The play has ended after the final act, “Ourselves.” Before the audience can disperse, the Reverend G.W. Streatfield takes the stage to fully conclude the event, and read how much money was raised from the pageant for the church:

“‘But there is still a deficit’ [...] of one hundred and seventy pounds odd. So that each of us who has enjoyed the pageant has still an opp...’ The word was cut in two. A zoom

severed it. Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck came overhead. That was the music. The audience gaped; the audience gazed. Then zoom became drone. The planes had passed.” (*BTA* 193)

Throughout the novel, there have been numerous instances of interruption, from the basic structure of the acts and the intervals to more direct interruptions while the pageant is being performed. The final interruption comes at the very end as Mr. Streatfield is attempting to announce the necessity for more donations from the church, the primary purpose of the pageant. He is interrupted down to the middle of the word he was speaking by the appearance of the war planes. It is the ultimate interruption as it speaks to the beginning of the war, as Giles seems to predict earlier in the novel when he is lamenting about Lucy looking at the view. In a parallel to the rain, the planes are gone soon after they arrive, and the audience is unable to do much more than just “gape” and “gaze.” Notably, there is no explicit danger from the planes, none of the characters are hurt and it is not an air raid that destroys the town, that would be a different novel, one that would turn the town directly into a battlefield, but it would not be in keeping with Woolf’s war novels. It does not have to be a highly dangerous scene for it to be impactful, Woolf is holding the everyday life surrounding war as equally as important as the battlefield narratives. The ominous nature of the passage comes from the reader and Woolf’s knowledge of the war and the historical moment. After the planes pass, Mr. Streatfield immediately keeps speaking right from where he was interrupted, “‘...portunity,’ Mr. Streatfield continued, ‘to make a contribution.’ He signalled. Instantly collecting boxes were in operation” (*BTA* 193). The interruption of the planes seems to have little to no effect on Mr. Streatfield, he continues to explain the small-town necessity of having more donations to the church. It speaks to the theme throughout the novel of the everyday persisting and existing alongside a historical moment. Even though they have just symbolically entered a new war, what is most important to the

townspeople is donating money for the church. The novel in mainly ways feels as though it is leading up to this very moment, as a reader one expects that at some point the historical moment would become important, the same way a contemporary work set in early 2020 would be expected to possibly lead up to the COVID-19 pandemic in March. Now that it has finally happened in the novel, it feels strangely anticlimactic from the perspective of the characters. The more mundane bureaucracy of the town is more important to the townspeople than the nature of the planes, they must focus on their personal everyday as a way of coping. Although the characters may be familiar with the sight of the planes from the first World War and know that they are a sign of a war, they cannot know the magnitude of the events that will occur in the following years.

In the article “Everyday War: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf in World War II” Maud Ellmann elaborates on the setting of *Between the Acts* and how it interprets World War II as a war that involved all areas of the country, and how this setting influences the novel. Ellmann explains how Woolf, “shows how the present is imbricated with the past through the habits and ceremonies of everyday life, notably the annual resumption of the village pageant, in which the community retells its own history” (Ellmann 89). Ellmann is touching on a crucial aspect of the novel in the way it is interested in history, both as the characters are viewing and performing the history of England, but as the characters themselves live through the beginnings of a monumental historical moment that to them is only their daily lives. The past is of utmost importance to the novel, even as it maintains a focus on the events of the present and the unknown (to the characters) nature of what the future holds.

Between the Acts being set in the pastoral sphere, as Ellmann explains, also creates an image of everyday life and the mundane, with the expectation that the town will largely be

separated from the looming war. This remains true for most of the novel until the arrival of the planes, a sign of the aerial warfare common of the period that was developed in World War I and continued to be used in World War II. Ellmann explains how these methods fundamentally change the concept of the “everyday war” when the fighting enters the civilian sphere:

“But war in the air also suggests that war has seeped into the atmosphere, becoming as pervasive and familiar as the weather. For Woolf [...] war is ‘in the air’ in the sense that it suffuses everyday life, invading every dimension of existence, including the air itself. Hence the everyday can no longer be regarded as an insulated zone of peace or war as a bounded event that can be declared and entered. [...] For Britons during World War II, air was both the source of mass annihilation and the medium in which the danger was communicated ‘on the air,’ enveloping everyday life in an atmosphere of terror.”
(Ellmann 77)

