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### **War in Virginia Woolf's fictional and non-fictional works**

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# **War in Virginia Woolf's Fictional and Non-fictional Works**

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## Abstract

This thesis argues that Virginia Woolf can be seen as essentially a 'war-writer'; the impact on her imagination, evident in both her fiction and non-fictional writing, of the First World War was profound. However, the sense of insecurity and anxiety which the war instills in Woolf, present directly in her portrayal of the tragedies of Jacob Flanders (*Jacob's Room*), Septimus Warren Smith (*Mrs. Dalloway*), and Andrew Ramsay (*To the Lighthouse*), never really goes away. The insecurities of 1930s, in particular the Spanish Civil War, in which her nephew Julian Bell was killed, are also present in Woolf's writing and the fear of a new war means that her anxieties, vulnerability of Civilisation, continue until her death by suicide in 1941. One could indeed argue that Woolf was herself a victim of war.

The thesis argues that fundamental aspects of Woolf's writing are related to the presence throughout her adult life of the threat of War: her continued concern with gender has its roots in her seeing the First War and the likelihood of future conflict as being due to the prevailing dominance of masculinity, of 'subconscious Hitlerism'; the post-1918 sense of insecurity of values, of what was 'real', demands from her a new mode of narrative. In other words, her famous urging of novelists to 'look within' has its origins in her sense of the outer world of the Post-War years as insecure and 'unreal' and that sense of unreality continues through the 1930s, as evident in her non-fiction.

This study consists of four chapters. It opens with an introduction that concentrates on the Bloomsbury Group, its attitudes towards the state, politics and war; it shows also Woolf's pacifist views towards war. In the First and Second chapters Virginia Woolf's response to the First World War and its aftermath is discussed, including discussion of the social effects of the war, new social attitudes in the post-war period and how Woolf responds to the war and its impact in her novels, essays, diaries and letters. The war itself is dealt with through analysing four of Woolf's novels written in the post war period: *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. Like Virginia Woolf herself, the characters of these novels suffer the horror of the war and its consequences, a suffering that can be seen in Woolf's combatant and non-combatant characters.

Having some combatant relatives and friends, Woolf consistently and skilfully portrays the sense of duty and patriotism that caused young men to join the army, the effect of the loss of some of these young men on those left behind and the emotional and psychological effects of the war on those young men who survived. The theme of war is also shown through the sense of vulnerability which Woolf's characters experienced, exacerbated by the war; Freud's notion of "The Uncanny" in his 1919 essay on that topic is employed to indicate the state of mind of some of the characters in the post-war period. Woolf's use of images of the unpredictable sea and of the indifferent flow of water as emblematic of the flow of time and natural process to which her characters are subject is also discussed; war is essentially seen as an aspect of this arbitrary process. Woolf's notions of masculinity in these novels, as culpable for the conflicts which lead to war, are also discussed.

The Third Chapter focuses on the political tensions of the Thirties that witnessed the rise of Hitler and the violence of Fascism. These political forces played a role in the Spanish Civil War that caused the death of Julian Bell, Virginia Woolf's nephew, an event that provided a focus for Woolf's anxieties about the contemporary political situation. Julian is seen as another example of the gallery of young men who are the victims of war in her fiction, coloured by her experience of the death of Thoby Stephen. Woolf's anxiety and fear in this period are registered through tracing her diaries, letters and essays written in this period. Like her previous novels, *The Waves* manifests the theme of war directly and indirectly through the increasing images of time and process, images of danger and death, the awareness of the masculine world as playing a role in waging war. The characters' growing sense of vulnerability and their awareness of the threat that would invade their peace represented by the Nazi and fascist danger, is discussed; these are concerns which led Woolf to discuss how to prevent war in her book *Three Guineas*, published one year after *The Waves*.

The Final chapter concentrates on the Second World War and the bitter impact which it had on Woolf's private life, ultimately reflected in her works written in this period: diaries, letters, some of her essays, and her final novel *Between the Acts*, in which Woolf explicitly and implicitly manifests the theme of war. These works show how Woolf responded to the war that caused her constant fear and anxiety, which she herself ended by committing suicide.

## Contents

Introduction: Woolf, Bloomsbury and Civilisation .....	1
Chapter One: Virginia Woolf's Response to the First World War .....	40
I. Virginia Woolf's <i>Jacob's Room</i> .....	66
II. Virginia Woolf's <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> .....	96
Chapter Two: Virginia Woolf's <i>To the Lighthouse</i> and <i>The Waves</i> .....	126
I. <i>To the Lighthouse</i> .....	126
II. <i>The Waves</i> .....	152
Chapter Three: Virginia Woolf's Response to the Political Tensions of the 1930s.....	188
I. General Historical Outlook.....	188
II. Virginia Woolf's Outlook on the Early Thirties.....	190
III. Woolf and the Spanish Civil War .....	194
IV. Virginia Woolf's <i>The Years</i> .....	208
Chapter Four: Virginia Woolf's Response to the Second World War .....	241
I. Woolf and the Phoney War.....	241
II. Virginia Woolf in the War Years .....	245
III. Virginia Woolf's <i>Between the Acts</i> .....	260
Conclusion .....	290
Bibliography of Sources Consulted .....	295

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## Abbreviations

<i>JR</i>	<i>Jacob's Room</i>
<i>MD</i>	<i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>
<i>TL</i>	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>
<i>TW</i>	<i>The Waves</i>
<i>TY</i>	<i>The Years</i>
<i>BA</i>	<i>Between the Acts</i>
<i>DI</i>	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Vol. I</i>
<i>DII</i>	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Vol. II</i>
<i>DIII</i>	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Vol. III</i>
<i>DIV</i>	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Vol. IV</i>
<i>DV</i>	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Vol. V</i>
<i>LI</i>	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. I</i>
<i>LII</i>	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. II</i>
<i>LIII</i>	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. III</i>
<i>LIV</i>	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. IV</i>
<i>LV</i>	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. V.</i>
<i>LVI</i>	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. VI</i>
<i>TG</i>	<i>Three Guineas</i>
<i>EV</i>	<i>Eminent Victorians</i>

## **Introduction: Woolf, Bloomsbury and Civilisation**

Virginia Woolf lived her whole life against a background of War. She was of that generation which lived through two world wars with full adult awareness of the dangers and horrors which those two wars unleashed on civilized life, changing human consciousness and human values irrevocably. Indeed it was the years through which she lived which saw the invention of the mechanical forms of war which scarred the twentieth century. As Virginia Woolf grew to adulthood Britain was still engaged in imperial wars abroad. The war in Sudan had seen the last charge of Britain cavalry, but the Boer wars saw new methods of fighting; the Boers waged guerrilla warfare, but they faced disciplined British troops with modern rifles, machine guns and artillery. Within a decade and a half the Western Front saw massed, mechanical slaughter, about which Woolf heard at first-hand from those who had been present; her family experienced personal loss in the Spanish Civil War, which at Guernica saw the first systematic bombing of civilian targets; and she was herself to experience the London Blitz at first hand. In other words, one might argue that war became an ever-closer threat and intrusion in Woolf's life as, at the same time, warfare itself evolved from imperial wars, fought far overseas using methods which had existed for centuries, to modes of destruction from which nobody was spared; by the 1940s, one could argue, there were no such things as non-combatants.

This increasingly threatening presence in the world around her inevitably marked Virginia Woolf's consciousness, became an unavoidable part of the ways she sees the world and, it is the contention of this thesis, fundamentally affected the imaginative world which she created in her writing. In other words, Woolf's fiction is essentially born out of the inescapable experience of war: she was fundamentally a war writer.

The effect on Woolf of the First World War is at one level immediately obvious: from *Jacob's Room* onwards the world of her fiction is haunted by that war and in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the second of what we might term Woolf's 'war novels', Septimus Warren Smith becomes an emblematic representation of the catastrophic effects on human consciousness that modern warfare can entail. Unsurprisingly it is the impact on Woolf of the First War that has till now received the



main body of critical attention.<sup>1</sup> For instance of the thirteen essays in Mark Hussey's collection *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality and Myth*, despite the wide-ranging title, eleven of the essays are on Woolf's response to the First World War; only one refers to the Second War, as reflected in *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, and there are only brief passing references to the Spanish Civil War. Jonathan Atkin's study, as its title suggests, is not restricted to Woolf herself; the role which her association with the Bloomsbury Group played in forming her attitudes to the war will be considered below and Woolf's responses to the First World War considered in these studies will be referred to, and taken account of, in this thesis.

However, the present thesis goes well beyond these works to consider Woolf's response to *both* world wars and to the Spanish Civil War, and to discuss not only her fiction but also her essays, letters and diaries. It also goes beyond a consideration of specific and direct references in the fiction to the various conflicts by taking account of the ways in which the war conditions the ways in which Woolf not only sees the social world around her but also essentially affects the way she perceives the nature of human existence: the ways in which human life is seen as subject to non-human processes, to the fluxes of Time and Process. War breeds and develops a profound sense of human vulnerability. Thus, going beyond existing studies, the present thesis argues that Woolf's experience and awareness of war is fundamental to the way she sees human life. It also argues that features of Woolf's writing and thinking that have been much commented upon can in fact be seen to have been crucially affected by her experience of War.

For instance, domestic circumstances—the emotional demands of her father on her and her sister, the abusive presence of her step-brothers, the awareness that while male relatives and friends could experience university education, she could not—inevitably sensitized her to the gender inequalities of her society and gave sharp personal focus to the ongoing contemporary struggle of the Women's Suffrage movement. But what is evident, too, is the way in which her experience of the events of 1914-1918 and the continued and unrelenting threat of war in the years that followed, gave her writing, fictional and non-fictional, a sharper and more profound animus against patriarchy; it was the masculine world of imperial power, of politics and economics, that

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark Hussey, ed., *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1991), Karen L. Levenback, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1999); Jonathan Atkin, *A War of the Individual: Bloomsbury attitudes to the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2002).

had led to the catastrophe of the First War. It was the actions and ambitions of “Great Men” that had urged—through propaganda which overtly emphasised such gender values— the young men of her own generation to demonstrate their own heroic masculinity by volunteering to serve their country on the Western Front. As we shall see, through her contact with those who responded to the call, she was early on aware of the awful reality: that men did not die heroically on the Western Front but were slaughtered ‘like cattle’,<sup>2</sup> the victims not just of the Germans but of the “Great Men” and the sexual polarity of their society. Septimus Warren Smith is, again, emblematic of this contemporary construction of what a male should be; as he desperately struggles to maintain his grip on reality, he is urged by his doctors—who have no experience of the horrors that have brought him to his present state—to ‘be a man’; Dr. Holmes for instance looks at Septimus as lacking manliness: He had actually talked of killing himself to his wife, quite a girl, a foreigner, wasn’t she? Didn’t that give her a very odd idea of English husbands? Didn’t one owe perhaps a duty to one’s wife”.<sup>3</sup> In the scene where he commits suicide, Septimus is described by Dr. Holmes as being “coward” (*MD*, 132). Indeed, the fragmentation of his personality is also a fragmentation of his adherence to the contemporary codes of masculinity: central to his suffering is his loss of his friend Evans, for whom he seems to have more intimate feelings than he does for his wife. The loving comradeship of Septimus and Evans was not uncharacteristic of the sorts of emotional male bonding that were built in the trenches, as Woolf seems to have become aware from contact with friends like Siegfried Sassoon.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Septimus’s moving response to the fleeting, vivid beauty of the world around him, his exclamations of emotion, are not those normally associated with the masculine in his society; they are qualities of feeling more akin to those characterised by that society as ‘feminine’. In Septimus, then, the figure most damaged by the war in her fictions, Woolf seems in fact to begin to construct a new notion of masculinity, a new version of what a man might be. Although Peter Walsh, in the same novel, has not served in France—he has been far away in India—Woolf again seems to construct him as being less than conventionally masculine. Peter is a man unafraid to show feelings—he is capable of weeping—and is in fact “attractive to women” precisely because they “liked the sense that he was not altogether manly [...] He was a man. But not the sort of man

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<sup>2</sup> See Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, *Poems by Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1921).

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Hogarth, 1990), 80-81. Hereafter references will be included in the text abbreviated as *MD*.

<sup>4</sup> On issues of male emotional relationship in the war, see Adrian Caesar, *Taking It Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality, and the War Poet: Brooke, Sassoon, Owen, Graves* (Manchester: Manchester U. p., 1993).

one had to respect [...] not like Major Simmons, for instance” (*MD*, 138). Woolf neatly sums up the sort of man Simmons is by the fact that he asserts his masculine authority by continuing to use his army rank after the war. In her Bloomsbury circle of friends, of course, Woolf had several examples of men who were not conventionally masculine—Forster and Strachey were homosexual, Keynes and Grant were bi-sexual—and issues of relations between the sexes were a matter of discussion, as well as of practical exploration. Such discussions were almost certainly infused by the radical ideas of Edward Carpenter, whose ‘New Society’ envisioned a revolution in the relations between the sexes, as well as toleration for gay men and women; Forster’s visit to Carpenter in 1913 had directly inspired *Maurice* while Roger Fry had known Carpenter since the 1880s.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while such novel ideas about masculinity and about gender relations in general were available to Woolf, it was ultimately the *war*, resulting from rampant patriarchy, which causes Woolf to seek to challenge contemporary English notions of masculinity in her fiction. Both in her fiction and in her non-fictional writing it is patriarchy, the power of the “Great Men”, which remains a dangerous threat to civilisation and peace in the post-war years and in the 1930s, as the storms-clouds gathered again.

At the same time the impact of the First World War on Woolf was not limited to issues of gender; the war also has important effects on the form of Woolf’s fiction. It is a commonplace that the war was a major contributing factor to the emergence of Modernism, in literary and artistic culture as well as the more general shift in human perception which it involved. But one can certainly argue that of the novelists most directly associated with High Modernism, it is Woolf who is the most profoundly affected by twentieth-century warfare. Certainly it is the First War that creates the darkening of vision which we see in D.H. Lawrence between *The Rainbow* (1915 ) and *Women in Love* (1920) and the emergence in the latter, and in some of his non-fiction writing, of an almost apocalyptic vision. But Lawrence died in 1930; he does not live as Woolf did, to experience the growing anxieties of the 1930s and a second world war. James Joyce was geographically and culturally away from both wars; even *Ulysses* shows little sense of the catastrophe which has engulfed Europe. The only major Modernist figure on whose work war makes an impact comparable to that shown in Woolf is a poet: T.S. Eliot; *The Waste Land* is

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<sup>5</sup> On Carpenter and his intellectual connections, see *Edward Carpenter and Late Victorian Radicalism*, ed. Tony Brown (London: Frank Cass, 1990). Sassoon had stayed with Carpenter before the war, and Carpenter, active in the peace movement, was one of the recipients of a carbon copy of his “Soldier’s Declaration”. The carbon is in the Carpenter Collection at Sheffield City Archives.

essentially a post-World War poem and *Four Quartets* is repeatedly lit up by the flames of the Blitz. If *The Waste Land* registers the fragmentation of values, the disorientation, of the years after 1918, so repeatedly does Woolf's fiction. In the shattered aftermath of 1914-18, wherein *was* value? Was there any more to individual human existence than merely being an organic speck in a world which was governed by natural process through the seasons, the years and the centuries, a human life being merely a brief and unconsidered episode in that process? How does one convey in fiction such a vision? Realism ultimately implies a sense of shared values, a security in the nature of the world around one: a sense of certainty now profoundly eroded. To portray the world after 1918 in such terms was to ignore the cultural shock, the disturbance in human awareness, which the war had created in the mind of anyone of imaginative sensitivity; it was to continue to portray the socio-economic certainties of the Great Men. Of necessity, therefore, Woolf's post-war novels required a technique which would manifest this new awareness. The novelist conventions of the novels essentially written with the consciousness of an earlier age, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* would no longer suffice. Initially the post-war insecurity is conveyed in *Jacob's Room* by the lack of a secure, confident narrator; it is a narrative not only elegiac in tone but whose doomed young protagonist remains elusive, shadowy, and the narrator remains detached, herself uncertain. But ultimately the *reality* of that insecurity can only be conveyed by portraying it where it actually existed: not in the external physical world but within the consciousness of the characters themselves. Woolf's fiction is less concerned with what her characters are doing than what they are thinking and feeling. "Look within" Woolf famously asserts in her essay "Modern Fiction" (1925),<sup>6</sup> for that is where the novelist can register what is now perhaps the only reality: not the outer world of streets and cars, of social activity and events, but the ways in which those streets and cars and social activities are *perceived*. And that perception, from *Mrs. Dalloway* onwards, manifests directly the sense of unreality—"unreal" as we shall see is a word which recurs—which is characteristic in Woolf's view of a world shocked by the First World War and is exacerbated by the unrelenting anxieties and tensions of the 1930s, climaxing in a war which impacts on Woolf and her world even more violently.

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<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction", *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth, 1962), 189.

Thus, this thesis will demonstrate more fully than has been undertaken previously that warfare and insecurity which it bred, is of the essence of Virginia Woolf's creative imagination not just in those novels which engage the effect of the war directly, especially *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, but in *all* novels that follow. Nor in her only writerly response to the contemporary conflicts confined to her fiction of course; in her diaries and letters we can see the ways in which war, the effects of war and the threat of war impinge on her consciousness. It was a consciousness, an imagination, which longed to see a way of existence governed, in the absence of any eternal spiritual reality, by a sensitive awareness of beauty, of friendship, of the free action of reason. These values were, manifestly, the precise reverse of the forces unleashed in the world through much of Woolf's adult life. But for Woolf and her friends these ideals were of the essence of human civilisation, if indeed that civilisation was to survive; these were the ideals of Bloomsbury.

In 1820 at St. John's College, Cambridge, George Tomlinson, a Cambridge student, who later became the first Bishop of Gibraltar, organized an undergraduate discussion group, based mainly on the young men of King's College and Trinity College, which met regularly to discuss issues of philosophy and aesthetics. It was from these early roots that grew the group which was called the 'Cambridge Conversation Society' or, amongst themselves (in a characteristically semi-secret way), just 'The Society'. To the wider world, as some members moved, through the nineteenth century, into prominent positions in British life—education, politics, the church, the arts—the group became famous (or, for some who did not share their values, 'infamous') as the Apostles. From the initial period, 1820-1840, the society moved through three stages: the Pre-Victorian stage, when member included Alfred and Fredrick Tennyson, Arthur Hallam, F. D. Maurice, and Monckton Miles, then a mid-century stage at the time of Henry Sidgwick, when members also included James Clerk Maxwell, Robert H. Pomeroy, Charles Puller and Cecil James Monro. The third stage started around the turn of the century, perhaps the Apostles' most influential period; among the members of this period were G. Lowes Dickinson, J. M. E. McTaggart, G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, Nathaniel Wedd, and Alfred North Whitehead; among the undergraduates were E. M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, Desmond MacCarthy,

Thoby Stephen, Lytton Strachey, and Leonard Woolf.<sup>7</sup> Many of the members in this last period, even if they did not become Fellows at Cambridge, came back to give papers to meetings of the Apostles, the new generations of undergraduates. Even after graduating, the deep personal friendships established among these members of the Apostles—and friendship was a key value for the group—meant that they remained in touch with one another as their lives and careers developed. It was the movement of members of this turn-of-the century group of Apostles to London that, as we shall see, provided the foundation of that circle of friends—writers, philosophers, artists, economists, civil servants—that became known as the “Bloomsbury Group”.