Ellmann’s first point regarding war becoming as mundane as the weather is especially pertinent to the parallels in the novel between the sudden rainfall and the planes that are treated with about the same tone, despite their differences in level of danger. As *Between the Acts* takes place at the very end of the post-World War I and pre-World War II period, it only depicts a world that is aware of the aerial warfare of World War I. The war in the air has not fully seeped into the world of the novel the entire time, in the sense that the time puts the novel right before the breakout of the war. It is not until the end of the novel when the planes fly overhead is it fully foreshadowed that although the town can attempt to keep their everyday far away from the battlefield, when the warfare leaves nowhere to hide, there is almost no such thing as being fully away from the battlefield. Woolf’s creation of the “everyday war” is not to say that the townspeople are completely removed from the war. She instead creates a new definition of a war novel, one that shows how everyday life is maintained and upheld even during the time of a potential war, as she does in *The Years*. Ellmann explains further how Woolf and author Sylvia Townsend Warner utilize this form of war novel:

In this way, both novelists resist the rhetoric of war, which draws on a Whig conception of history to justify bloodshed for the sake of progress toward liberal democracy and economic growth. Against this teleological view of history, Woolf and Warner turn away from ends and beginnings to focus on the middle—between the acts—where alternative trajectories emerge and fade away. (Ellmann 93)

Ellmann's analysis complicates how Woolf creates her war novel by describing it as something that could be a radical act against the idea of war, or as Ellmann explains, the "rhetoric of war," the narrative commonly associated with war and fiction about it. Woolf is more concerned with the life that occurs in a small town in this period between the two wars. As a war novelist, Woolf seems to attempt to show a multitude of realities of war that does not solely show life in the trenches or the battlefield.

Near the end of the novel, Mr. Streatfield is reflecting on his experience of the pageant as an audience member. He says, "Then again, as the play or pageant proceeded, my attention was distracted. Perhaps that too was part of the producer's intention?" (*BTA* 192). *Between the Acts* is in many ways, a novel of distraction and interruption. With the knowledge of the imminent war in mind, the characters seem to be biding their time in between two historical, devastating events. When the war does fully begin, it is possible that some of the characters will have to leave the town for the battlefield, and they will be more directly affected by the warfare. When the planes come again, they could be dropping bombs. For now, the townspeople are putting on a pageant, allowing their everyday to persist. Giles seems to be the only character that sees an issue with them putting on a play when war could start at any moment. When a sign of the war does come it is as normal as the change in the weather, and the events of the day carry on. The novel itself exists as between the acts, in this case between World War I and World War II. While the characters could be seen as just distracting themselves in a sort of fool's errand, they are also

attempting to cope with the devastating historical moments they have lived through and parse through their past, unaware of their future.

Conclusion

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh, one of Clarissa Dalloway's school friends, is reflecting on the Clarissa he knew at school and how his life has changed since then, "As we are a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship [...] as the whole thing is a bad joke, let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners [...] decorate the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions; be as decent as we possibly can" (MD 77). These lines exist in the fabric of the novel, but when thought of across these Woolf works, from the pageant in *Between the Acts* to the continuation of the dinner during the raid in *The Years*, it is indicative of Virginia Woolf's approach to writing about confusing, catastrophic, and devastating times of war. If one must live through the horrible circumstances of life, like war, illness, or anything else they might as well decorate the dungeon they are stuck in, try to find things in life to distract them and that make their life worth living. To borrow a term used across Woolf's work, to sum up everything in her career even writing about war feels in many ways impossible, but there is something in Peter's lines that suggest how she intended to write about times of war. She is distinct in her choice to write about war at home, war in the domestic sphere, especially how it impacts women in ways just as isolating and important as how it affects men that fought on the front lines. There is more to the war narrative than simply stories of the trenches and the battlefield. These lines from *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well as the analysis in all these sections leads to the belief that Woolf set out to show in these works how people attempt to continue living in times of war, and in doing so, as Woolf did with all her works, created her own version of a war narrative.

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