Relationships and codes of behaviour within the family of the various layers of the British middle classes were, even in the closest interplay between individuals, conditioned by the wider values and assumptions of society as a whole; notions of order and hierarchy, for instance, permeated familial relations: “The patriarchal family was the smallest unit of the patriarchal state; the military and ecclesiastical establishments, the regime of inherited status and the Imperial idea, all rested upon a notion of natural rights and duties which depended in the last analysis upon force and upon traditions of obedience”.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the whole climate of the Victorian home was based not only on authority but specifically on male authority; the judgment of the father, right or wrong, was that which prevailed, even at the cost of emotional discomfort, unfulfilment even pain, of wife and children. Domestic life in the nineteenth century was thus painfully prescriptive: “The boredom, the restriction, the oppression of family life was not the product of individual cruelty but social habit”.<sup>9</sup>

In Virginia Woolf’s home, the domestic life of the Stephens family was “the most typical of Victorians”.<sup>10</sup> The dominant atmosphere, especially after the family deaths which the Stephens experienced, was one of sombreness and even depression. At Hyde Park Gate in Kensington, Virginia Stephen, the daughter of Leslie Stephen, an eminent literary critic and public figure,

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<sup>7</sup> Wilfred Stone, *The Cave and the Mountain: A Study of E. M. Forster* (London: Oxford U. P., 1966), 40-41. See also Richard Deacon, *The Cambridge Apostles: A History of Cambridge University's Elite Intellectual Secret Society* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: University Press Sussex, 1976), 125.

lived a life enveloped with gloom and sadness. When she was thirteen, Virginia Stephen suffered the loss of her mother, who seemed to have had a great influence on her, as she herself describes: “It is perfectly true that she [Woolf’s mother] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four”.<sup>11</sup> The departure of the mother negatively affected the atmosphere of the family: “With mother’s death the merry, various family life which she had held in being shut for ever”.<sup>12</sup> Darkness settled over the whole family: “[A]ll dressed in unbroken black, George and Gerald in black trousers, Stella with real crape deep on her dress, Nessa [Vanessa] and myself with slightly modified crape, my father black from head to foot—even the notepaper was so black bordered that only a little space for writing remained”.<sup>13</sup> The loss of the female kindness and nurturing, represented by the mother, painfully affected Virginia Woolf who endured her first mental breakdown at this period.<sup>14</sup> More misery was to afflict the family. After three months of her marriage, Stella Duckworth, Virginia Woolf’s half-sister, died in 1897, a further death that made Woolf see life as “a struggle”, since she and her sister Vanessa now had to endure alone the agony of their father, who was, in Woolf’s own words, the “most imminent obstacle and burden” on the family.<sup>15</sup> The loss of Leslie Stephen’s wife, his second such loss, seemed to have increased his sombre outlook, deepened it into despair and anger; he became rougher and sometimes, again in Woolf’s own words, “brutal”, with his daughters.<sup>16</sup> His behaviour is evident in Woolf’s telling of the weekly showing of the domestic account books to their father, often made by Vanessa, who had to endure his severe words silently:

If they [the account books] were over eleven pounds, that lunch was a torture [...] Down came his fist on the account book. There was a roar. His vein filled. His face flushed. Then he shouted ‘I am ruined.’ Then he beat his breast. He went through an extraordinary dramatization of self-pity, anger and despair [...] ‘And you stand there like a block of stone. Don’t you pity me?’ [...] Vanessa stood

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<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, 80-81. At the age of forty-four, Virginia Woolf was working on *To the Lighthouse*, in which she portrays her mother through the character of Mrs. Ramsay “and when the book was written, I [Woolf] ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her”. See *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 93-94.

<sup>14</sup> See Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography, Vol. One: Virginia Stephen 1882-1912* (London: Hogarth, 1972), 44.

<sup>15</sup> “A Sketch of the Past”, 124.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

by his side absolutely dumb. He flung at her all the phrases—about shooting Niagara and so on—that came handy.<sup>17</sup>

The lack of communication here between the father and daughter shows Leslie Stephen's insensitive, and self-indulgent, attitudes to his daughters as women, as keepers of his domestic world; they had to be subject to his patriarchal authority. Leslie Stephen looks at woman, as Woolf herself indicates, as being "his slave".<sup>18</sup> But in treating his sons and the other males in his family, Leslie Stephen seemed to be different: "If Thoby had presented those books or George, the explosion would have been suppressed".<sup>19</sup> Thus, the patriarchal pressure, represented by the restrictions of a Victorian father and Victorian beliefs, made Woolf see Hyde Park Gate as a dark period in her life:

When I look back upon that house it seems to me so crowded with scenes of family life, grotesque, comic and tragic; with the violent emotions of youth, revolt, despair, intoxicating happiness, immense boredom, with parties of the famous and the dull; with rages again, George and Gerald [...]; with passionate affection for my father alternating with passionate hatred of him, all tingling and vibrating in an atmosphere of youthful bewilderment and curiosity—that I feel suffocated by the recollection.<sup>20</sup>

Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf's sister, confesses that as their father aged, life became even darker, "the atmosphere of the house was melancholy in every way during those last years. There had been tragedy following on tragedy and now my father was old and dying".<sup>21</sup> The illness and vulnerability of Leslie Stephen gave a chance for George Duckworth, Virginia Woolf's half-brother, to be "the head of the family" and to practise his authority on his sisters.<sup>22</sup> Surrendering to the patriarchal pressure of this brother, Virginia Woolf and her sister attended parties which they did not enjoy and were introduced to people they did not like; they were subject to George's

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Old Bloomsbury", *Virginia Woolf: Moments of Being*, 161.

<sup>21</sup> Vanessa Bell, "Notes on Bloomsbury", *The Bloomsbury Group: a Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 104.

<sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, "22 Hyde Park Gate", *Moments of Being*, 146.



constant criticism of their behaviour and clothes, and they even had to endure his sexually abusive behaviour, especially to Virginia Woolf.<sup>23</sup>

To escape the bitter circumstances of her family, and create an atmosphere of relief for herself, Virginia Woolf resorted to her father's books, which became her companions, and her only solace for the loss of her mother, and she enjoyed herself in studying Greek and Latin, which had been taught to her at home.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, she found a measure of self-expression by writing her diaries; in 1897 at the age of fourteen, Virginia Woolf began to document her first extant daily diaries in a small brown leather diary, which had, not insignificantly, a lock and key.<sup>25</sup> As Andrew McNeillie points out, the self-education through her father's books, provided her with a refuge from the pressures imposed on her by those books' owner, and her attempts to write a diary marked the beginning of her literary career and helped to shape her future years before Bloomsbury even came into being.<sup>26</sup>

After the death of their father in 1904, the Stephens moved to 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury, where they started a new life; this year is accepted "as the starting point for Bloomsbury".<sup>27</sup> Thoby's Cambridge friends began to visit him and his sisters regularly on Thursday evenings, as Vanessa Bell narrates:

[I]n the summer 1905, Thoby [...] began to gather round him such of his Cambridge friends as were also starting life in London. It seemed to him a good plan to be at home one evening a week and though I do not think it had at first occurred to him to include his sisters in the arrangement [...] So it happened that one or two of his Cambridge friends began to drift in on Thursday evenings after dinner.<sup>28</sup>

Here at 46 Gordon Square, the young men of Cambridge, formed the skeleton of Bloomsbury, especially those who were members of the semi-secret Cambridge Apostles, and now it was extended to include other intellectual figures, who started revealing their liberated thoughts, and

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<sup>23</sup> See Ibid, 148-155.

<sup>24</sup> See Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography, Vol. One*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Lounsberry, *Becoming Virginia Woolf: Her Early Diaries and the Diaries She Read* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 1-5.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew McNeillie, "Bloomsbury", *The Cambridge Companion of Virginia Woolf*, eds. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2000), 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Frances Spalding, *The Bloomsbury Group* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2013), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Vanessa Bell, "Notes On Bloomsbury", 105.

also Thoby's sisters, who had not of course received a university education.<sup>29</sup> Michael Rosenthal points out that “Cambridge was a paradise where culture mattered and human beings were left free to develop their minds and souls. Every member of Bloomsbury who attended Cambridge flourished there”.<sup>30</sup> The move to Bloomsbury from Hyde Park Gate, and all that the old home represented in terms of emotional repression, marked an emancipation for the sisters especially, a new imaginative and intellectual freedom; even relatively trivial domestic routines were markers of release from the father’s previously inescapable constraints: “We were full of experiments and reforms. We were going to do without table napkins [...] we were going to paint; to write; to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine o'clock. Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial”.<sup>31</sup> The Stephens’ house at Gordon Square, was the haven in which Virginia Woolf, her sister and the educated young men could have their intellectual refreshment and discuss an unconstrained range of subjects:

When it is said that we did not hesitate to talk of anything, it must be understood that this was literally. If you could say what you like about art, sex, or religion; you could also talk freely and very likely dully about the ordinary doing of daily life. There was very little consciousness I think in those early gatherings.<sup>32</sup>

With the atmosphere of wit and open-mindedness of Bloomsbury, Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa broke the oppression of the family; for them “Hyde Park Gate seems now so distant from Bloomsbury, its shadow falls across it”.<sup>33</sup> The friendships of Bloomsbury was a kind of compensation for the previous deprivation of liberty and of, as Quentin Bell suggests, the “deliberate shutting out of [the] spiritual light”, and the liberty they had not had at Hyde Park Gate.<sup>34</sup> Years later, Virginia Woolf herself confesses: “I felt the horror of family life, & the terrible threat to one’s liberty that I used to feel with father, Aunt Mary or George”.<sup>35</sup> In Bloomsbury, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell occupied a new world: “We were, it appears, extremely social [...] we were for ever lunching and dining out and loitering about the book

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<sup>29</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: New York U. P., 1979), 21.

<sup>31</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Old Bloomsbury”, 163.

<sup>32</sup> Vanessa Bell, “Notes On Bloomsbury”, 108.

<sup>33</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Old Bloomsbury”, 160.

<sup>34</sup> Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf Biography, Vol. One*, 40.

<sup>35</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume III: 1925-1930*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1980), 194. Hereafter references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *DIII*.

shops”.<sup>36</sup> Some of these changes are manifestly trivial, but even these are symptomatic both of their state of mind but also of the ways in which *all* received values were to be challenged, from domestic routines to the whole range of moral and public values.

In 1906, Virginia Woolf’s brother, Thoby Stephen, died. His death was a terrible further loss to the family, the loss of an energetic and extroverted member, as Vanessa Bell, his sister, describes: “Then after a holiday in Greece social evenings and our small circle generally seemed crushed by the tragedy of Thoby’s death of typhoid fever at the age of twenty-six. He had seemed essential to the life and structure of our circle”.<sup>37</sup> As we shall see, the loss of Thoby left scars on the emotional imagination of Virginia Woolf which were to be present for the rest of her life. The arbitrary loss of this young man was forever to be linked with the meaningless deaths of so many million other young men in the years that followed, and gave Woolf a profound understanding of the emotional price paid by those left behind. The tragic death of Thoby did, however, not stop the regular meetings of Bloomsbury and the push towards liberation of mind, emotion and spirit; this early death, as S. P. Rosenbaum points out, intensified the relationships between the young men and the Stephens, indeed it led to the marriage of Vanessa Stephen to Clive Bell in 1907 and Virginia Stephen to Leonard Woolf in 1912.<sup>38</sup>

The aim of Bloomsbury was to seek out truth by the application of rational thought, and the value of good states of mind was the target for the members’ discussion. Clive Bell writes in his essay on Bloomsbury that “[They] shared a taste for discussion in pursuit of truth and contempt for conventional ways of thinking and feeling, contempt for conventional morals if you will”.<sup>39</sup> Duncan Grant says: “interpretations of the ‘good’ and the value of certain states of mind were a frequent subject of discussion”.<sup>40</sup> It seems that the young educated men were stimulated and inspired by each other; they discussed different things, shared their knowledge in different matters; they were motivated by “[an] atmosphere of wit, intelligence, criticism, self-conscious brilliance and never any tolerance of ordinary dullness”.<sup>41</sup> Nigel Nicolson describes the

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<sup>36</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Old Bloomsbury”, 163.

<sup>37</sup> Vanessa Bell, “Notes On Bloomsbury”, 107.

<sup>38</sup> S. P. Rosenbaum, *The Bloomsbury Group: Memoir Club*, ed. James M. Haule (London; Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 164.

<sup>39</sup> Clive Bell, “Bloomsbury”, *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*, 119-120.

<sup>40</sup> Duncan Grant, *Recollections of Virginia Woolf*, ed. John Russell Noble (London: Peter Owen, 1972), 21.

<sup>41</sup> Vanessa Bell, “Notes On Bloomsbury”, 107.

atmosphere of Bloomsbury: “People were jumping up all the time, reaching for a book, peering into a picture, and there was an undercurrent of competitiveness, as if everyone there had to justify their presence each time afresh”.<sup>42</sup> In other words, they were a “freemasonry of intellect”.<sup>43</sup>

In Bloomsbury discussion, women were given the right to show their attitudes and convey their ideas freely; women were sharing their conversations with men, in a way which was in itself challenging to the prevailing cultural codes:

Bloomsbury was feminist. It was also more or less feminist in a wider and more usual sense [...]. The feminism of Bloomsbury was libertarian and, while challenging the ethics of a society which saw in the man the natural fount of power and authority, challenged also the entire system of morality on which that power was based. For members of the group the sanctity of the home had no justification save in mutual affection.<sup>44</sup>

Bloomsbury rejected the traditional stance of the Victorians, which gave men the dominant power over women. Duncan Grant suggests that his fellow Cambridge graduates, unfamiliar of course with female approaches to thinking and to society, themselves found the experience liberating after years of male only education at school and university; his friends “were willing to discuss anything and everything with [Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa] or before them. It was again all round. What the Cambridge of that time needed was a little feminine society”.<sup>45</sup> The intellectual participation of Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell in Bloomsbury was the outcome of the deprivation they suffered in their Victorian home, where the main role had been given to male, ignoring the feminist rights; these two women filled the intellectual feminist gap in their society.

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<sup>42</sup> Nigel Nicolson, “Bloomsbury: the Myth and the Reality”, *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), 17.

<sup>43</sup> Quentin Bell, Introduction, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume I: 1915-1919* (London: Hogarth, 1977), xvi. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *DI*.

<sup>44</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, 42-43.

<sup>45</sup> Duncan Grant, *Recollections of Virginia Woolf*, 21.

## **Bloomsbury's Attitudes towards the State, Politics and War**

Bloomsbury revolted against the power—political, social, moral—that deprives individual human being of practising his/her own liberty, since the Victorian age, in which the members of Bloomsbury had been brought up, was an age controlled by patriarchal power. In her own work, Virginia Woolf in particular increasingly criticises her society as being an institution restricting women's liberty and encouraging masculine domination. In most of her fictional and nonfictional works, which will be discussed in the next chapters, Woolf shows her negative feelings towards this prevailing masculine authority, which seemed to her to be fundamental to attitudes that lead to social conflict and international warfare. This authoritarian power she also sees, relatedly, as stimulating the male's sense of heroism and the desire for gaining glory and greatness that ultimately encourage conflict and struggle. The domination of masculinity in Victorian society had also been connected with depriving women of being educated, and opening the way for men to be the masters over women. It is this society against which Virginia Woolf and her Bloomsbury friends revolted, a revolt that was focussed even more sharply by the outbreak of the First World War, which they increasingly opposed.

Much of Bloomsbury's early works were devoted to showing the falseness of the First World War and its negative consequences, the inflicting of death and danger on the human individual's life. Bloomsbury's works represent the challenging spirits of its members: Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and *Queen Victoria* (1921), Maynard Keynes's *The Economic Consequence of the Peace* (1919), Clive Bell's *Civilisation* (1928), Leonard Woolf's essay "A Civilized Man" (1927), and Virginia Woolf's novels which respond to the First World War, like *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, as well as her essays that deal with the war and its danger. In addition to their writing, however, members of Bloomsbury undertook other actions, which showed their opinions against war and anything that leads to it, especially in the time of the First World War that will be discussed below. But before dealing with their writing and actions against the First World War, it is worth tracing the story of the Dreadnought Hoax, which was not merely a ridiculous performance, but serves to vividly reflect the attitudes of this group towards the atmosphere of the political world that was prevailing a few years before the outbreak of the war.

## The Dreadnought Hoax

The First World War was not the first time in which Bloomsbury's pioneers showed their negative attitudes towards militarism; four years before the war, Bloomsbury revealed its negative reaction towards the politics of the British Empire: its desire to expand its colonies and the concomitant naval arms race.

The years before the First World War witnessed a naval arms race between Britain and Germany, which created increasing tension between the two countries. Writing as another war approached, G. P. Gooch noted that in the autumn of 1909, one of the important topics of the British political agenda was the German naval limitation.<sup>46</sup> In 1910 there was a negotiation between Britain and Germany; the British government declared that “No understanding with Germany would be appreciated here unless it meant an arrest of the increase of naval expenditure.”<sup>47</sup> In fact the British-German tension was only the most overt imperial struggle in Europe. There were tensions between France and Germany, while Russia and Austro-Hungary were also jostling for power; there were, fatally, tensions between the various racial groupings in the Balkans, while further to the East the Ottoman Empire struggled to maintain power over its disparate peoples. R. J. Evans describes the political stage in Europe before the war: “During the five years which elapsed before the final catastrophe, there were a series of alarms, crises, and wars, overcome each time with greater and greater difficulty, each leaving the margin of safety rather smaller than before, until in 1914 came the final plunge.”<sup>48</sup> Given Evans's description of the European situation, one can say that the years before the First World War witnessed a kind of competition to achieve dominance. The tension between the countries started, as Evans indicates, in 1909 which witnessed the Balkan crisis, and 1911, the year of the Agadir crisis. According to the Algeiras Conference held in 1906, which led to the first Moroccan Crisis, France sought to maintain order in Morocco and in May France occupied Fez. Germany showed a menacing reaction by sending a gunboat to Agadir on 1 July 1911 to protect its interests there. The German reaction was accompanied by a demand for compensation, which implied that Germany had the right to obtain

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<sup>46</sup> G.P. Gooch, *Before the War: Studies in Diplomacy, Vol. II The Coming of the Storm* (London: Longman, 1938), 64.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> R. J. Evans, *The Victorian Age: 1815-1914* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1968), 333.

a Moroccan port or—as an alternative—other French territory in Africa.<sup>49</sup> Britain watched such imperial jostling for colonial space with concern, since it had most to lose from a rise in German power and authority; Evans points out that on 21 July 1911 Lloyd George, the most pacific member of the Cabinet, stated at a Mansion House dinner: “I am bound to say this, that I believe it is essential in the higher interests, not merely of this country, but of the world, that Britain should at all hazards maintain her place and her prestige amongst the greater Powers of the world”.<sup>50</sup> The desire of Britain to maintain her place and power was already manifesting itself in its naval expansion, but Lloyd George's words were a formal, direct declaration from the British side of its intention to maintain its position among the powers in the world and undoubtedly this position could not be maintained without expanding, or at very least robustly protecting, its colonies.

A key element in the Britain's determination to resist German aggression and to ensure Britain's colonial—and thus economic and political—authority, was the building of a series of state-of-the-art warships, more powerful than any that had previously existed. The symptomatically named “Dreadnought” “was the largest and most powerful battleship of the time”.<sup>51</sup> In other words, it had an iconic status, and to show disrespect to such an icon was a profoundly subversive act, mocking the country's (masculine) power.

What became known as the “Dreadnought Hoax”, and attracted much publicity and even questions in the House of Commons, involved a visit in 1910 to inspect the ship by a group that purported to be the Emperor of Abyssinia and his entourage; in fact the group consisted of Virginia Woolf, her brother Adrian Stephen, Duncan Grant, Horace Cole and other friends, all carefully blacked up and wearing ‘Abyssinian’ robes: “we proposed to visit [the Dreadnought] in the character of the Emperor of Abyssinia and his suite”.<sup>52</sup> The whole trick was organized by Horace Cole, a wealthy practical joker and college friend of Adrian;<sup>53</sup> Adrian Stephen himself indicates that “[t]he idea was suggested to Cole by a naval officer as a matter of fact, and those who made a to-do about the honour of the Navy would have been interested to hear this”.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 333.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Ibid, 334.

<sup>51</sup> S. P. Rosenbaum, ed., *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Adrian Stephen, “The Dreadnought Hoax”, *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*, 7.

<sup>53</sup> Rosenbaum, *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen, 7.

When they reached The Dreadnought, “they were received with dignity” by Admiral McKenna, who was the First Lord of the Admiralty during that time, and the group solemnly inspected Britain's secret new armaments.<sup>55</sup> A few days after the exploit had been discovered, Adrian and his friends tried to apologise, as Virginia Woolf herself confesses in a letter to Violet Dickinson on 8 March 1910:

Adrian and Mr [Duncan] Grant saw McKenna. He merely laughed at them, and supposed that they had come to save themselves. When they said that they wished to apologise in order to get the officers out of the scrape, he was amazed [...] He advised us not to do it again.<sup>56</sup>

It seems that the Dreadnought hoax marked the beginning of the political struggles of Bloomsbury, since it implies direct criticism towards the policy of the British Empire and its desire to expand its power by building an ever more powerful naval force.

The Dreadnought hoax, which is described by Kristin Czarnecki as a “legendary political activity”,<sup>57</sup> epitomises the challenging spirit of Bloomsbury and it put the group into direct confrontation with the prevailing military and political powers. What happened after the incident came to contradict Virginia Woolf's expectation as expressed in a letter to Violet Dickinson in March 1910: “The whole [Dreadnought] affair is at an end; and without a scratch” (*LI*, 423). In fact, as Virginia Woolf explains in her memoir of the Dreadnought hoax, written, we should note, thirty years later, when Bloomsbury again saw its values threatened by world war, this was not the end of the affairs, indeed far from it. A few days after this incident, Virginia Woolf and her brother Adrian, as Woolf narrates, received a direct threat from her cousin, Admiral William Fisher, the flag commander of the Chief Home Fleet, and another naval officer: “[O]ne Sunday morning soon afterwards when there was a ring at the bell; and then I heard a man's voice downstairs. I seemed to recognise the voice. It was my cousin[']s. It was Willy Fisher and

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<sup>55</sup> Nigel Nicolson, ed., *The Flight of the Mind: the Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume I: 1888-1912*, Virginia Stephen (London: Hogarth, 1975), 422.

<sup>56</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Flight of the Mind: the Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume I: 1888-1912* (Virginia Stephen), 423. Hereafter references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *LI*.

<sup>57</sup> Kristin Czarnecki, “Comparative Modernism: The Bloomsbury Group and the Harlem Renaissance”, *Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury, Volume 1: Aesthetic Theory and Literary Practice*, eds. Gina Potts and Lisa Shahriari (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 136.



though I could not hear what he said I could tell that he was saying something very forcible”.<sup>58</sup> After Fisher's visit, Virginia Woolf was told by her brother, Adrian, who ‘looked very upset’, that she and her brother “owed [...their] lives to the British Navy”,<sup>59</sup> as Fisher said, and was only because “[her] brother’s mother was [Willy Fisher’s] Aunt, [that] the rules of the Navy forbade any actual physical punishment”.<sup>60</sup> Thus, by virtue of having a relative in the British Navy, they were saved from facing punishment; as Woolf puts it paraphrasing Fisher's angry words to Adrian: “Did we realise that we ought to be whipped through the streets, did we realise that if we had been discovered we should have been stripped naked and thrown into the sea? And so on and so on”.<sup>61</sup> Other participants in the Dreadnought hoax did not fare so well; William Fisher and his men visited Duncan Grant, took him by force out of his home and beat him:

Duncan Grant found that he was sitting on the floor at the feet of three large men who carried a bundle of canes. Duncan asked where they were taking him? ‘You will see plenty of Dreadnoughts where you’re going’ said Willy Fisher [to Grant...] Duncan Grant stood there like a lamb. It was useless to fight. They were three against one.<sup>62</sup>

Horace Cole also received a visit on behalf of the furious naval authorities; Adrian Stephen describes Cole’s punishment by naval officers: “Cole received them in his sitting-room and they announced that they had come to avenge the honour of the Navy. They proposed to achieve this by beating him with a cane”.<sup>63</sup> Clearly, the violence meted out to some of the group, and the terms in which even the women were spoken to, is indicative that the episode had touched a nerve in the military and political establishment. What had started as an irreverent joke, poking fun at the power of the state, ended with a violence that shows quite how precisely Bloomsbury had baited those that represented the patriarchal status quo.

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<sup>58</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Dreadnought Hoax: Unpublished paper read in the Women’s Institution in Rodmell during the summer of 1940”, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography Volume One Virginia Stephen 1882-1912*, ed. Quentin Bell, 215.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 215-216.

<sup>63</sup> Stephen, 14.

## Bloomsbury and the First World War

Even though the outbreak of the First World War negatively affected Bloomsbury and, as Clive Bell suggests, “disintegrated this group” at least in its first phase, it ultimately led to the group’s success and its fame.<sup>64</sup> The period of the war witnessed the first flourishing of Bloomsbury’s works, though at the same time showed differences in attitudes towards the war among its members. Quentin Bell points out that during the war the vast majority of the nation had, inevitably, adopted patriotic attitudes and those still at Cambridge were part of that majority. There was a spirited determination in Britain to fight and defeat the enemy. The most prevailing ideals, among most people, were that of gallantry, heroism and endurance. The nationalism of people extended to include even art; German art was banished from English galleries and German music from the concert halls.<sup>65</sup> So, people were already prepared to pursue the war in all manner of ways, driven by the state’s propaganda, a propaganda that caused the majority of young men to join the tide of the war. Among them was Rupert Brooke, the close friend of Woolf. Brooke joined the fight motivated by the prevailing climate of patriotism; he was a strong believer in the war as he himself confesses in a letter on 10 November 1914, to Cathleen Nesbitt: “The central purpose of my life, the aim and end of it, now, the thing God wants of me, is to get good at beating Germans”.<sup>66</sup> Observing the danger of this war and being aware of the wave of patriotism that might engulf the young generation, and believing that the war was a profound threat not only to the peaceful life of people, but even to literature and indeed to the existence of Civilisation, Bloomsbury rejected the war. Bloomsbury looked at the war as (a profoundly Apostolic position) unreasonable; it was unnecessary and fundamentally ridiculous, since honour, heroism and patriotism were meaningless, tools used by those who encouraged the war.<sup>67</sup> This is an Apostolic position, since the Apostles had rejected, war, heroism, imperialism, politics and patriotism from the outset.<sup>68</sup> In 1900, for example, E. M. Forster, still an undergraduate at this point, was among those who rejected the patriotism of the Second Boer War; he published a poem in an undergraduate magazine, *Basileona*, in which he wrote:

Elusive prospects of renown

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<sup>64</sup> Clive Bell, “Bloomsbury”, 118.

<sup>65</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, 67.

<sup>66</sup> Rupert Brooke, *The Letters of Rupert Brooke*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 631.

<sup>67</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, 68-69.

<sup>68</sup> Stone, 54.

Do not excite me in the least,  
A Lion fighting for a Crown  
Is hardly an attractive beast.  
If you are anxious to be shot  
For Queen and Country, I am not.<sup>69</sup>

Bloomsbury were influenced by their Cambridge pioneers; Jonathan Atkin puts the view that the older generation of Bloomsbury in emphasising the values of beauty, art and friendship, agreed with G. E. Moore, the Cambridge philosopher, whose writing played an influential role in the formation of the Apostles' thinking. Moore's primary concern was with private states of feeling, not politics or the public world; for Moore good existed in positive states of feeling, in pleasure, created by art and friendship with others. In endorsing such values, Bloomsbury was overwhelmingly aware that warfare, and the attitudes of hatred it involved, was utterly antithetical to all that Moore, and they themselves, held to be of value.<sup>70</sup> In his *Ethics*, published in 1912, G. E. Moore discusses the two concepts of 'right' and 'wrong'; he argues:

For our theory most emphatically does not assert that pleasure is the only thing *intrinsically* good, and pain the only thing *intrinsically* evil. On the contrary, it asserts that any whole which *contains* an excess of pleasure over pain is *intrinsically* good, no matter how much else it may contain besides; and similarly that any whole which contains an excess of pain over pleasure is *intrinsically* bad.<sup>71</sup>

Fundamentally, Bloomsbury's rejection of the First World War, as Atkin suggests, was based on a moral, humanistic and aesthetic motivation rather than a religious or political one.<sup>72</sup> Bloomsbury looked at the war as a real threat to all those values which they considered to constitute the essence of civilisation, across Europe; war was as a source of destruction and bloodshed, used by those who want to gain dominant (material) power. Therefore, through their political activities and literary works, the members of Bloomsbury try to change the world from

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<sup>69</sup> E. M. Forester quoted in Stone, 54-55.

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Atkin, *A War of the Individual: Bloomsbury Attitudes to the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2002), 2.

<sup>71</sup> G. E. Moore, *Ethics* (London: Oxford U. P., 1955), 47.

<sup>72</sup> Atkin, 2.

one being controlled by violent power to another dominated by civilised ideas. In other words, Bloomsbury's works imply a moral message, through which they want to make people be aware of the danger of war.

The activities of Bloomsbury showed that the members did their best to prevent the war, then to stop it and avoid participation in it. Narrating his anti-war activity at Cambridge, before the outbreak of the war, Bertrand Russell, a central Bloomsbury member, indicates that he “collected signatures of a large number of professors and Fellows to a statement in favour of neutrality which appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*”.<sup>73</sup> When the war started, Russell continued showing his protest by undertaking some activities that might help to stop the war: “I addressed many Pacifist meetings, usually without incident, but there was one, in support of the Kerensky revolution, which was more violent. It was at the Brotherhood Church in South-gate Road”.<sup>74</sup> The attempts of Russell and his friends to put an end to this catastrophe were inevitably doomed to failure; their opposition was attacked by the police and members of the public, deceived by what was said by newspapers, and, indeed, by the activities of those newspapers themselves:

Patriotic newspapers distributed leaflets in all the neighbouring public-houses [...] saying that we were in communication with the Germans and signalled to their aeroplanes as to where to drop bombs. This made us somewhat unpopular in the neighbourhood, and a mob presently besieged the church [...] The mob burst in led by a few officers; all except the officers were more or less drunk. The fiercest were viragos who used wooden boards full of rusty nails.<sup>75</sup>

In his objection to the war, Russell seemed—again showing the influence of Apostolic and Bloomsbury discussion—to be dominated by the voice of reason rather than that of emotion: “Love of England is very nearly the strongest emotion I possess, and in appearing to set it aside at such a moment, I was making a very difficult renunciation”.<sup>76</sup> Russell, of course, was motivated by his awareness of the danger and the threat that the war might bring to both humanity and civilisation: “I knew that it was my business to protest, however futile protest might be [...] As a lover of truth, the national propaganda of all the belligerent nations sickened

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<sup>73</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1956), 30.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 31-32.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

me. As a lover of civilisation, the return to barbarism appalled me”.<sup>77</sup> As a result of his being an active pacifist, Russell was punished by the government: “For four and a half months in 1918 I was in prison for Pacifist propaganda”.<sup>78</sup>

Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf and Duncan Grant were also against the war; they directly and actively rejected the war and the men were conscientious objectors to it. None of them fought in this war; most of Bloomsbury appeared to do some agricultural work on farms, or were exempted from military service on medical grounds. Their opposition found voice through the group associated with the pacifism of Garsington.<sup>79</sup> Garsington was the home of Philip Morrell and Lady Ottoline Morrell, friends of several Bloomsbury members, who are described by Leonard Woolf, as also being firmly against the war:

Philip [Morrell] was a Liberal M. P., a supporter of Asquith as against Lloyd George, and politically and socially there was an aura of liberalism or even radicalism about him and Ottoline. They were leading members of that stage army of British progressives who can be relied upon to sign a letter to *The Times* supporting an unpopular cause or protesting against a program or judicial murder.<sup>80</sup>

Before the war, several of the people associated with Bloomsbury used to visit the Morrells every Thursday at Garsington, where they could talk and enjoy the hospitality of Lady Ottoline.<sup>81</sup> Some of Bloomsbury found Garsington as being the only way to escape being involved in the war; it became a kind of haven of Bloomsbury values:

During the war there was a resident sediment of Conscientious Objectors, for Philip had a kind of farm and the Morrells, with their usual high-minded generosity, took on to it a number of C. O.'s to whom the tribunals had given exemption from military service provided that they worked upon the land.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>79</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, 68.

<sup>80</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918* (London: Hogarth, 1964), 198.

<sup>81</sup> See Spalding, 82.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 199-200.

Clive Bell was one of those who worked at Garsington, while Duncan Grant and David Garnett worked at the farm of one of Grant's relatives in Suffolk.<sup>83</sup>

Bloomsbury held conventional heroic *manliness* in disdain; in most of their works they criticise the sense of patriotism and masculinity that lead to war. According to Bloomsbury's attitudes, heroism is not something greatly to be valued. For the most part, of course, a more public antipathy to patriotism and heroism came only with the end of the war and wider knowledge and understanding of the true nature of the slaughter which had taken place in France. But the poets who had seen that reality at first hand, had waded in the squalor of the trenches, began to change their attitudes toward the war earlier, and to speak in a tone of voice quite different from that of 1914.<sup>84</sup> For example, in his diary written while serving on the battlefields, on 22 December 1916, another acquaintance of the Woolfs, Siegfried Sassoon writes: "And the war is settling down in everyone—a hopeless, never-shifting burden. While newspapers and politicians yell and brandish their arms, and the dead rot in their French graves, and the maimed hobble about the streets".<sup>85</sup> Moreover, Sassoon portrayed the misery of the soldiers in most of his war poems, as will be discussed in the First Chapter of this study. Like those of Sassoon, Wilfred Owen's poems, which were not collected and published till 1921, record the suffering of soldiers at the front line; in his poem entitled "Anthem for Doomed Youth", Owen describes the tragic, *unheroic* end of soldiers at the Front:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

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<sup>83</sup> See S. P. Rosenbaum, *The Bloomsbury Group: Memoir Club*, 21.

<sup>84</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, 82.

<sup>85</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried Sassoon's Diaries 1915-1918*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber & Faber 1983), 105.

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.<sup>86</sup>

The tone of Owen's poems is less angry, less sardonic, than that of Sassoon; Owen's dominant tone is elegiac. "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is both an elegy for those who have died in France but also, perhaps even more pertinently for the present discussion, an expression of understanding for those at home, those who have been left with their grief, unassuaged by the comfort and 'closure' that a funeral would provide. It points to a psychological state, a grim sense of emptiness and *endurance* that echoes tones we find in Woolf's post-1918 novels. The awareness of the combatants themselves of the false victory and heroism of the war, can be seen as a justification for Bloomsbury, which stood against the war.

In his book *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918, Lytton Strachey satirises some central aspects of the Victorian era, and in particular its sense of heroism that still dominates his society. By seeing some Victorian iconic figures as possessed of frailties and shortcoming that are less than heroic, Strachey aims at achieving a less unqualified image of a number of public figures who had become emblematic of Victorian values; for Strachey they represented the kind of narrowly-defined English public morality which had contributed to the construction of the patriotism which had led Britain into war. Noel Annan describes Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* as being neither history nor biography; it is a polemical work against Victorian administration and its culture.<sup>87</sup> The lives of Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold and General Gordon are presented in what is ultimately a mode of satire. In Victorian eyes these people had been regarded as heroes and great public figures, but Strachey made them look different; his negative attitudes towards the culture and values which had culminated in war make him present the lives and deeds of these figures as being far from unambiguously serving humanity. In the Preface of *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey indicates that through the lives of these Victorian figures, "[he has] sought to examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth".<sup>88</sup> The 'truth', which Strachey tried to prove in his work, is the disastrous limitations of Victorian values, a mode of conducting oneself which might appear self-sacrificial but which is ultimately related to a desire for power. In the biography of Cardinal Manning, the English Roman Catholic

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<sup>86</sup> Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth", *Poems by Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1921), 11.

<sup>87</sup> Noel Annan, "Bloomsbury and the Leavises", in *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Macmillan, 1987), 23.

<sup>88</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), 7.

Archbishop of Westminster, Strachey shows how this religious man depended upon his relationship with political men, rather than his own deeds, in becoming a great figure and obtaining fame:

Manning was now thirty-eight, and it was clear that he was the rising man in the Church of England. He had many powerful connections: he was the brother-in-law of Samuel Wilberforce, who had been lately made a bishop; he was a close friend of Mr Gladstone, who was a Cabinet Minister; and he was becoming well known in the influential circles of society in London.<sup>89</sup>

In the life of Dr. Thomas Arnold, the historian, supporter of Broad Church Anglicanism and the reforming head master of Rugby School from 1828 to 1841, Strachey portrays Arnold's desire to impose his own set of moral and religious values on English society by imposing them on the young men in his charge who would go on to positions of power:

Dr Arnold agreed. He was convinced of the necessity for reform [...] His great object, throughout his career at Rugby, was, as he repeatedly said, to 'make the school a place of really Christian education' [...] he told [...] his pupils] 'I repeat now: what we must look for here is, first, religious and moral principle; secondly, gentlemanly conduct; thirdly, intellectual ability.'<sup>90</sup>

The desire to have an absolute authority over his subordinates and those in his care, was the dominant feature that shaped the behaviour of Dr. Arnold, in Strachey's view.

Through his portrayal of the life of Florence Nightingale and her contribution in the Crimean war, Strachey portrays the ugly policies of the War Office, which tried to hide the destructiveness of the war and to gain victory and power, through the propaganda constructed around Nightingale. Nightingale, "The Lady with the Lamp", popularised as a heroine for her constant services to wounded soldiers, even at night time, is presented by Strachey as an arrogant woman who, again, loves power:

This remarkable woman was in truth performing the function of an administrative chief. How had this come about? Was she not in reality merely a nurse? Was it not her duty simply to tend the

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 195.



sick? And indeed, was it not as a ministering angel, a gentle 'lady with a lamp' that she actually impressed the minds of her contemporaries?<sup>91</sup>

The fourth figure whom Strachey mocks at is Major-General Charles Gordon, who was famous for his own heroism, a heroic image that led to—indeed arose from— his death. Narrating the death of Gordon, who was killed during a revolt in British Sudan, in which he was a governor general, Strachey portrays the supposed heroism of Gordon as being in fact ultimately circumstantial and unheroic:

The sudden appearance of the Arabs, the complete collapse of the defence, saved him the necessity of making up his mind. He had been on the roof, in his dressing-gown, when the attack began; and he had only time to hurry to his bedroom, to slip on a white uniform, and to seize up a sword and revolver [...] The crowd was led by four of the fiercest of the Mahdi's followers [...] Gordon met them at the top of the staircase. For a moment, there was a deathly pause, while he stood in silence, surveying his antagonists. Then it is said that Taha Shahin, the Dongolawi, cried in a loud voice, 'Mala' oun el yom yomek!' (O curséd one, your time is come), and plunged his spear into the Englishman's body. His only reply was a gesture of contempt.<sup>92</sup>

Through the portrayal of Gordon's death, Strachey shows how military men are glorified by a false heroism, ultimately gained by the actions of their soldiers rather than their courage.

In presenting these people in an irreverent way, Strachey decreases the importance of the Victorian values they had come to epitomise. Michael Rosenthal suggests that "*Eminent Victorians* is a fiercely moral treatise excoriating the previous age's superstition, self-righteousness, mindless public-school attitudes, and blatant nationalism which Strachey felt had made the war inevitable".<sup>93</sup> For Strachey those who motivated people to fight in the First World War and encouraged the sense of patriotism and heroism, seemed to inherit such features and attitudes from the previous generation, represented by the four Victorian figures. In other words, the desire of these figures to have an authoritative power influenced those who led the world into the catastrophe of the First World War. On the other hand, Strachey's whole criticism of these Victorian figures is also a direct attack on historical biographers, who immortalise such figures and enshrine their values as being 'great'. Relatedly, in "The War from the Street", an essay

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 315-316.

<sup>93</sup> Rosenthal, 29.

published in 1919, Virginia Woolf implies what is argued in *Eminent Victorians*; she agrees with D. Bridgman Metchim in reviewing his work *Our Own History of the War from a South London View* that “the history of war is not and never will be written from our point of view [that of ordinary people]. The suspicion that this applies to wars in the past also has been much increased by living through four years almost entirely composed of what journalists call ‘historic days’”.<sup>94</sup> Woolf sees that the history of war is determined by what is written rather than what is actually happened: “No one who has taken stock of his own impressions since 4 August 1914, can possibly believe that history as it is written closely resembles history as it is lived”.<sup>95</sup>

Due to his negative attitudes towards the war, Strachey endured attacks against him. Quentin Bell indicates that in 1918, Lytton Strachey was condemned for being an iconoclast.<sup>96</sup> The objections against Strachey continued even after his death; his image is caricatured by his enemies as that of a camp, rather unworldly figure, and duly dismissed.<sup>97</sup>

John Maynard Keynes, the economist and a central member of Bloomsbury, had advised the Government since 1914, assisting the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George, and from 1915 had served in the Treasury.<sup>98</sup> In 1919 he published his book *The Economic Consequence of the Peace*. Keynes criticises what had been discussed and decided at Versailles in the Treaty that ended the First World War. He concentrates on the failure of that treaty, pointing, rightly, to the damage that would be caused to the German economy and indicates that the European future cannot be achieved by weakening, economically and politically, any European country: “Europe is solid with herself. France, Germany, Italy, Austria, and Holland, Russia and Romania and Poland, throb together, and their structure and civilisation are essentially one. They flourished together, they have rocked together in a war, [...], and they may fall together”.<sup>99</sup> Keynes’s book through which the author presents economic, moral and political arguments, seems to be similar to Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*, especially the method used in the political attack. The latter reduces the importance of the Victorian heroes in his book, while the famous war figures like

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<sup>94</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The War from the Street”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume III 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1988), 3.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>96</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, 81.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Holroyd, “Bloomsbury and the Fabians”, *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Macmillan, 1987), 42.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes: Hopes Betrayed, 1883-1920* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>99</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequence of the Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 3.

Wilson, Clemenceau and Lloyd George are equally diminished in Keynes's angry polemic analysis. Keynes presents the power and arrogance of such men to be the real cause of the war and fears, with considerable insight, the consequences of their actions at Versailles.<sup>100</sup> He describes its political decisions, taken at the meetings held in Paris in 1919, and the main outcome, the Treaty of Versailles, in vigorous polemical terms, as manifesting a total lack of reasonableness:

There at the nerve centre of the European system, [...]; the futility and smallness of man before the great events confronting him; the mingled significance and unreality of the decisions; levity, blindness, insolence, confused cries from without,—all the elements of ancient tragedy were there. Seated indeed amid the theatrical trappings of the French Saloons of State, one could wonder if the extraordinary visages of Wilson and of Clemenceau, with their fixed hue and unchanging characterisation, were really faces at all and not the tragic-comic masks of some strange drama or puppet-show.<sup>101</sup>

S. P. Rosenbaum points out that Keynes refers to this conference in letters sent to Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, from Paris; the content of these letters was read by Vanessa in a Memoir Club meeting, years after his death:

[I]n 1957 [...] Vanessa read excerpts copied out from Keynes' letters of how he was at the very first civilian negotiations in Germany, how later was engaged in secret meetings with the enemy [...] how he was living without any private life whatever in a state of nervous excitement for weeks, and finally, just before he resigned, how bad the treaty was despite Lloyd George's desperate wish now to change it.<sup>102</sup>

There is no doubt that Keynes's book played an important role in drawing the attention of people to the great mistakes and the wrong political strategy adopted by the Allies represented by their leaders. It was again, finally, an attack from a Bloomsbury perspective on the unreasoned assertion of power.

Being the central figures in Bloomsbury Group, Virginia Woolf and her husband rejected the war and showed their pacifism through their literary works and activities. For Virginia Woolf, it was

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<sup>100</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, 87.

<sup>101</sup> Keynes, *The Economic Consequence of the Peace*, 3-4.

<sup>102</sup> See S. P. Rosenbaum, *The Bloomsbury Group: Memoir Club*, 84-85.

not only until 1915 that she could again begin writing some of her diaries, and even then, it seems, irregularly.<sup>103</sup> Her psychological illness made her unaware of the first part of the war, especially the first two years; even in the period of her recovery, as she herself describes in January 1915, she felt her daily life “like a leafless tree; there are all sorts of colours in it, if you look closely. But the outline is bare enough” (*DI*, 30). She was not allowed to work or read anything, and in replying to the letters she received in 1915 (the period of her illness) she “was only allowed to write cards”,<sup>104</sup> or “to write to the end of the page which has a paralysing effect” (*LII*, 64). Thus, the real activity of Woolf during the war started in 1917, a year in which she started to be involved both in direct activity and in writing warnings against the effects of the war.

Virginia Woolf involved herself in giving lectures to the Co-operative Women’s Guild, which was founded in 1883, and was a self-governing body within the Co-Operative Movement.<sup>105</sup> For four years, Virginia Woolf presided over the monthly meeting of the Guild, starting, in 1916, a year in which she was not fully recovered; she used to provide speakers, often her friends and people she knew. In November 1917, Woolf refers to one of those meetings: “L[eonard] is making up a lecture he’s giving at Hammersmith; I’m to preside over the Women’s Guild” (*DI*, 76). Woolf devoted her own lectures to the Women’s Co-operative Guild to discussing how to end the war; in July 1918, peace was the main topic of Adrian Stephen, Woolf’s brother, and he motivated women to express their attitudes against the war:

Adrian & Karin [his wife] dined here last night, & he spoke to the Guild on Peace—very composed, clear, well spoken, putting on his spectacles & reading in his pleasant intellectual voice from notes. He has traces of the judicial mind & manner. The women were more stirred than usual, [...] they would all have peace tomorrow, on any terms, & abuse our government for leading us on after a plan of its own. (*DI*, 165)

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<sup>103</sup> See Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 160.

<sup>104</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1922*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1976), 63. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *LII*.

<sup>105</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, ed., Footnote 19, *DI*, 8.

Woolf's meeting with these women ended with "ask[ing] them to join a Peace Meeting in Hyde Park on Sunday" (*DI*, 165). Anne Olivier Bell points out that this meeting was held on 14 July 1918 with the support of the British Workers' League.<sup>106</sup>

In addition to her practical activities, Virginia Woolf's publications in fiction and non-fiction, during the First World War and after it show her negative attitudes towards the war. Nigel Nicolson writes that "Virginia [Woolf] had no interest in politics".<sup>107</sup> But this is not the whole story, as is already apparent. Her very involvement in the social effects of the war, and her response to it, made her political. Indeed, politics became part of Virginia Woolf's daily conversation with her husband, as Cecil Woolf shows: "At lunch [...] Conversation is lively, boisterous, even, full of surprises, of unpredictable questions, fantasy, books, politics and laughter".<sup>108</sup> Moreover, Woolf's essays and war novels show that Woolf cannot detach herself from the political atmosphere that was dominant during her times, since war is the product of politics. Some of the books that Woolf reviewed in the *TLS* discussed the effects of the First World War that disturbed the peace of the human individual and threatened his/her future. In her essay "Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth", written in 1916, Woolf shows her acute awareness of the war's impact, even on an English landscape imbued with history:

In this district, for instance, there are curious ridges or shelves in the hillside, which the local antiquaries variously declare to have been caused by ice-pressure, or by the pickaxes of prehistoric man. But since the war we have made far better use of them. Not so very long ago, we say a hundred years at most, England was invaded, and, the enemy landing on the Down at the back of our village, we dug trenches to withstand him, much like those in use in Flanders now. You may see them with your own eyes. And this, somehow, is proof that if the Germans land they will land here, which although terrifying, also gratifies our sense of our own importance.<sup>109</sup>

In 1917 Virginia Woolf wrote her essay "Before Midnight" in which she reviewed a volume of short stories by Elinor Mordaunt; in this essay Woolf refers to the dark atmosphere of the war and its horror, especially the naval battles in the English Channel:

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<sup>106</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, Footnote 8, *DI*, 165.

<sup>107</sup> Nigel Nicolson, *Recollections of Virginia Woolf*, 130.

<sup>108</sup> Cecil Woolf, "Back to Bloomsbury", *Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury, Volume 1: Aesthetic Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. Gina Potts and Lisa Shahriari (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

<sup>109</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Heard on the Downs", in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume II: 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1987), 41.

[W]e do not like the war in fiction, and we do not like the supernatural. We can only account for the first of these prejudices by the feeling that the vast events now shaping across the Channel are towering over us too closely and too tremendously to be worked into fiction without a powerful jolt in the perspective.<sup>110</sup>

Woolf, who experienced the war as a civilian, tried to know what was actually going on at the Front; she embarked on reviewing the work of the war poets, who were themselves combatants. Hence her essays like “Mr Sassoon’s Poems” in 1917, “Two Soldier Poets” in 1918, show Woolf’s seeking to understand the suffering and misery of the soldiers, a suffering that she later reflected in her post-war novels.

For Leonard Woolf, the war was the product of specific powers: “[T]he Austrian and German governments were mainly responsible, but which our government probably could have prevented and should never have become involved in”.<sup>111</sup> The causes of war in general and how to avoid war in the future became Leonard Woolf’s concern during the conflict; in 1915, Leonard Woolf started writing a report discussing war and its causes: “In 1915 I worked like a fanatical or dedicated mole on the sources of my subject, international relations, foreign affairs, the history of war and peace”.<sup>112</sup> The work was published in 1916 in a book called *International Government*, a book which “was used extensively by the government committee which produced the British proposals for a League of Nations laid before the Peace Conference, and also by the British delegation to the Versailles Conference”.<sup>113</sup> In this book, Leonard Woolf stresses the role of International Law in keeping peace: “[U]nless there are certain general rules generally observed regulating the conduct of nations to one another, and forming the constitution of the society of nations, a peaceful solution of international differences will always be doubtful”.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, Leonard Woolf devoted part of his time lecturing to Co-operative societies. Narrating his experience in this role, he writes:

The most interesting experience I had trying to educate co-operators was during the 1914 war. I think it was the Co-operative union which asked me to give a series of lectures on international

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<sup>110</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Before Midnight”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume II: 1912-1918*, 87.

<sup>111</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 177.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 185.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 189.

<sup>114</sup> Leonard Woolf, *International Government* (New York: Brentano's, 1916), 12.

<https://archive.org/details/internationalgo00commgoog>.

government to a number of Lancashire and Cheshire Co-operative Societies. I spent some time going from society to a society and giving a lecture in the evening to audiences ranging in numbers from 30 or 40 to 100 or a little more.<sup>115</sup>

In the post-war period, Leonard Woolf continued writing against war and discussing its disastrous effects, caused by the strategy of political men. In his essay “Statesmen and Diplomats”, in 1927, Leonard Woolf argues that the statesmen of the First World War played a negative role on the political stage of their time and they led the whole nation to be sunk into the deep darkness of the war:

[T]he statesmen of the Great War cut helpless figures. They seem to be completely at the mercy of circumstances, in the grip of forces which they do not understand and which they do not even pretend to control; lawyers, rhetoricians, and schoolmasters whom a savage and ironical god has set as captains of rudderless ships in a great storm.<sup>116</sup>

Leonard Woolf is very conscious that, even given the disastrous consequences of the actions of statesmen and generals, the crop of biographies that appeared after the war still did not confront the bleak truth: “The war momentarily created a wider interest in the history of statesmanship, and the result was a sudden outcrop of a large number of books [...]; most of them are tendentious [*sic*] and superficial”.<sup>117</sup> This underlines again Bloomsbury's rejection of heroism and heroic figures; Lytton Strachey, as we have discussed previously, mocks at what are considered heroes and great men, since they are regarded as enemies of civilisation. Heroes and great men are too often tempted to adopt violent actions in order to be great; in this way they are poisonous things to civilisation. This is why E. M. Forster disdains 'great men': “I distrust Great Men. They produce a desert of uniformity round them and often a pool of blood too”.<sup>118</sup>

Like her husband and most of her Bloomsbury friends, Virginia Woolf also disregards heroism and ‘great men’, since she considers them as being the real cause of war, a view she shows in most of her non-fictional works, like her essay-review “The War from the Street”, in 1919, and her post-war novels, as well as the books and novels written in the Thirties and during the

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<sup>115</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again*, 111-112.

<sup>116</sup> Leonard Woolf, “Statesmen and Diplomats”, *Essays on Literature, History, Politics, Etc.* (London: Hogarth, 1927), 184.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

<sup>118</sup> E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1951), 82.

Second World War. In her post-war novels, Woolf presents young men who pay with their lives the price of the enthusiasm and heroism that motivated them to be involved in war or even be in dangerous colonial areas, leaving behind them relatives and friends who suffer their loss. Young men, like Jacob Flanders in *Jacob's Room*, Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Andrew Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, and Percival in *The Waves* are all victims of heroism and the enthusiastic sense of duty. Through these novels, Woolf stresses death as a consequence of the irrationality of war and its equally irrational heroism, a death that engulfed millions of young men. As Woolf writes in her review-essay "Montaigne" in 1924: "But enough of death; it is life that matters."<sup>119</sup>

Virginia Woolf sees war as a threat to Civilisation itself, a view she shared with her friends in August 1914: "All people expected an invasion [...] Clive [Bell] was having tea with Ottoline, and they talked and talked, and said it was the end of civilisation" (*LII*, 51). It is a fear that permeates Woolf's post-war novels; Britain and her allies might have triumphed in 1918, but the sense of the vulnerability of Civilisation, of all that she and her friends held dear, was never finally going to go away, especially as the clouds of war gathered again in the 1930s.

Leonard Woolf also looks at the war as a real threat to civilisation. In his autobiography of the years 1911-1918, Leonard Woolf describes his shock when he heard about the outbreak of the First World War: "That was how I first learnt that war was inevitable and that 19<sup>th</sup>-century civilization was ending".<sup>120</sup> In his essay entitled "A Civilized Man", published in 1927, Leonard Woolf, argues how history proves that war is an obstacle to the achievement and continuation of Civilisation:

[C]ivilized people have been overwhelmed, and everyone has been plunged back again into the misery of barbarism. In Athens they contrived to blot out civilization by one the most futile wars that has ever been fought; the nascent civilization of the Renaissance was overwhelmed by the savagery of Catholics and Reformers, an outbreak of religious barbarism which culminated in one of the most horrible events of history, the Thirty Years' War; in 1914 the Great War was only just in time to prevent Europe from becoming civilized.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup>Virginia Woolf, "Montaigne", *The Common Reader: First Series* (London: Hogarth, 1962), 95.

<sup>120</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again*, 145.

<sup>121</sup> Leonard Woolf, "A Civilized Man", *Essays on Literature, History, Politics, Etc.*, 150.



Leonard Woolf suggests that civilisation cannot be obtained without its essential qualities, the values that he and his wife held dear:

There was such a moment at Athens four hundred years before the Christ; another at the beginning of the sixteenth century; another perhaps at the beginning of twentieth. The essence of such intellectual and social civilization is reason, tolerance, freedom, democracy, a kind of communal altruism and goodwill; the essence of barbarism is unreason, intolerance, tyranny, superstition, and mystic belief that there is some virtue in making as many people as possible miserable.<sup>122</sup>

Leonard Woolf in this essay focuses on the importance of freedom, physical and intellectual freedom, since they are the essential things in a civilized society. Being a supporter of Erasmus, who was described by him as being “one of the first Europeans who refused to believe in the blessing of war”, Leonard Woolf adopts the notion of rebellion as a means to have a civilised society.<sup>123</sup> In this case, Leonard Woolf agrees with Maynard Keynes’s view: “Against political tyranny and injustice Revolution is a weapon”.<sup>124</sup> This means that some of Bloomsbury’s members adopt the choice of actual physical struggle in facing tyranny, because revolution itself would involve the resistance to power.

Like Leonard Woolf, Clive Bell regarded war as a menace to civilisation; he devotes his book *Civilisation*, published in 1928, to the definition of civilisation: “[The] self-conscious training is a peculiarity of civilisation; the ensuing enjoyment, the *good states of mind* that come of it, is the end to which civilization is a means. ‘A means,’ I say: for though civilization is the most fecund that we know of, it is not the only means to good”.<sup>125</sup> According to Bell “civilization must have security, leisure economic freedom, and liberty to think, feel, and experiment”.<sup>126</sup> Clive Bell, here, argues that war prevents the human individual from being civilised; it is a real obstacle to building a civilized society. Civilisation cannot be obtained by imposing power upon others, or encouraging a sense of patriotism; without having people liberated in their ways of thinking and feeling, there will be no civilisation. Instead there will be a dominating power that leads to an irrationality that ultimately might create violence:

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>124</sup> Keynes, 277.

<sup>125</sup> Clive Bell, *Civilization* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1941), 203. My emphasis.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 208.

Irrational and uncompromising belief, blind patriotism and loyalty, have often been means to sublime states of mind, to good therefore; but they are not civilization, and to civilization more often than not have proved inimical. Civilization is a particular means to good: and we have to be careful not to assume that anything we like or respect is part of it.<sup>127</sup>

In her diary in May 1928, Virginia Woolf documents Leonard Woolf's comment on Bell's *Civilisation*: "Clive's book [Civilisation] out—a very superficial one, L[eonard] says" (*DIII*, 184). However, though Clive Bell and Leonard Woolf differ in their ways of achieving civilisation, since the first rejects 'uncompromising belief' and the second encourages revolution and rebellion, they have the same view that a civilised society is characterised as civilised by its intellectual capacity, its capacity for reason, rather than by its military machine and concern for power.

In spite of the fact that he rejects war, and sees it as dangerous to civilisation, Bertrand Russell, albeit writing many years later, proposes a different emphasis again of the means of achieving civilisation. In his opinion, if a struggle is used as a means to achieve civilisation, it can be useful and fruitful. In this case, Russell even justifies some kinds of war, and believes in 'successful wars'; he regards the wars of Alexander and Caesar, for instance, as ultimately being good:

Now take, to go back into ancient history, Alexander and Caesar. They were both great conquerors, they both engaged in wars which hadn't a legal justification, but I think the conquests that both of them made did good. Alexander's conquests established Hellenism throughout the Near East, spread the knowledge of the Greek language, and preserved for us the cultural heritage of Greece [...] Caesar conquered Gaul and made Gaul a part of the civilised world and incidentally produced the French language which we all so much admire—which wouldn't have existed but for Caesar.<sup>128</sup>

But the First World War is seen by Russell as having been a meaningless struggle, and indeed it ultimately created another conflict, the Second World War, a view he emphasises years after the end of the First World War. In a transcription of a television series broadcast in 1960, Russell still regards the War as an unjustified mistake that led ultimately to the rise of the Nazis in the post-war period: "Yes, I think England should have been neutral. I said so at the time and I still

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>128</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Bertrand Russell Speaks his Mind* (London: Arthur Barker, 1960), 36-37.

stick to that. I think if we had remained neutral in the First World War it would have been rather a shorter war [...and] we should not have had Nazis and we should not have had the Communists”.<sup>129</sup> Bloomsbury's negative response to the war was, consistently, a kind of moral and humanistic response, aimed at saving Europe from retreating from the long progress to civilisation. The War led Europe to be involved in destruction and bloodshed rather than achieving any sort of progress.

Quentin Bell attributes Bloomsbury's success in the years after the war to the shift in prevailing opinions, which moved closer to Bloomsbury's disbelief in the war. There is no doubt that the revelation of the cost of the war, in terms of death, and human suffering, led to the realisation on the part of many people of the war's falseness. And in turn this new awareness, fostered in part by Bloomsbury's writing in its various forms, helped to change the negative reaction of people towards Bloomsbury.<sup>130</sup> Virginia Woolf herself wrote in 1928: “Bloomsbury today revives” (*DIII*, 175). The period between 1924 and 1931 was a time of Bloomsbury's flourishing; it was a time that shapes the group's identity. Bloomsbury was reunited after a period of being scattered by the war.<sup>131</sup>

However, the beginning of the Thirties witnessed tragic events in the life of Bloomsbury's members. As a group, in this period, “Bloomsbury was but a shadow of its former self”.<sup>132</sup> The deaths of Lytton Strachey in 1931 and Roger Fry in 1934 inevitably had a negative effect on the social interaction of the group; as Quentin Bell suggests, these deaths affected the group and somewhat faded its brilliance.<sup>133</sup> Michael Rosenthal makes a link between the death of Julian Bell, Woolf's nephew, whose death will be discussed in the Chapter on the 1930s, and Bloomsbury's end: “If we want to locate the end of Bloomsbury with a date as sublimely arbitrary as the one Woolf uses to indicate the month when human character changed, it would be 18 July 1937. It was on that day that Julian Bell, one of the younger Bloomsberries [...], was killed”.<sup>134</sup> Thus, the Thirties that witnessed the rise of Fascism and the Spanish Civil War, marked the end of Bloomsbury as a group that has regular meetings; but this does not mark the

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>130</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury* 83.

<sup>131</sup> Quentin Bell, *Bloomsbury*, 83.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>134</sup> Rosenthal, 32.

end of the friendships between the members. Their friendships continued, since “[t]he best of their legacies is their concept of friendship” and the relationship within the group did not stop.<sup>135</sup> They kept in touch by irregular visits to Virginia Woolf at Rodmell and frequently stayed for the weekends, as Louie Mayer the servant of the Woolfs assets:

Of course, her relations who lived nearby came to see her all the time—particularly her sister Vanessa, and her niece Angelica. Mrs. Woolf was always delighted to see them [...] When Mrs. Woolf was well they invited special friends to stay, most of them lived in London.<sup>136</sup>

Moreover, Bloomsbury kept in touch by letters; for instance, Ethel Smyth “not only came many times to Monks House, she also wrote a letter to Mrs. Woolf nearly every day”.<sup>137</sup> Virginia Woolf’s volume of letters written from 1936 till 1941 proves that most of these letters were devoted to her Bloomsbury friends.

### **Virginia Woolf in the Thirties and the Second World War**

With the rise of Fascism and Hitler to power in the Thirties, Virginia Woolf became more aware of the renewed threat of modes of inhuman violence that would rival even the slaughter of 1914-1918. Actual warfare broke out in 1936, as the bitterly-fought Civil War in Spain unleashed forces that threatened all of Europe once more. Woolf herself lived in an “extraordinary depth of despair”,<sup>138</sup> caused by Julian Bell’s decision to go to Spain, a decision that made Woolf unable even to go on writing *The Years*, the novel which she was working on: “Now the Years will completely die out from my mind” (DV, 67). Woolf’s despair is increased and turned into deep grief after the death of her nephew. The death of this young man occurred while Woolf was engaged in writing *Three Guineas*, which she published in 1938; the violence in Spain stimulates Woolf to start writing this book, in which she points out the brutality of the Spanish Civil war against civilians, especially children and women, and the urgent need to stop war in the future.

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<sup>135</sup> Nigel Nicolson, “Bloomsbury: The Myth and the Reality”, 22.

<sup>136</sup> Louie Mayer, “Virginia Woolf: A Recollection”, *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Criticism*, ed. Thomas S. W. Lewis (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 4.

<sup>137</sup> Mayer, 5.

<sup>138</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. V: 1936-1941*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1984), 54. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as DV.

In both *The Years* (1937) and *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf again argues that war is the product of dictators, a new generation of so-called ‘great men’, whose love of fame and power led them to wage war and ultimately to commit new forms of brutality. Woolf’s view of the masculine love of greatness and power as encouraging war is developed in her essay “Women Must Weep” in 1938, in which she directly addresses men: “Obviously there is for you some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting which we have never felt or enjoyed”.<sup>139</sup> Again, Woolf in this period is of the view that “the great majority of men [...] are to-day in favour of war”.<sup>140</sup>

By the end of 1938, faced by Hitler’s annexation of Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, and when “[w]ar seemed around the corner again. Question what Hitler will do, when he’ll do it” (*DV*, 165), Woolf was again under acute stress as she saw once more the inevitability of another catastrophic threat to Civilisation by the irrational forces of (masculine) power. Most of her non-fictional works, including her diaries and letters are suffused with the public tension; she notes in September 1938: “The news as black as possible. Hitler has at any rate cursed, & Goering spat: nothing said till tomorrow” (*DV*, 168).

In the Second World War, the pressure on Virginia Woolf seemed to be quite different from the other wars that she experienced. Her non-fictional works, especially her diaries, record the war with daily exasperation, deep suffering and increasing fear. In these works, Woolf registers the danger of the intensive air raids to civilians; for example, in her essay “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, in 1940, she emphasises that it is civilians, not combatants, which are the direct targets of the machines of the war and this time she herself was directly involved: “The sound of sawing overhead has increased. All the searchlights are erect. They point at a spot exactly above this roof. At any moment a bomb may fall on this very room”.<sup>141</sup> The acute threat of the expected invasion of England by the Germans, and the horror of the Nazi violence to Jews, made Virginia Woolf, the wife of a Jewish husband, endure an increasing anxiety that ultimately made her discuss with her husband what they would do if the Germans marched into England.<sup>142</sup> They

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<sup>139</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Women Must Weep”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941*, ed. Stuart N Clarke (London: Hogarth, 2011), 135.

<sup>140</sup> “Women Must Weep”, 136.

<sup>141</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941*, ed. Stuart N Clarke (London: Hogarth, 2011), 244.

<sup>142</sup> After the Second World War, a black book containing a list of over 2, 300 prominent British citizens was discovered among the papers of Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler. The book titled *Sonderfahndungsliste*, dated 1940, contained a list of politicians, writers and journalists who were to be immediately arrested if Germany successfully

knew very well the inevitable fate of Jews in the European countries invaded by Hitler. Hence, the stress and anxiety of Woolf seemed to be increased day by day, an anxiety that is recorded not only in her non-fictional works, but also in her final novel *Between the Acts* that shows how the coming war broods over the whole people of *Pointz Hall*, the village where the action of the novel occurs. Again Woolf here, in *Between the Acts*, deals with war not only through a direct reference to the threat of the war, but through the implicit hints of the anxiety of the period she herself lived and suffered, represented by the flux of time and process, images of the sea and flowing water that fill most of the scenes of this novel. Given the presence of such images, embodying the threat of the sweeping away of all she held dear, there is a terrible inevitability in the way by which Virginia Woolf ended her life, as the war continued to rage.

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invaded Britain. This included Virginia Woolf and her husband. See <http://virginiawoolfblog.com/virginia-woolf-and-hitlers-blacklist/>.

## Chapter One: Virginia Woolf's Response to the First World War

**“Suddenly one has come to notice the war everywhere”.<sup>1</sup>**

Owing to her psychological illness, Virginia Woolf was not aware of periods of the First World War, especially the first two years, since she was often highly, even violently disturbed. Leonard Woolf asserts that “[t]here were two insane stages, one lasting from the summer of 1913 to the summer of 1914 and the other from January 1915, to the winter of 1915; there was an interlude of sanity between the summer of 1914 and January, 1915”.<sup>2</sup> Describing the years of the war, Leonard Woolf asserts: “Our life during those four years was dominated not only by the war, but also by Virginia’s illness”.<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf’s full recovery from her illness took a long time, since there are no diary entries from the middle of February 1915 till the beginning of August 1917. This confirms Quentin Bell’s recollection that Woolf “very slowly returned to normal life, shaken, older-looking and heavier”.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Lady Robert Cecil on 29 September 1915, Woolf herself describes her life of struggling with her illness as “[b]ed-walk-bed-walk-bed-sleep”.<sup>5</sup> For the Woolfs, this awful private insecurity coalesced with, and in many ways must have exacerbated, their awareness of the public insecurity, the sense of threat which everyone was experiencing on the home front. Leonard Woolf himself comments:

Meanwhile the public nightmare of the war also dragged itself on, but became continually more oppressive and terrible. In the first year of the war I was so entangled in the labyrinth of Virginia’s illness—the psychological struggle, the perpetual problems of nurses and doctors, the sense of shifting insecurity—that I do not think that I had time to consider my own personal relation to the war and the fighting. But as the year waned and the fighting waxed and Virginia gradually grew better, I was forced to consider my position.<sup>6</sup>

Recovery from her illness only meant, of course, that Virginia Woolf had to face and endure the bitterness of the war as it was affecting relatives and friends. The war saw the death of three

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. I: 1915-1919*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1977), 100. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *DI*.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918* (London: Hogarth, 1964), 160.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. I: 1915-1919*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1922*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1976), 64. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *LII*.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 176.

relatives and the wounding of another, and the pain of such events, both private and more public, permeates her literary work in the ensuing years.<sup>7</sup> Woolf's essays written during the war and her post-war novels convey her attitudes and response to the war itself and to show the horror and fear of the war that she, her relatives and friends had experienced.

### **Woolf and the War's Patriotism**

The outbreak of the First World War was, of course, accompanied by a wave of propaganda that encouraged men to fight. Recruitment offices opened everywhere in London and recruitment posters were pasted on walls from the very beginning of the war, assuring young men that: "Your King and Country need You".<sup>8</sup> For many the war was a chance to redeem the nation's manhood; as George Robb points out, 'muscular Christianity', as well as a range of new activities for boys and young men, in the years leading up to the war, can be seen as an antidote to a sense that, in the view of some, Edwardian society was becoming decadent, and men softer and more effeminate: "The war, it was hoped, would regenerate manliness in men and femininity in women".<sup>9</sup> Young men showed increasing enthusiasm to join the war and by the thousand they voluntarily enlisted as soldiers. In spite of the fact that Leonard Woolf was against the war, considering it as a "senseless and useless war",<sup>10</sup> his brothers, Cecil and Philip Woolf, "joined up from the first day of the war. They had a passion for horses and riding and had joined the Inns of Court regiment a year or two before 1914".<sup>11</sup> The riding is not necessarily militaristic, of course. But clearly they saw the war as an opportunity to use this expertise—and presumably they were indeed patriotic, not sharing Leonard's reservations. Accordingly, their enthusiasm motivated them to confront the danger of the war by enlisting in the British army. Their enthusiasm seems fairly quickly to have been blunted by the actuality of army routine at home in England; Woolf comments in her diary on 12 January 1915: "In fact they are both entirely sick of the army, & see no chance of going to the front. Nevertheless, Cecil thinks of being a permanent soldier, because the life is better than a Barrister's life. On the other hand, he & Philip may go to the colonies"

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<sup>7</sup> As well as the death of Leonard Woolf's brother, Virginia Woolf writes in a letter to her sister expressing her pain, caused by the death of two of her cousins, who were killed in the war. See Virginia Woolf, *LII*, 100.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Jerry White, *Zeppelin Nights: London in the First World War* (London: Bodley Head, 2014), 33.

<sup>9</sup> George Robb, *British Culture and the First World War* (London: Palgrave, 2002), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 177.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 177.



(DI, 16). It seems that Leonard Woolf's brothers here were fully accepting of the sense of militarism and patriotism that make them eager to join the Front without thinking of the futility of such an ambition. But Virginia Woolf fears what would happen if her brothers-in-law did go to the France "Cecil has a machine gun, which may lead to his going, & if so, almost certainly to his being killed" (DI, 34). Two years later, on 3 December 1917, Woolf's fears came painfully true: "On Sunday we heard of Cecil's death, & Philip's wounds" (DI, 83). Both Woolf and her husband were profoundly shocked by the fact of both brothers being casualties, in the same action; Leonard Woolf writes: "it was as if one had suddenly received a violent blow on the head".<sup>12</sup> As well as her brothers-in-law, other close friends of Virginia Woolf had responded to the spirit of patriotism in England, and paid the ultimate price. Following his sense of heroic patriotism, Woolf's friend Rupert Brooke joined the army to meet his tragic end in April 1915 on the island of Skyros, where he died from blood-poisoning.<sup>13</sup> His death occurred while Woolf was still struggling with her psychological illness; it was thus a few months after his death that she expressed her pain, in a letter in November 1915, to Kathrine Cox, Brooke's girlfriend, who also joined the war through her "services in the medical line" (LII, 70); Woolf tells her: "I am afraid that all my friends are dead" (LII, 70). The exaggeration is a measure of the depth of Woolf's feelings of loss and anxiety at this point. Woolf reviewed Brooke's life in her essay "Rupert Brooke" in 1918, published in *The Times Literary Supplement*; as she notes in her diary in July 1918: "I should like to explain Rupert to the public" (DI, 170). Woolf, who believes that "patriotism is a base emotion" (DI, 5) rather than the outcome of reason, describes Brooke, especially when he was at Cambridge, as being dominated by 'sensitivities':

[T]he whole effect of Rupert Brooke in these days was a compound of vigour and of great sensitiveness. Like most sensitive people, he had his methods of self-protection; his pretence now to be this and now to be that [...] he was not only very sincere, but passionately in earnest about the things he cared for.<sup>14</sup>

The vitality, passion and earnestness that Brooke had, made him immediately responsive to the prevailing atmosphere of patriotism in 1914; it was an influential response, especially among his

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>13</sup> John H. Johnston, *English Poetry of The First World War: A Study in the Evolution of Lyric and Narrative Form* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1964), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Rupert Brooke", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1987), 279-280.

contemporaries since, from his Cambridge years, Brooke had been a charismatic figure, and his passionate ‘pagan’ life-style widely influential, as Woolf knew:

Under his influence the country near Cambridge was full of young men and women walking barefoot, sharing his passion for bathing and fish diet, disdaining book learning, and proclaiming that there was something deep and wonderful in the man who brought the milk and in the woman who watched the cows.<sup>15</sup>

In Woolf’s view, Rupert Brooke was not only one of “the type of English young manhood at its healthiest and most vigorous”,<sup>16</sup> but was also “one of those leaders who spring up from time to time and show their power most clearly by subjugating their own generation”.<sup>17</sup> It was but a short step for such a man from his passionate embrace of the physical life to expressing that masculine vigour when the call came: “No one could have doubted that as soon as war broke out he would go without hesitation to enlist”.<sup>18</sup> Woolf in her essay now sees what has happened to Brooke and his Cambridge contemporaries as a tragedy; his generation of young men are now “for the most part scattered or dead”, the victims of the war.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Woolf was aware of the propaganda of the war that caused the death of millions of young men and injured others who joined the war trying to prove their manliness like Brooke, Philip Woolf and Siegfried Sassoon, who ends his military service suffering shell shock.

Virginia Woolf looks at the First World War as a “preposterous masculine fiction” (*LII*, 76), a view that she herself stresses in most of her fictional and non-fictional works. In her essay “The War from the Street”, published in 1919, Woolf makes it obvious that “[t]hey, the individuals, the generals, the statesmen, the people with names, proclaim war”.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, from the outset, Woolf considers the young men who joined the war as ultimately victims of the authoritarian masculine power that wages war; it is in her post-war novels that Woolf consistently delineates the fate of young men who follow their sense of patriotism, a veritable

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 279. On Brooke’s Cambridge influence, see Paul Delany, *The Neo-Pagans: Friendship and Love in The Rupert Brooke Circle* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 279.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 279.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 281.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 277.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The War from the Street”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. III: 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew MacNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1988), 3.

gallery of the lost: Jacob Flanders in *Jacob's Room*, Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* and Andrew Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*.

The militarism of the war seemed to dominate not only the public world, but even that of the public arts. Visiting the National Gallery on July 1918, Woolf comments that “the atmosphere of picture galleries, always gloomy, is worse than ever now, when the glory of war has to be taught by a life size portrait of Lord Kitchener, & almost life size battle scenes” (*DI*, 168). The sense of militarism, represented by the Gallery’s pictures of earlier battles as well as other images of masculine authority, made Woolf feel depressed, a feeling she expressed to Vanessa Bell: “But I must tell you of my melancholy at the National Gallery [...] There is a room devoted to battle pictures; there is Millais’ Gladstone, and Furses [*sic*] Return from the ride [...]; and the rest I suppose, put away in the cellars” (*LII*, 260).

The sense of patriotism that was everywhere in the early years of the war was accompanied by a sense of hatred towards anything that seemed to be related to the enemy. When war was declared there was great hostility towards the Germans who lived and worked in Britain, even when they had done so for years. As a result of this sense of aggression, some few thousands escaped from London before the outbreak of the war itself, while many others had no choice but to stay and face their destinies; most of them were Germans with English wives and children. But they found themselves being attacked and regarded as enemies rather than British. In addition to the hostility, and even violence, inflicted on the Germans by Londoners themselves, the government’s Aliens Restriction Act, rushed through the Parliament on 5 August 1914, restricted the movements of all ‘enemies’ born in hostile countries, male and female, and ordered them to register with the police.<sup>21</sup> Rosemary Rees points out that the hostility towards the Germans increased, especially after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the British ocean liner which was torpedoed in 1915 by a German U-boat causing the death of 1,198 passengers.<sup>22</sup> By May 1915 *all* German men, not just a selected few, were being arrested by the British government, and interned in different camps prepared for them.<sup>23</sup> They were treated as if they were soldiers and they had to face the miserable environment of these camps. Narrating his life there, one of the internees describes his camp as being “grey and drab and miserable”, where he spent most of his

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<sup>21</sup> White, 69-70.

<sup>22</sup> Rosemary Rees, *British and the Great War* (Oxford: Heineman, 1993), 48-49. See also White, 76.

<sup>23</sup> See White, 78.

days hungry and could not find anything to eat.<sup>24</sup> When the German raids increased on London, the Admiralty came to believe that the only defence against this bombardment was the Germans themselves. Winston Churchill revealed, some years later, a proposal suggested by Admiral Fisher, the First Sea Lord: “[W]e should take a large number of hostages from the German population in our hands and should declare our intention of executing one of them for every civilian killed by bombs from aircraft”.<sup>25</sup> In spite of the Cabinet’s rejection of this proposal—and it is a measure of the times that the proposal got as far as Cabinet discussion—the Germans were treated as ‘hostages’ or military prisoners rather than civilians; the degradation that these men suffered in these camps shows the misery that the war brought to human individuals: “Internees were woken each morning by a whistle, had breakfast in a huge dining room and then were lined up to be counted. Exercise was allowed in a compound fence with barbed wire and watched over by more soldiers”.<sup>26</sup> Under guards, these prisoners had to work outside their camps during the day. Evidently one of these camps was in Asheham, near Rodmell in East Sussex, close to the Woolfs’ house there. This allowed Virginia Woolf to observe how these civilian prisoners were obliged to work, as she notes in August 1917: “Passed German prisoners, cutting wheat with hooks. Officer & woman with orderly galloped onto the downs” (*DI*, 41). Sometimes the work of these prisoners was done close to Woolf’s house and this enables her to see them frequently, as she writes in September 1917: “German prisoners stacking corn at the back of the house” (*DI*, 49). Woolf observes how the physical presence of these enemies brought home to her again the effects war had on humanity, as she notes on 27 August 1918:

By rights they [German prisoners] should have been killing each other. The reason why it is easy to kill another person must be that one’s imagination is too sluggish to conceive what his life means to him—the infinite possibilities of a succession of days which are furled in him, & have already been spent. (*DI*, 186)

The bleak, dulling humiliation that the war caused to these human individuals made them feel the futility of their lives; they had lost their right to live as human beings and they are considered virtually as slaves commanded by others. Such a situation, as Woolf saw it, might lead them to ‘kill each other’ to escape their bitter reality, a reality that made such a life seem meaningless.

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<sup>24</sup> See White, 79.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

Woolf is acutely aware of the hopelessness of these prisoners: “the prisoner who looks very lean & hopeless, seemed to like talking; I met him later & we smiled, but the sentry was not there” (*DI*, 186). Woolf understood the grief and suffering that these prisoners endured, away from their families, and deprived of seeing their wives and children, who were frequently, if German nationals, obliged to depart to their original countries or to countries they had never seen. Even those wives who remained frequently experienced hostility from their neighbours or were dismissed from their employment, while their sons and daughters were deprived of scholarships.<sup>27</sup> The suffering of these people is echoed in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* in which Miss Kilman whose roots were German (her family name had been ‘Kielman’) had been thrown out of her work during the war and endured the pain of being regarded as an enemy. Woolf looks at the war as the real cause that deprived these prisoners of their liberties: “[T]he existence of life in another human being is as difficult to realise as a play of Shakespeare when the book is shut. This occurred to me when I saw Adrian [Woolf’s brother] talking to the tall German prisoner” (*DI*, 186). The sympathy that Woolf shows towards the German prisoners, reveals that she does not look at them as enemies but as human beings who are victimised by the war that brought about their miseries and distress.

### **Woolf and the Danger of 1917 and 1918**

After Virginia Woolf’s full recovery from her illness, in 1917, the impact on her of the war quickly becomes evident in her diaries and letters. She inevitably shared the general anxieties of English society, especially in London. The fear of bombing, the shortages of food and fuel, the general and continual disruption of life caused by the war. Ironically, perhaps, her most direct awareness of the conflict came when she was not in London, but in the countryside, at Asheham House in Sussex, on the Western Front, where “one could hear the incessant pounding of the guns on the Flanders front. And even when one did not hear them it was as though the war itself was perpetually pounding dully on one’s brain”.<sup>28</sup> The haunting reverberation of the conflict is referred to by Woolf in her essay “Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth” in 1916: “At all times strange volumes of sounds roll across the bare uplands, and reverberate in those hollows in

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 81-84.

<sup>28</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 197.

the Downside which seem to await the spectators of some Titanic drama”.<sup>29</sup> The ‘strange volumes of sounds’ of the actual Front just across the Channel seem to form a recurring background to Woolf’s life in the ensuing months. In her diary in September 1917, she notes that she “[w]ent over the downs by the farm; [...] Heard guns & saw two airships maneuvering [*sic*] over the sea & valley” (*DI*, 49). In March 1918, Woolf writes about the British anti-aircraft guns, which were closer: “As we lay down on our mattresses there was a great though distant explosion; & and after that the guns set in very thick & fast to north & south, never, but once, so near us as Barnes [...] The bugles sounded at 1.35—two hours from start to finish” (*DI*, 124). In addition to the sounds of guns, Woolf’s life at Asheham was disturbed by the ceaseless bombing raids of the Zeppelins, as well as German bombers, as she writes in September 1917: “Aeroplanes over the house early, which may mean another raid” (*DI*, 54). The anxiety caused by the sounds of guns and aeroplanes heading for London made Woolf’s life in the countryside far from one of calmness and security.

In London itself, at Richmond, where the Woolfs’ business at the Hogarth Press needed to be kept going, the danger and the constant anxiety were more immediate as London underwent bombing raids, from Zeppelins and from planes. On 6 October, 1917, Woolf wrote to her sister, Vanessa Bell, revealing the stress she lived in, caused by the raids:

16 German aeroplanes have just passed over Richmond—They haven’t done us any harm—We went and sat in the cellar and listened to them, and Nelly [Woolf’s servant] nearly had hysterics [...] They sounded quite near, but I don[’]t know if they dropped bombs, or whether it was only our guns. Carrington has just rung up to say there were 35 over Gordon Sqre [*sic*] But didn[’]t drop bombs. (*LII*, 185)

Even though these German planes seemed on this occasion not to drop bombs, as ever they clearly caused Woolf and her servants periods of fear and terror. By 1917, the German attacks on London had been extended to include both day and night raids; for the first time in European conflict in the twentieth century civilians were the direct targets of intensive bombing.<sup>30</sup> The horror of the German intensive raids made people seek shelter in Tube stations that were packed with working-class women and children spending their nights there, since the depths of the

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<sup>29</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1918*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Alan G. V. Simmonds, *Britain and World War One* (London: Routledge, 2012), 162.

London Tube made them feel secure.<sup>31</sup> During their frequent visits to London, to work at the press, “Virginia [Woolf] slept night after night in the cellar of Hogarth House, sheltering from the Zeppelin raids”.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, neither London nor the countryside at Asheham were secure places for Virginia Woolf. On 20 October 1917, London witnessed severe raids that included a random 50 kg bomb which fell near Swan and Edgar’s department store on Piccadilly Circus.<sup>33</sup> This must have especially disturbed Woolf, since she and her friend Alix Strachey had been nearby, walking “up and down Dove Street” (*DI*, 63), the night before, as she herself notes on 20 October in her diary: “Happily, or she might say unhappily for Alix she [*sic*] didn’t presumably wander in Piccadilly all night, or the great bomb which ploughed up the pavement opposite Swan & Edgar’s might have dug her grave” (*DI*, 63).<sup>34</sup> The bombing of Piccadilly caused not only considerable damage to a well-known London location, but spread deep anxiety among people, as Woolf explains in her diary:

The moon grows full, & the evening trains are packed with people leaving London. We saw the hole in Piccadilly this afternoon. Traffic has been stopped, & the public slowly tramps past the place, which workmen are mending, though they look small in comparison with it. (*DI*, 65)

As Woolf became aware, many of the German raids were carried out by moonlight, which helped them to see their targets.<sup>35</sup> So the only time for people to escape the raids was during periods of bad weather: “Still no raids, presumably the haze at evening keeps them off, though it is still, & the moon perfectly clear” (*DI*, 68), and also dark moonless nights: “But there was no raid; & as the moon wanes, no doubt we are free for a month” (*DI*, 85). The stress and tension that the possibility of raids created, whether they happened or not (and in many ways the waiting was almost as stressful as the actual raids), was profound both on Woolf herself and of course on her servants, as Woolf documents in November 1917:

The raid didn’t actually happen but with our nerves in the state they are (I should say Lottie’s & Nelly’s nerves) the dipping down of the electric lights was taken as a sign of warning: finally the

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<sup>31</sup> White, 217.

<sup>32</sup> See Nigel Nicolson, Introduction, *LII*, xvii.

<sup>33</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. I: 1915-1919*, Footnote 31, 63.

<sup>34</sup> “Unhappily for Alix” because, as the previous diary entry indicates, Alix Strachey was in a period of “sepulchral despair” (*DI*, 63).

<sup>35</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. I: 1915-1919*, Footnote 37, 67.

lights went out [...] I was deluged with certain knowledge that the extinction of light is in future our warning. (*DI*, 70)

To decrease the danger of the raid, electricity—and thus electric lighting—has to be reduced, itself an eerie and disturbing warning of what was to come.

The private life of the Woolfs had been directly threatened in 1917, as Woolf describes in her diary on 9 October:

We had a horrid shock. [L]eonard came in so unreasonably cheerful that I guessed a disaster. He has been called up. Though rather dashed for 20 minutes, my spirit mounted to a certainty that, save the nuisance, we have nothing to fear. But the nuisance—waiting a week, examination at 8.30 at Kingston—visits to Craig & Wright for certificates—is considerable. (*DI*, 56)

In fact Leonard Woolf had first received calling up papers earlier, in 1916, but because of his wife's illness and his own suffering from trembling hands, he had been exempted from military service by a certificate he obtained from Dr. Maurice Wright.<sup>36</sup> The second attempt to call him for service “was more surprising” for him and Virginia Woolf herself.<sup>37</sup> The stress on Woolf, and even more on her husband, came to an end on 14 October 1917, since the latter was given the same exemption for the same reason: “Saturday was entirely given over to the military. We are safe again, &, so they say for ever” (*DI*, 59).

In 1918 the danger and threat of night raids on London continued to make it difficult for people to have peaceful nights. Gerard J. DeGroot points out that by this time Gotha bombers were spreading more horror on the home front than Zeppelins.<sup>38</sup> Woolf again complains of the disruption and discomfort of the intensive raids of 1918 in her diary on 28 January: “[T]here was a raid of course. The night made it inevitable. From 8 to 1.15 we roamed about, between coal hole kitchen [,] bedroom & drawing room. I don[']t know how much is fear, how much boredom, but the result is uncomfortable, most of all” (*DI*, 116). Even though Woolf and her husband “arranged mattresses in the kitchen” (*DI*, 116) to get at least a short time of sleep, the

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<sup>36</sup> See Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 178-179. Leonard Woolf's trembling hands was a kind of “rare nervous disorder, called ‘familial tremor’” that he seemed to inherit from his father. See Leonard Woolf, *Sowing: An Autobiography of the Years 1880 to 1904* (London: Hogarth, 1960), 100-101.

<sup>37</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 179.

<sup>38</sup> Gerard J. DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London: Longman, 1996), 247.



anxiety caused by the raids was increasingly unavoidable, an anxiety that made Woolf feel the threat of death everywhere, as she expressed wryly (and with characteristic class awareness) to Vanessa Bell in February 1918: “We have spent the last 3 nights more or less in the cellar [...] but when the servants take cover I can’t help thinking what an irony if they should escape and we be killed” (*LII*, 217). In such an atmosphere of fear and horror, Woolf’s own thinking seemed to be paralysed, as she herself documented on 8 March 1918:

From yesterday’s writing it looks as if the raids were casting their shadow before me, & were sent expressly by God to rebuke my arrogance. However this may be, we played our patience; I lost my 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>[d], and so to bed, the only thought in our mind being, I think, something to do with patience or printing. I’d take my third or final roll in bed, when there was an explosion. (*DI*, 123-124)

It seems unsurprisingly that the raids not only disturbed Woolf’s daily life, both domestic and at the Hogarth Press, but also her attempts to write.

The grimness that the war brought made Woolf feel a constant degradation of life in London, a feeling which is revealed in her diary in March 1918, a comment which at the same time reveals yet again Woolf’s class consciousness, and discrimination: “London from a spectacular point of view was at its worst; like a middle aged charwoman with hair scrubbed off a bleak forehead” (*DI*, 121). The anxiety and stress caused by the raids, which Woolf endured, are echoed in her novel *The Years*, in which Eleanor Pargiter, her cousins Sara, Maggie and her husband with Nicholas, a friend of them have experienced such horror, an experience that makes them lose hope of escape, as Sara’s mocking words as the air raid ends for the moment express: “‘Well, it’s over now,’ said Sara. ‘So let’s drink a health—Here’s to the New World!’ she exclaimed.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Woolf and the Economic Problems of 1917 and 1918**

The extraordinary circumstances that the war created, led to economic problems that hit the daily life of people. Agricultural production was negatively affected by the farmworkers’ abandoning their work in the fields to join the war; even if they were not called up, they were unable to resist the high wages in munitions factories. What made the situation worse is that Britain was mostly

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<sup>39</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (London: Hogarth, 1990), 255-256.

dependent on importing food, and this made not only the economy but day-to-day life in Britain very vulnerable, a situation, which was exacerbated in February 1917 with the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare.<sup>40</sup> Thus, by 1917, food shortages resulted in the long food queues that became familiar at the doors of food shops. In some parts of London, queues for margarine, tea, milk, rice and other items were formed by people in the early hours of the morning.<sup>41</sup> The Woolfs were no exception, of course, to experiencing the shortages of food; in July 1917 Virginia Woolf wrote to Vanessa Bell, who was in the country, at Charleston in East Sussex, appreciating the latter's sending produce: "First a million thanks for the potatoes and greens. We still live upon them, and they have far more potato [*sic*] in them than shop ones—But you mustn't be so generous" (*LII*, 160). Food shortages led to the rise of commodities' prices. Early in the war, the cost of wheat had risen by 72 per cent, barley by 40 per cent, and oats by 34 per cent; prices of food were doubled during the war in spite of the government's efforts to fix some of them. Inevitably, people's morale had been negatively affected by food shortages and the price rises; they accused the government of poor administration and some shopkeepers were undoubtedly profiting from the shortages.<sup>42</sup> Woolf herself was aware of the exploitation by shopkeepers; she wrote in her diary on 31 August 1917: "Gunn charges 4d quart for milk" (*DI*, 42) and "Great question about Mrs Wooler's chicken; offers it for 2/6. Eggs now gone up to 3/-the dozen" (*DI*, 47). Given their limited wages, the working classes could not help themselves in facing the rise of prices that directly hit their life and jobs; housewives needed to spend most of their time waiting in the long queues at food shops.<sup>43</sup> The Woolfs may have had occasional access to food supplies from the countryside, but could not escape the financial effects of the situation. In December 1917, Woolf is faced with her servant's complaints about the high cost living: "This morning ruined by the tears & plaints of Lottie, who thinks her work too hard, & finally demanded higher wages, which she could easily get, [...] everyone's wages raised—Of course we had to pay extra for food, but then we'd got to" (*DI*, 91).

Woolf's diaries in 1917 show her and Leonard attempting to find a practical solution to food shortages, while at Asheham. On 14 August 1917, they went out "[t]o get mushrooms and

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<sup>40</sup> DeGroot, 86.

<sup>41</sup> See Simmonds, 201.

<sup>42</sup> See DeGroot, 201.

<sup>43</sup> See *Ibid*, 201-202.

blackberries; the rings of horse mushrooms seem to put an end to the others; we only get a few” (*DI*, 42). On 15 August 1917 they “[w]ent into [a] hollow without success; but Nelly [their servant] found more mushrooms on the top. The Co-ops will allow more sugar, so we can now make jam” (*DI*, 42). Woolf also refers to the shortage of other necessary materials on 17 August 1917: “Found no mushrooms; we suppose the rain brought them prematurely. No yeast, so had to eat Bakers bread, wh[ich] is very dull & dry” (*DI*, 43). Even though they tried to overcome the problem by depending on what they could grow, “[e]ating potatoes from the garden” (*DI*, 44), the shortage of food seemed to be a real problem that faced Woolf and her husband, as it affected everyone in London and beyond. Food provision continued to be a problem, not just of supply but of fair distributions of what *was* available. Fifteen divisional Food Committees were devoted to manage this problem and control prices. By the end of 1917 the government succeeded in its first attempt in food rationing.<sup>44</sup> But rationing was itself unpopular and created some “food riots & strike at Woolwich” (*DI*, 110), and did not ease the difficulty of finding any kind of food available in shops at any time; Woolf comments in her diary on 5 January 1918:

Everything is skimped now. Most of the butcher[']s shops are shut; the only open shop was besieged. You can't buy chocolates, or toffee; flowers cost so much that I have to pick leaves, instead. We have [ration] cards for most foods. The only abundant shop windows are the drapers. Other shops parade tins, or cardboard boxes, doubtless empty. (*DI*, 100)

Reconciling such a severe problem during these circumstances of the war with the continued visits of her guests, caused Woolf's patience at times to run out, as her diary in April 1918 shows:

Visitors do tend to chafe one, though impeccable as friends. I'm always glad at the end of a visit to find one's liking unmodified [...] yet I'm puzzled to account for the sense of strain & discomfort which the people one likes most manage to produce. L[eonard] & I discussed this. He says that with people in the house his hours of positive pleasure are reduced to one [...] But this time the food difficulties certainly increased one's discomfort. One day we came back from a long walk to find the third of a loaf of bread on the table. No more to be had in the house. (*DI*, 132)

The ‘discomfort’ that is caused by food shortages increased Woolf's anxiety, since she felt she had to offer hospitality to her guests. Intending to visit the Woolfs and stay one week at

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

Asheham House, James Strachey was informed by Woolf in a letter in March 1918 “to bring whatever cards for meat, sugar, butter you possess as we are strictly rationed here” (*LII*, 227). The straitened circumstances of the war made non-essentials virtually impossible to find, however desirable for social gatherings. At one point Woolf notes she “beat the town for chocolate or sweets. In the whole of stores, not one ounce of choc[olate] to be had” (*DI*, 126).

The pressures of war were thus a constant stress on the day-to-day life of those on the Home Front. What would have been a simple social activity, like spending time working in London, becomes a problem. Woolf notes the situation of her acquaintance, the poet Fredegond Shove: “As a sign of the times we live in, I note that Fredegond who wants to spend some months in London is advised by her practical friends to live in a hotel. They say that she would have difficulty in getting food, even if she found a servant, or a room to live in” (*DI*, 102). In addition to food difficulties created by the war, people endured shortages of coal, fuel and paper. One cause of fuel shortages was that in the first six months of the war a great number of miners joined the army and thus created labour shortages that ultimately caused disruption in coal supplies and, as a further result, disruptions of the railway network which depended on coal.<sup>45</sup> Train services were cut and those that continued were overcrowded.<sup>46</sup> The “[g]reat crowd for the London train” (*DI*, 52), for example, made Woolf come “home in tube, standing the whole way to Hammersmith” (*DI*, 65) after her visit to the London Library on 22 October 1917. The severe winter of 1917, “when the temperature never rose above freezing, and thermometer falling as low as  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ ”, made life more miserable given the lack of fuel.<sup>47</sup> People tried to find alternatives, especially in the countryside, as at Asheham; Woolf writes in October 1917: “Men came & fetched fallen trees, dragging them with horses” (*DI*, 54). The war also created an acute shortage of paper, which directly affected the Hogarth Press, which had to find alternative, and inferior, supplies; Woolf mentions in October 1917: “Our paper will be soft & yellow tinted” (*DI*, 66). It is no wonder that Woolf writes in her diary on 5 January 1918: “Suddenly one has come to notice the war everywhere” (*DI*, 100).

The end of the war in 1918 brought some relief: the end of the horror of air raids and a gradual easing of shortages. But the British people faced a new horror. The influenza epidemic that

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 204.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 247.

<sup>47</sup> White, 201.

showed its first signs in the latter half of 1918 brought with it death and new anxiety to the public; eventually a total of 228,917 died. Taken ill while in Manchester to give a speech at the Town Hall, the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, endured the disease for two weeks before recovering.<sup>48</sup> Woolf herself felt the anxiety caused by the disease, especially when she needed to go to London. Returning from one of her London visits, Woolf documents in her diary in May 1918: “The disease escaped us” (*DI*, 146). But even at Asheham the disease could not be escaped, nor presumably the anxiety it created. Woolf notes in July 1918: “[A] funeral next door; dead of influenza” (*DI*, 165). On 28 October 1918, Woolf echoes the *Times*’ comment that the influenza epidemic is “a plague unmatched since the Black Death” (*DI*, 209): her allusion to the comparison to that earlier devastation perhaps manifests the depth of her own concern.<sup>49</sup> Woolf’s friend, the biographer Lytton Strachey, escaped to the countryside in October 1918: “However, Lytton is probably moving in to Mary in a day or two, avoiding London, because of the influenza” (*DI*, 209). If Lytton Strachey escaped, his brother James Strachey failed to do so, as Woolf indicated in her diary on 30 October 1918: “James just back from Cornwall, where he had the influenza” (*DI*, 212). By the end of 1918, Woolf’s fear came to an end, since “[i]nfluenza seems to be over” (*DI*, 229).

### **Woolf and the War Poets**

Virginia Woolf may have experienced the First World war as a non-combatant, but she was far from unaware of the lives of the men at the front, not only from her contact with Leonard Woolf’s brothers but also from her reading of the poetry of the young poets who were in the trenches, which she reviewed during the war years, poets like Geoffrey Dearmer, Charles Hamilton Sorley and, above all, Siegfried Sassoon. Her reviews demonstrate not only her awareness of the misery of the soldiers at the Front but of the challenge the horrors and deprivations of modern warfare presented to the imaginative writer. The poetry of Geoffrey Dearmer, for instance, she reviewed in 1918 alongside Sassoon’s *Counter-Attack and Other*

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<sup>48</sup> Simmonds, 282.

<sup>49</sup> The Black Death was the most devastating pandemic disease in the human history. It struck Europe in the years 1348-50 and caused the death of 75 to 200 million people. See Joseph P. Byrne, *Encyclopaedia of the Black Death* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2012), xxi.

*Poems*.<sup>50</sup> Especially when compared to Sassoon's poems, Woolf finds Dearmer's essentially Romantic imagination and registers as being less than adequate to deal with the awful realities confronting him. (Dearmer arrived in Gallipoli, a subaltern in the Royal Fusiliers, a few days after his brother had been killed there; he later served in France, survived the war and lived until 1996.)<sup>51</sup> Woolf sees him "as a young poet venturing once more as Keats ventured" and, given that "[s]ome of the loveliest poems in the language have been produced in the manner that Mr. Dearmer attempts", he "commands our sympathy".<sup>52</sup> But "[t]he undertaking is so perilous that it is no harsh criticism to say that Mr. Dearmer's imagination is neither strong enough nor trained enough to do the work he asks of it".<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, Woolf sees the creative process in terms that anticipate her post-war writing about the ways in which the external world impinges upon the consciousness: "Reality is an accident that passes across the mirror of his mind and makes images that interest him far more than the objects that caused them".<sup>54</sup> It is in the latter respect that Woolf sees Dearmer's work as falling short. He becomes distracted by the images, often rather Romantic in tone, which his imagination generates in response to that external stimulation, and the actuality is lost sight of:

He slips too often into the habit of imaginative inaccuracy; he compares men dashing to their holes to 'burrowing moles'; he says that gossamer clouds crossing the moon 'scurrying ran'; he makes glow-worms 'crawl excitedly'; he stuffs out his verse with such tags as 'glad tidings', 'laughter of the main', 'jewelled night'.<sup>55</sup>

For Woolf, "the romantic poet lays heavier tasks upon his imagination than any other. The vision alone is not enough; he must see it in detail as well as hold it in mass".<sup>56</sup> The tendency to drift from the actual to the imaginative is evident in the lines Woolf quotes from Dearmer's "A Trench Incident":

We waited, like a storm-bespattered ship

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<sup>50</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Two Soldier Poets", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. II 1912-1918*, 269-272.

<sup>51</sup> See the Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey\\_Dearmer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Dearmer). Geoffrey Dearmer is one of the forgotten poets of the war. Some of his work is collected in *Voice of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. Vivien Noakes (London: Sutton, 2006).

<sup>52</sup> "Two Soldier Poets", 271.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

That flutters sail to free her grounded keel[.]<sup>57</sup>

Here and in poems like “Gommecourt”, not quoted by Woolf, the imagery distracts rather than describes; there is a lack of the vivid, precise “detail” that Woolf felt was required:

[...] each pregnant shell  
Rumbling on tracks unseen. Such tyrants reign  
The sullen masters of a mangled world,  
Grim-mouthed in a womb of furnaced hell,  
Wrought, forged, and hammered for the work of pain.<sup>58</sup>

Charles Sorley arrived in France as a lieutenant in the Suffolk Regiment in May 1915; he was dead, shot by a sniper at Loos, by October.<sup>59</sup> His only volume, *Marlborough and Other Poems*, was published the following January to some acclaim, the book being reprinted six times that year.<sup>60</sup> It was a later edition that Woolf reviewed in the *Athenaeum* in 1919.<sup>61</sup> Woolf is immediately sympathetic to what she saw as Sorley’s ambition as a poet, especially to his being “experimental”, and she responds positively to the direct, unromantic nature of his descriptive writing, even in the schoolboy poems included in the collection: “[T]he downs showed themselves not, as other poets have seen them, soft, flowery, seductive, but stony, rain-beaten, wind-blown beneath a clay-coloured sky”.<sup>62</sup> She quotes, with approval it seems, what he writes in prose as war breaks out:

I am sure the German nature is the nicest in the world, as far as it is not warped by the German Empire. I regard the war as one between sisters ... the efficient and intolerant against the casual and sympathetic ... but I think that tolerance is the larger virtue of the two, and efficiency must be her servant. So I am quite glad to fight against the rebellious servant.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 271.

<sup>58</sup> Geoffrey Dearmer, “Gommecourt”, *Voice of Silence*, 197.

<sup>59</sup> Johnston, 54-55.

<sup>60</sup> See Jean Moorcroft Wilson, ed., *The Collected Poems of Charles Hamilton Sorley* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1985), 35.

<sup>61</sup> Virginia Woolf, “These are the Plans”, *Books and Portraits*, ed. Mary Lyon (London: Hogarth, 1977), 93.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 95.

She admires the way in which in such passages, as in the poems, she sees that “Sorley thought for himself, and fate contrived that the young men of his generation should have opportunities for doing the thinking of a lifetime in a very few years”.<sup>64</sup> She admires Sorley’s sense of purpose, his plans for the future, and mourns the fact that such plans, “such vigour and clear-sightedness” as she sees in his work were cut so painfully short.<sup>65</sup>

But it is the work of her friend Siegfried Sassoon about whom she writes most and whom she sees as having forged a technique that succeeded in bringing home to the reader the horrific realities of modern warfare and its effects. Again she is acutely aware of the difficulty of writing about such almost unimaginable experiences: “There is a stage of suffering, so these poems seem to show us, where any expression save the barest is intolerable”.<sup>66</sup> And it is in the bareness, the direct reality of the “detail”, which Sassoon conveys, that Woolf sees his power and his success as a poet:

What Mr. Sassoon has felt to be the most sordid and horrible experiences in the world he makes us feel to be so in a measure which no other poet of the war has achieved. [...] It is realism of the right, of the poetic kind. The real things are put in not merely because they are real, but because at a certain moment of emotion the poet happened to be struck by them and is not afraid of spoiling his effect by calling them by their right names.<sup>67</sup>

His “terrible pictures” show the actualities of what “lie behind the colourless phrases of the newspapers”.<sup>68</sup> Woolf is not only responsive, however, to the graphic physical realities of the carnage but also to Sassoon’s sophisticated, astringent satire on the culpability and the apparent lack of concern of those in power, and she quotes from one of the most bitter of these, “The General”:

‘Good-morning; good morning!’ the General said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of ’em dead,

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>66</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Two Soldier Poets”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume II: 1912-1918*, 270.

<sup>67</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Mr Sassoon’s Poems”, Review of *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems*, *Times Literary Supplement* 31 May 1917, in *Books and Portraits*, 98.

<sup>68</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Mr Sassoon’s Poems”, Review of *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, *Times Literary Supplement* 11 July 1918, in *Books and Portraits*, 99.



And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.  
'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack,  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

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But he did for them both by his plan of attack.<sup>69</sup>

Woolf is aware that even Sassoon "can only state a little of what he has seen, a very little one guesses"; she is acutely alert to what is not being said, to the psychological displacement which is still going on.<sup>70</sup> And she is alert too to the complexity of tone in Sassoon's poetry, to the mixture of satire of the dominant, gung-ho registers of officialdom and the press, and the understated rage and grief at what is being done to the men; Woolf quotes "To Any Dead Officer" which registers these shifting registers:

Goodbye, old lad! Remember me to God,  
And tell him that our politicians swear  
They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod  
Under the heel of England ... Are you there?..  
Yes ... and the war won't end for at least two years;  
But we've got stacks of men ... I'm blind with tears,  
Staring into the dark. Cheero!  
I wish they'd killed you in a decent show.<sup>71</sup>

However, her admiration of Sassoon's work, an admiration based on Bloomsbury antipathy to the war and sympathy for those suffering, was not shared by everyone. In *The Nation* John Middleton Murry saw Sassoon's *Counter-Attack*—and we need to engage the full implications of that title—saw the subject matter as having overcome the art; these poems he wrote "are not poetry [...they] are incoherent cries of torment, touching the sense rather than the imagination".<sup>72</sup> This review provoked the anger of Philip Morrell, the MP and husband of Woolf's friend Lady Ottoline Morrell, both of whom continued to oppose the war. Woolf records in her diary on 29 July 1918 how she has spent the weekend at Garsington, the Morrells' home:

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<sup>69</sup> "Two Soldier Poets", 270.

<sup>70</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Mr Sassoon's Poems", in *Books and Portraits*, 100.

<sup>71</sup> "Two Soldier Poets", 270.

<sup>72</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, ed., Footnote 34, *DI*, 174.

The string which united everything from first to last was Philip's attack upon Murry in *The Nation* for his review of Sassoon. He was half proud of himself & half uncomfortable; at any rate, I was taxed with being on Murry's side before 10 minutes was out; & then to prove his case Philip read Murry's article, his letter, & his letter to Murry, three times over. (*DI*, 174)

Clearly for Woolf and her circle, the war was not merely a matter of the situation through which one was living, but remained a focus for vigorous debate, as did the issue of how it could be responded to by creative writers.

### **Women and the War**

The direct and indirect involvement of millions of combatants and civilians in the First World War made it seem a total war in a way that had not occurred in Britain before.<sup>73</sup> For women, the war can be regarded as a turning point; the need for female labour during the war gave women, many of whom had already spent years campaigning for more political power, the opportunity to have more liberty and financial independence.<sup>74</sup> The opportunities for women to be employed, including occupations not previously available to them, such as in transport and manufacturing, meant that many young women who had worked, often at low wages, in domestic service, could improve their income and conditions. Inevitably, this created a shortage of domestic servants. Vanessa Bell, Woolf's sister, now pregnant, was in great need of domestic help during the war and from April till June 1918, the correspondence between the two sisters shows Woolf engaged in finding a servant for Vanessa. On 22 April, Woolf wrote to her: "But have you got a servant? Nelly [Woolf's servant] says Drewet in the High St is very good indeed" (*LII*, 233). Woolf went to the Registry Office for domestic employment several times; on 4 May, she wrote to Vanessa Bell telling her how she "went to the Registry Office yesterday and heard of a servant [...] who wants to be in the country [...and] wants from £26 to 28 [...] Shall I offer £28 if she seems wavering?" (*LII*, 236-237). The problem was evidently especially acute in London, as even women who wanted to stay in domestic service also wanted to escape the air raids. Thus, the Registry Office "has never had so many [servants] wanting country places as this year [1918], though of course they get snapped up at once" (*LII*, 237). Woolf gained nothing through her

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<sup>73</sup> See Robb, 96.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

attempts, as she indicates in her letter on 15 May: “I’ve just been to the Registry Office without success, I’m afraid. She has a Cook who wants to be near Lewes, and is very good—but I suppose that[’]s useless” (*LII*, 239). Failing to get a servant for her sister, Woolf suggested that she send Nelly and Lottie, her own servants, to serve her sister: “I’ve just spoken to her, and suggested that she and Lottie should go to you on the 1<sup>st</sup> July and stay till October” (*LII*, 248). The problem of domestic service, a chronic one throughout the war, is also dealt with in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Years*, as both Mrs Mac Nab and Maggie Pargiter seek out domestic help.

The new circumstances that the war brought for women also released them from the strictness of older, essentially Victorian, social conventions and sexual prudery.<sup>75</sup> Martin Pugh points out that during wartime, and as a sign of patriotism, working women responded to the attempt at economising on materials by wearing shorter skirts and reducing their weight; after the war, the shorter skirts, and the boyish physique, became fashionable and in the early 1920s, women considered the style of their clothes as a way of expressing their new freedom.<sup>76</sup> In both *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the new liberated life of women is clearly shown through the style of Elizabeth Dalloway and the marital life of the Rayleys.

## **Woolf and Sigmund Freud**

Leonard Woolf read Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, probably in Brill’s translation (1913), and he reviewed *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in *The New Weekly* in June 1914.<sup>77</sup> By doing so, Leonard Woolf from the outset “recognised and understood the greatness of Freud and the importance of what he was doing”.<sup>78</sup> It seems likely that what had been read and reviewed by Leonard Woolf had been also read by Virginia Woolf or at very least discussed with her. In due course Vol. I and II of Freud’s *Collected Papers* were published by the Hogarth Press in 1924, with further volumes in 1925.<sup>79</sup> Woolf herself refers to this in her diary in November 1924, noting that she and Leonard were, it seems, setting type: “doing up Freud” (*DII*, 322). In 1920, James Strachey and his wife, Alix, went to Vienna to study psychoanalysis under Sigmund Freud

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>76</sup> Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night’: A Social History of Britain between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009), 171.

<sup>77</sup> See Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 167

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>79</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, ed., Footnote 6, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1920-1924*, 322.

and later Strachey translated *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* into English.<sup>80</sup> Woolf's friendship with this couple would have helped her in discussing things related to Freud, as she shows in her letter to Janet Case in 1921, although her scepticism towards psychoanalysis as a therapy is evident: "The last people I saw were James and Alix, fresh from Freud—Alix grown gaunt and vigorous—James puny and languid—such is the effect of 10 months psycho-analysis" (*LII*, 482).

In his book *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, reviewed by Leonard Woolf, Freud argues that most of the patients who suffer traumatic neurosis have the same symptoms. One of the cases Freud studied was a lieutenant who had suffered trauma; Freud describes the symptoms of this soldier:

In this case, too, were to be seen the severe tremors which give pronounced cases of these neuroses a similarity that is so striking at the first glance, as well as apprehensiveness, tearfulness, and a proneness to fits of rage, accompanied by convulsive infantile motor manifestations, and to vomiting ('at the least excitement').<sup>81</sup>

Her contact with Freud's ideas—we recall that Leonard Woolf was reading this material on its first appearance in English—means that Virginia Woolf is in the forefront of contemporary awareness of such psychological conditions, and well-placed to re-create them when she comes to describe the character of Septimus Smith, the shell-shocked soldier in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as will be discussed below. However, Freud's other writing, it seems likely, furnished Virginia Woolf with a set of ideas which enabled her to portray the more general sense of disorientation of feeling, which many people seem to have felt after the traumas of the war, whether they had been at the Front or experienced it from Home Front. As will be shown in the discussion of her post-war novels, Woolf seems to have been responsive to the ideas of defamiliarisation and the insecurity of the individual's relation to the world around him/her which Freud identifies in his essay on "The Uncanny", published in 1919; certainly, many of Woolf's characters who have experienced the dangers of the war are dominated by a sense of unreality and uncertainty. Moreover, some of Woolf's post-war characters, especially the characters of *To the Lighthouse*,

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<sup>80</sup> See, Virginia Woolf, *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1922*, 482.

<sup>81</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, ed. James Strachey, trans. Alan Tyson (New York: Penguin, 1975), 163).

resort to the world of unconsciousness, by which they seem to escape their bleak post-war reality. In his paper “The Unconscious”, Freud connects ‘the unconscious affect and emotion’ to anxiety and repression. Woolf’s characters on occasion, as will be discussed below, find the ‘unconscious world’ to be a kind of relief that enables them to be free from their anxiety and tense repression.

Like Freud, Woolf also deals with the mind of the human; she looks at the individual’s mind as it interacts with, and is affected by, daily life itself most famously in her essay “Modern Fiction”, published in 1925, a year later after she has been working on The Hogarth editions of Freud’s work:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer [...] could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style [...] Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged.<sup>82</sup>

Woolf here shows that the great part of the pressure on the mind of the individual is caused by the scenes of daily life and their intensive details that colour the individual’s own life.

Freud’s influence on Woolf was not limited to psychological concepts; there seemed also in later years to be a kind of admiration for Freud’s political views, views he expressed when he received Woolf and her husband in his house in Britain, where they discussed things related to the First War while the onset of the Second World War seemed inevitable; as Woolf notes in her diary in January 1939: “Freud said It [*sic*] would have been worse if you had *not* won the war. I said we often felt guilty—if we had failed, perhaps Hitler would have not been”.<sup>83</sup> It is a characteristically shrewd observation: few at that time had identified—as many have since—that the seeds of 1939-45 were sown at Versailles in 1919.

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<sup>82</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction”, *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth, 1962), 189.

<sup>83</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. V: 1936-1941*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1984), 202.

## Woolf and the Hope of Peace

By the end of 1917, the political atmosphere showed the first possibilities of peace. The Soviet Russian Government, which seized power in November 1917 after the Revolution, decided to negotiate for peace and on 3 December the contacts with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk ended with a truce, which led to an armistice from 15 December to 14 January 1918. On 3 March 1918, the Soviet Russian Government signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which ended the participation of Russia in the First World War.<sup>84</sup> At the beginning of 1918, the “[c]hief topic [in the news was] the approach of peace” (*DI*, 101), which occupied the minds of Woolf and her friends, who had a wish that the “news from Russia” (*DI*, 95) might end the war. But the uncertain peace that came from Russia did not immediately help in ending the war; it put the Allies in a critical situation, since they had to face Germany and her allies alone. The dramatic events at the Front, represented by the renewed German attack, filled newspapers in early April 1918, and demonstrated the vulnerability in the Allied war effort created by Russia’s withdrawal. Such developments raised the anxiety of Woolf who was clearly very conscious of what was happening on the political stage:

A cold dismal day, & very bad news in the newspapers [...] And Ireland has Conscription. if one didn’t feel that politics are an elaborate game got up to keep a pack of men trained for that sport in condition, one might be dismal; one sometimes is dismal; sometimes I try to worry out what some of the phrases we’re ruled by mean. (*DI*, 138)

Woolf here is responding to the headlines of the *Times* for 13 April 1918: “Our Backs to the Wall” and “Fight it Out”.<sup>85</sup> Specifically, Woolf’s stress here is caused by her awareness of the news of the Battle of Lys, known also as The Third Battle of Flanders. In this severe battle that continued from 7-29 April, the Germans planned to drive their troops west to the English Channel and cut off British forces in France from their supply line that ran through the Channel ports of Calais, Dunkirk and Boulogne.<sup>86</sup> Keith Robbins points out that in early April, the German attack was successful but not decisive, the German troops had penetrated some forty miles along the Allies Front; they had captured many prisoners and guns and caused around

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<sup>84</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. 1: 1915-1919*, Footnote 6, 95. See also Cyril Falls, *The First World War* (London: Longmans, 1960), 264-269.

<sup>85</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, *DI*, Footnote 23, 138.

<sup>86</sup> See Martin Gilbert, *First World War* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 412-415.

15,000 casualties, chiefly among the British.<sup>87</sup> This made the British situation critical, a situation that made the government to call for conscription in Ireland, referred to in Woolf's diary entry.<sup>88</sup>

The despair that the war caused made people see it as an endless struggle. By 1918, people were exhausted by it; they almost no longer needed to talk of the war, since it had become part of their life.<sup>89</sup> Like all people, Woolf longed to enjoy peace, a feeling expressed in her diary in October 1918 when Germany began at last to negotiate to stop the war: "The German offer of peace. Certainly it made our hearts jump at Asheham this morning" (*DI*, 199). Woolf discussed the news of the imminent peace with her guests, among them her cousin, Herbert Fisher, the Liberal politician and President of the Board of Education in Lloyd George's Cabinet, who visited her in October 1918: "'We've won the war today' he said, at once [...] 'the Germans have made their minds they can't fight a retreat [...] Of course we can't accept their present terms. Why, that would leave them still the greatest military power in Europe. They could begin again in ten years time'" (*DI*, 203). On 14 October 1918, the American President, Woodrow Wilson, sent a note to the Germans, in which he asked them to declare their surrender and to withdraw from all occupied territories.<sup>90</sup> Responding to news of this note, Woolf wrote on 18 October:

The truth is that nothing much more definite is yet known about peace. Wilson's second note came out on Tuesday, in which he used the word 'peradventure'; so far the Germans have not answered. But their retreat goes on, & last night, beautiful, cloudless, still & moonlit, was to my thinking the first of peace, since one went to bed fairly positive that never again in all our lives need we dread the moonlight. (*DI*, 205)

The news of peace brought relief not only to Woolf but to all of Britain; Woolf observed how people finally received such pleasant news, as she describes in her diary in November 1918:

People buy papers at a great rate; but except for an occasional buzz round a newspaper boy & a number of shop girls provided with *The Evening News* [*sic*] in the train one feels nothing different in the atmosphere. The general state perhaps is one of dazed surfeit; here we've had one great relief after another; you hear the paper boys calling out that Turkey has surrendered, or Austria given up,

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<sup>87</sup> Keith Robbins, *The First World War* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1984), 75.

<sup>88</sup> See Gilbert, 413.

<sup>89</sup> Simmonds, 282-283.

<sup>90</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, Footnote 22, *DI*, 206.

& the mind doesn't do very much with it; was the whole thing too remote & meaningless to come home to one, either in action or in ceasing to act? (*DI*, 215)

Woolf realised that the end of the war that finally brought peace to the British people, was possibly the beginning of an end to the kind of masculine military power, represented by the German Emperor Wilhelm II: "The Kaiser still wears a phantom kind of crown. Otherwise there is revolution, & a kind of partial awakening, one fancies, on the part of the people to the unreality of the whole affair" (*DI*, 215). It was an 'unreality' that as we shall see, resonates through Woolf's post-war novels. This Emperor faced an end to his power on 9 November 1918 when he was exiled in Holland.<sup>91</sup> On 11 November, the Armistice was declared, people "possessed London, & alone celebrated peace in their sordid way, staggering up the muddy pavement in the rain, decked with flags themselves, & voluble at sight of other people's flags [...] Taxicabs were crowded with whole families, grandmothers & babies, showing off" (*DI*, 216-217).

Woolf registered the change of life that peace brought in her diary on 15 November 1918; she showed how different London seemed, especially with the 'unshaded lights':

Peace is rapidly dissolving into the light of common day. You can go to London without meeting more than two drunk soldiers; only an occasional crowd blocks the street [...] But mentally the change is marked too. The Streets are crowded with people quite at their ease; & the shops blazoning unshaded lights. (*DI*, 217)

In 1919 "peace was signed" (*DI*, 291) at Versailles, an occasion that was celebrated on 19 July in Official Peace celebrations.<sup>92</sup> According to Woolf's description, Peace Day turned to be a mere military parade that encouraged people to watch it, especially those who had joined the war:

The servants had a triumphant morning. They stood on Vauxhall Bridge & saw everything. Generals & soldiers & tanks & nurses & bands took 2 hours in passing. It was they said the most splendid sight of their lives [...] it seems to me a servants festival; something got up to pacify & placate 'the people'. (*DI*, 292)

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<sup>91</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, Footnote 7, *DI*, 215.

<sup>92</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, Footnote 16, *DI*, 292.



Clearly Woolf felt detached from the general festive mood; the grimness of her outlook is perhaps a measure of the mental toll the years of war had taken on her. The festival of Peace Day made the mass look like ‘animals’, led by their masters, as Woolf saw it: “Perhaps I will finish the account of the peace celebrations. What herd animals we are after all!—even the most disillusioned” (*DI*, 294). In Woolf’s view, the end of a war which had caused such death and destruction was no matter for celebration.

Of course the bitter experience of the First World War made Woolf more certain of the futility of the war, a futility she tries to show in most of her post-war novels, in which Woolf does not only present the physical victims of the war but the individual lives that have been forever coloured and shadowed by the war and its aftermath.

## **I. Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room***

*Jacob’s Room*, published in 1922, is essentially a post-war novel and is in fact the first novel in which Virginia Woolf attempts to find a narrative technique to express the consciousness of the inhabitants of a new, modernist world, the consciousness of a world whose tensions and disconnections largely originated in the chaos of that catastrophic world war. In January 1920, Woolf notes in her diary her first thoughts about *Jacob’s Room*: “[H]aving this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel [...] doesn[?]t that get closer & yet keep form & speed, & enclose everything, everything. My doubt is how far it will (include) enclose the human heart”.<sup>93</sup> Undoubtedly the disastrous events of the First World War are part of the ‘everything’ that Woolf intends to deal with in her book, since such events caused the pain of individuals and affected the ‘human heart’. Woolf herself, as we have seen, had experienced the war, mainly in London, as a non-combatant, like so many of her original readers; her consciousness of the world around her and, inevitably the nature of the imagination out of which her fiction was created, had been profoundly affected by the experience of the war. Its shadows fall across *Jacob’s Room*, often in subtle and indirect ways, for the novel’s readers in 1922 would have been, like its creator, all too aware of those shadows; those readers, unlike perhaps the reader almost a

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<sup>93</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1978), 13. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *DII*.

hundred years later, would not have needed the potential fate of a young man in the years reading up to 1914 to be spelled out. At the same time, however, for that reader and for later readers, Woolf signals the perspective of her novel in the very first line by means of the introduction of the surname of Jacob's mother, and thus of Jacob himself: "Flanders".<sup>94</sup>

As in the fiction that was to follow, however, the awareness of the catastrophe that has just happened is incorporated into, is indeed an aspect of, a wider perspective on the human condition, as perceived by Woolf in the post-war years; the characters of the novel inhabit a world shadowed not initially by war itself but a world in which they are vulnerable to the wider, more universal processes which humanity is subject to: the natural processes of existence in time, human mortality in a natural world indifferent to human endeavour and achievement. *Jacob's Room* is thus a world in which war is ultimately one manifestation of that vulnerability, insecurity and danger which, for Woolf, is the plight of all individual human beings.

Virginia Woolf opens the novel with the tears of Betty Flanders, who is no doubt like a number of her readers, a young widow. But this we realise is some time in the 1890s and she has lost her young husband, Seabrook, not at war but in a shooting accident: "[The] young man [...] who had gone out duck-shooting" (*JR*, 10), leaving his wife to take the responsibility alone for bringing up their three children: Archer, Jacob and John. As Mrs. Flanders spends a holiday at the Cornish seaside with her children, the grief and memories of her husband spring up to disturb her again; tears spring afresh to her eyes as she reflects how "[a]ccidents were awful things" (*JR*, 1). Mrs. Flanders has to face life alone, looking after her children, and such a load is not an easy one for a woman to carry. In the Victorian family the father was the revered head, earning his family's living and directing its relations with the outside world, while the mother's role was definitely subordinate. Mrs. Flanders is bound by the Victorian belief that sees "marriage is a fortress" (*JR*, 2) for woman, and without her husband or the support of a man she feels vulnerable: "There's no man to help with the perambulator" (*JR*, 5). Mrs Flanders's feelings express the feelings of a widow and mother, whose only aim is how to keep her children safe and live a decent life: "Mrs. Flanders bent low over her little boys' heads" (*JR*, 2). After the death of her husband, Mrs. Flanders becomes "lonely, [and] unprotected" (*JR*, 2); she feels the need of a man to depend on.

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<sup>94</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (London: Hogarth, 1990), 1. Hereafter, references will be included in the text abbreviated as *JR*.

This leads her to resort to Captain Barfoot to find the protection, advice and emotional support she has lost, staying in touch with him and writing him letters when she is away from Scarborough, “her native town” (*JR*, 2), on holiday.

In the seashore scene, where his mother engages herself in writing a letter, Jacob Flanders’ childhood is subtly portrayed. Woolf makes her reader focus on Jacob, the little boy, whose mother does not stop being anxious about him: “Where is that tiresome little boy? [...] I don’t see him. Run and find him. Tell him to come at once” (*JR*, 1). Woolf portrays Jacob as a child who prefers to play alone, often apart from his brothers; his behaviour thus always requires his mother to keep her eyes on him. Bernard Blackstone describes Jacob’s refusal to play with his brother, Archer, as a kind of self-investigation of the natural world, represented by the sea-shore. Jacob likes to look for the reality of the world around him and to live his life in relation to it.<sup>95</sup> In his early life, Jacob seems to have self-reliance to the extent that he does not listen to the advice of his mother, who describes him as being difficult to deal with: “Jacob is such a handful; so obstinate already” (*JR*, 5). At the same time, Jacob’s refusal to play with his brother shows Jacob’s sense of independence and capacity to live life alone.

In his teenage years, Jacob, who is seen in Mr. Floyd’s eyes as having grown to be “such a fine young man” (*JR*, 16) goes to Rugby and tries to prove his manliness. Still a teenager, he continues to show his desire to be alone, in the “clover field, eight miles from home” (*JR*, 17) to catch butterflies and moths, often returning late at night: “And his mother had taken him for a burglar when he came home late” (*JR*, 17). At this age, Jacob is “[t]he only one of her sons who never obeyed her” (*JR*, 17). Jacob here tries to demonstrate that he is no longer a little boy, who depends on his mother; he “come[s] out of the depths of darkness” (*JR*, 18) of damp marshy places, where he goes on his lone expeditions. His behaviour makes his mother anxious most of the time: “It was after twelve when crossed the lawn and saw his mother in the bright room, playing patience, sitting up” (*JR*, 18). Through a conversation between Mrs. Flanders and Captain Barfoot, we are informed that Jacob does not only like adventures but he prefers masculine sport: “Jacob is after his butterflies [...] Cricket begins this week” (*JR*, 23).

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<sup>95</sup> Bernard Blackstone, *Virginia Woolf: A Commentary* (London: Hogarth, 1949), 57.

At the age of nineteen, Jacob goes up to Cambridge. On his way there by train, Jacob draws the attention of Mrs. Norman, one of the passengers in the same compartment; she sees him as “a powerfully built young man” (*JR*, 24). In her motherly eyes, Mrs. Norman (who has initially been somewhat fearful of sitting alone in a train compartment with a young male), watches him reading the *Daily Telegraph*; he seems to her full of manliness: “The lips were shut. The eyes bent down, since he was reading. All was firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious—as for knocking one down!” (*JR*, 24). Jacob, who invokes the fear of this lady, proves that he is a very nice young man, who directly offers his help: “[W]hen the train drew into the station, Mr. Flanders burst open the door, and put the lady’s dressing-case out for her, saying, or rather mumbling: ‘Let me’ very shyly; indeed he was rather clumsy about it” (*JR*, 25).

At Cambridge, Jacob Flanders has his education and ultimately gains his degree. He loves literature especially the works of Shakespeare and Virgil. Jacob's personality here starts to be more obvious. He tries to distinguish himself by “a pipe” (*JR*, 40), which he smokes in most of the scenes he appears in this novel. Jacob does not isolate himself from Cambridge colleagues, and “he appear[s] extraordinarily happy” (*JR*, 40) with them. But, in spite of “the intimacy, a sort of spiritual suppleness, when mind prints upon mind indelibly” (*JR*, 40) that constructs his relationships with them, Jacob makes limited friendships; his close friends are two only: Timmy Durrant and Richard Bonamy. Jacob shows his desire to achieve freedom: “‘I am what I am, and intend to be it,’ for which there will be no form in the world unless Jacob makes one for himself” (*JR*, 30). Jacob reveals to his friend, Timmy Durrant, some of his future plans: “I intend to preserve my economic independence” (*JR*, 32). This shows Jacob’s enthusiasm to have his own life, a life he lives by himself out of the sight of his family.

After graduating from Cambridge, Jacob again shows his independence. He lives in rooms in London and appears to have a job in an office which gives him an income, as the conversation between Jacob and Edward Cruttendon, the painter reveals: “No, Flanders, I don't think I could live like you. When one walks down that street opposite the British Museum [...] I mean going to an office” (*JR*, 125). In addition Jacob inherits “a hundred pounds” (*JR*, 120) from his mother's cousin. Woolf gives us no details about his job instead we have more of his social life and friendships and acquaintances. He looks at life here in London as “thoroughly pleasant” (*JR*, 66); he attends parties and has relationships with different women, but most of these relations

reveal his intention to prove his manliness and merely to feed his sexual desire. Again, here, he tries to show that he is no longer a boy who listens to his mother's advice: "Don't go with bad women, do be a good boy" (*JR*, 84-85). Instead he engages in relationships with women, which show Jacob as being "immature and confused".<sup>96</sup> His 'affairs' with prostitutes like Florinda and Laurette reveal him as in fact being clumsy and gauche in personal relations with women. With Florinda, for example, Jacob tries to convince himself that he is a hero who has won the love of a Greek goddess: "Wild and frail and beautiful she looked, and thus the women of the Greeks were, Jacob thought; and this was life; and himself a man and Florinda chaste" (*JR*, 72). Jacob seems also to give Florinda, a woman whom he ultimately does realise is "[as] ignorant as an owl, and would never learn to read even her love letters correctly" (*JR*, 73), romantic poems to read: "She left [him] with one of Shelley's poems beneath her arm" (*JR*, 72). Jacob's relationship with Florinda makes him feel his manliness; he is a man who attracts women; he has the physique of a Greek god and he is "one of those statues" (*JR*, 74) in the British Museum as Florinda tells him. Jacob's friendship with Florinda does not last for long, since he finally has to concede that, however attractive physically, she is "horribly brainless" (*JR*, 75). So he needs to find another woman, who satisfies the "romantic vein in him" (*JR*, 135). With Laurette, Jacob is also attracted by the physical beauty of a woman who is an artist's model and, ultimately, also a prostitute: "Laurette's skirts were short, her legs long, thin, and transparently covered" (*JR*, 99). Again, Jacob tries to see her as a Greek goddess and "an intelligent girl" (*JR*, 99), with himself as the knight.

At the house of Mrs. Durrant, Timmy Durrant's mother, where he is invited twice, Jacob draws the attention of others. In the eyes of Mrs. Durrant, "[h]e is extraordinarily awkward" (*JR*, 55) although "distinguished-looking" (*JR*, 64). Clara Durrant, Timmy's sister is attracted to him and sees him as being "too good" (*JR*, 57). While looking at Clara as being "[o]f all women, [the one] Jacob honoured [...] the most" (*JR*, 118), he seems emotionally reserved with her. Jacob fails to establish a love relationship with this young woman who, increasingly, seems to love him: "I like Jacob Flanders, [...] he is unworldly" (*JR*, 65). At her mother's party, Jacob tries to find a chance to chat with Clara alone: "'Will you come and have something to eat?' he said to Clara Durrant" (*JR*, 83). But Jacob's immaturity is shown here, since on their way downstairs,

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<sup>96</sup>Alex Zwerdling, "Jacob's Room: Woolf's Satiric Elegy", *ELH*, Vol., 48, No. 4 (Winter, 1981), pp. 894-913, The Johns Hopkins University Press Stable URL:<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872966>, accessed date 15/12/2011, 898.

Jacob seems to be annoyed when “Clara left him” (*JR*, 83) briefly to be hospitable to Mr. Pilcher, an American guest. Jacob here seems to be like a Victorian man who needs his woman to devote all her concern to him. Jacob is throughout the novel somewhat enigmatic, seen primarily from the outside, by the characters and even by the narrator, and the reader has to observe him closely and to deduce what he is like from his behaviour and what little we see of his inner thinking. For all his gaucheness in respect of Clara, his incapacity to express his feelings, this seeming trivial event at the party evidently disappoints Jacob deeply, and is a measure of his feelings for Clara, since he recalls it later while travelling in Greece: “Clara Durrant left him at a party to talk to an American called Pilchard [*sic*]. And he had come all the way to Greece and left her” (*JR*, 133). Instead of trying again to be close to Clara, Jacob has chosen in a way to punish her by his leaving London, while Clara keeps thinking of him till the end of the novel: “‘Jacob! Jacob!’ thought Clara” (*JR*, 163). Their mutually unexpressed love adds poignantly to Jacob’s final loss.

Jacob travels to France, Italy and Greece alone. Visiting the Classical sites he had read about in his Cambridge studies, he meets Sandra Wentworth Williams with her husband in one of the hotels in Greece. Again Jacob, the enigmatic young man looks at Sandra as more than a friend, since he keeps thinking of her all night: “He remember[s] Sandra Wentworth Williams with whom he was in love” (*JR*, 145). Echoing his behaviour with Florinda, Jacob, the romantic gives Sandra “the poems of Donne” (*JR*, 156). Mrs. Wentworth Williams is in fact not averse to a brief romantic holiday affair with an attractive young man. When the relationship inevitably ends and they each travel on, Jacob’s volume of Donne is placed on her bookshelf alongside volumes she has received from other young men: “And the book would be stood on the shelf in the English country house [...] There were ten or twelve little volumes already” (*JR*, 156). Even though Sandra sees Jacob as being “very distinguished looking” (*JR*, 141), she feels that he is “a mere bumpkin [...] a stupid fellow” (*JR*, 149). Again Tori Haring-Smith points out that the characters in the novel are viewed from outside themselves; their inner lives are not explored.<sup>97</sup> From the outside, manifestly, other characters can only see Jacob’s social self, not his inner world. But, of course, other characters’ deductions, may be true, but may equally be inaccurate. For instance, Sandra, although a mature married woman of forty, is less accurate in seeing Jacob as ‘stupid’ and ‘a bumpkin’. What he is, especially compared to this realistic woman, experienced in the

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<sup>97</sup> Tori Haring-Smith, “Private and Public Consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*”, *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*, eds. Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb (New York: Whitson, 1983), 158.

ways of the world, is naive and romantic. Generally, Woolf presents Jacob as young man who can be affected by others, or situations, easily; Sandra more shrewdly describes him as “credulous” (*JR*, 157), a young man who has no experience in life. Ultimately, Woolf “satirises the standard format of the biography of the exceptional man, [since she] makes of Jacob less a unique hero than a nebulous absent centre”.<sup>98</sup>

The presentation of Jacob’s life helps Virginia Woolf to imply hints that make the reader be conscious of the inevitable end of this young man: “One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done” (*JR*, 25). Thus, Woolf wants her readers to analyse things related to Jacob’s life, rather than just being involved in tracing the details of his life. There is a sense in which perhaps Virginia Woolf does not want to portray *too* precise and individualized a character. He must be sufficiently interesting, of course, but to a significant degree Jacob is designed as a representative young man of his generation. If his ultimate fate is suggested by his surname, as the reader in 1922 would have realised, it is a fate that is to be shared by thousands like him, a point Woolf suggests directly when she writes in ‘describing’ Jacob and his young fellow at Cambridge: “Simple young men, these, who would—but there is no need to think of them grown old” (*JR*, 37). Here, the image of these young men echoes that of Laurence Binyon’s poem “The Fallen” or “Ode of Remembrance”, published in *The Times* in 1914, in which he describes the young soldiers of the First World War:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We will remember them.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, the future of the young men at Cambridge will be drawn by the war itself.

When Fanny Elmer, the artistic model and part-time prostitute sees Jacob for the first time, she immediately admires his beauty and describes him as being “majestic” (*JR*, 112), but even she directly comes to an idea that young men’s beauty might soon be subject to decay: “Possibly

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<sup>98</sup> Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 1997), 87.

<sup>99</sup> Laurence Binyon, “For the Fallen” (London: Novello and Company, 1916), 32-33.

they are soon to lose it. Possibly they look into the eyes of faraway heroes, and take their station among us half contemptuously” (*JR*, 112).

Jacob is indeed presented as being associated with the British military past, especially as represented by the Duke of Wellington. In one of the scenes in London, Jacob is sitting in a stall with his friend Timothy Durrant, drinking coffee; the stall-keeper “[t]ak[es] Jacob for a military gentleman” (*JR*, 70), and he starts telling Jacob “about his boy at Gibraltar, and Jacob cursed the British army and praised the Duke of Wellington ” (*JR*, 70). This is just one of a string of references to Wellington, some of them quite oblique, that run through the novel. For instance, Jacob’s friend, Richard Bonamy is described as: “the young man with the Wellington nose” (*JR*, 79). Later in the novel Clara is walking in London with Mr. Bowley (although she is again thinking of Jacob) and they walk past a memorial: ““This statue was erected by the women of England...’ Clara read out with a foolish little laugh” (*JR*, 163); in fact the inscription, on a statue of Achilles in Hyde Park, was erected in memory of the Duke of Wellington and his soldiers. The events of Britain’s military past seem indeed to be part of the very texture of the novel, of the narrator’s consciousness, and thus references to Wellington’s defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo slip into the novel at quite unexpected moments. For instance as the table is being prepared for the party at Mrs. Durrant’s house, the details of the table settings are described and then we are told:

The little cards, however, with the names engraved on them, are a more serious problem than the flowers. More horses’ legs have been worn out, more coachmen’s lives consumed, more hours of sound afternoon time vainly lavished than served to win us the battle of Waterloo, and pay for it into the bargain. (*JR*, 78)

Jacob’s association with military heroism continues: in Chapter Eight, he is presented walking in London “to take the air with Bonamy on his arm” (*JR*, 84); they pass near Nelson’s Column: “[T]he world a spectacle, the early moon above the steeples coming in for praise, the seagulls flying high, Nelson on his column surveying the horizon, and the world our ship” (*JR*, 84).<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> A similar image is depicted in Woolf’s diary, written on December 1917, in which she narrates her visit to Fishmongers’ Hall, a military hospital to see Philip Woolf, her brother in law who was wounded in the war: “Today we went to see Philip at Fishmongers hall. Rather a strange place a few feet from London Bridge. A pompous hall, with a porter, a gigantic fire for that porter, a German gun; & within banisters draped with crimson folds of stuff, as if for a royal visit; Nelson’s flag in a glass case”.<sup>100</sup> Woolf again registers, in the midst of the contemporary warfare,



Woolf hints at the tragic end of Jacob through allusion to the tragic end of other young men in this novel, who die in the prime of life. Jacob's father is "a young man" (*JR*, 10) when he dies in Jacob's childhood. Jacob's uncle, Morty, who seems also young, is lost at sea, after the sinking of his ship, as Jacob himself narrates graphically to his friend, Timmy Durrant: "I expect he's feeding the sharks, if the truth were known" (*JR*, 32). Jacob's uncle is not the only one who becomes food for the creatures of the natural world. Jimmy, whose story is narrated by Rose Shaw, one of the people in the social circle of Mrs. Durrant, is also a young man who meets an untimely fate:

Rose Shaw, talking in rather an emotional manner to Mr. Bowley at Mrs. Durrant's evening party a few nights back, said that life is wicked because a man called Jimmy refused to marry a woman called (if memory serves) Helen Aitken [...] And now Jimmy feeds crows in Flanders and Helen visits hospitals. (*JR*, 90-91)

It is still a moment which brings the reader up short, and would of course have had an even more direct effect on the reader in the 1920s and, of course, as Alex Zwerdling points out, would have reminded them of Jacob's name, and his likely fate.<sup>101</sup> Again the shadows of the war fall darkly across the novel.

Moreover, for Woolf, Jacob is also shadowed by an earlier death, which had had an inevitable impact on her own life, her own sense of the vulnerability of young men. Her brother, Thoby Stephen, had not even lived long enough to fight with contemporaries, like Jacob, in the war, having died of typhoid in 1906 in Greece, visiting it as Jacob does. As well as an elegy for the young men of 1914-1918, the novel's emotional power also draws on that earlier, more personal loss, as her close friends realised. In October 1922, Lytton Strachey wrote to Woolf praising her attempt to portray Thoby in her novel: "Jacob himself I think is very successful—in a most remarkable & original way. Of course I see something of Thoby in him, as I suppose was intended".<sup>102</sup> Some critics have also suggested that Jacob represents Woolf's brother; Michael

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her awareness of the continued potency of Britain's heroic military past, as well as her distaste for pomposity and the trappings of royalty. See Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. I: 1915-1919*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1977), 91-92.

<sup>101</sup> Zwerdling, 896.

<sup>102</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Virginia Woolf & Lytton Strachey: Letters*, eds. Leonard Woolf and James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1956), 103-104.

Rosenthal asserts that *Jacob's Room* is a reflection of Thoby's life; Jacob's life at Cambridge, his love affairs and his travels, all these things show the connection between him and Woolf's brother.<sup>103</sup> Nancy Topping Bazin and Jane Homovit Lauter make the same suggestion, arguing that *Jacob's Room* expresses Woolf's personal distress.<sup>104</sup> There is no doubt that the suggestions presented by these critics are true but, at the same time, by 1922 other deaths were inextricably linked and entangled with her feelings of loss for Thoby, losses both personal and universal. Woolf's friend Rupert Brooke, subsequently a heroic emblem of the death of young men in the war, in fact died, like Thoby, not in action but in Greece, from blood poisoning in April 1915, while serving in the British Navy in the Aegean. Linden Peach in fact points out that *Jacob's Room* could be seen as a response to Edward Marsh's *Memoir of Rupert Brooke*.<sup>105</sup> In August 1918, Woolf wrote to Mrs. Brooke telling her that: "Rupert was so great a figure in his friends['] eyes that no memoir could possibly be good enough" (*LII*, 271). Moreover Woolf reviewed Edward Marsh's *Memoir of Rupert Brooke* and in her letter to Mrs. Brooke she emphasises how:

[O]ne is very glad to have the Memoir as it is [...] Indeed, I felt it to be useless to try to write about him [Rupert Brooke]. One couldn't get near to his extraordinary charm and goodness [...] I always felt that I knew him as one knows one's family. I stayed a week with him at Grantchester [1911] and then he came down here, and we met sometimes in London. He was a wonderful friend. (*LII*, 271)

Whether Jacob represents Thoby or Brooke, he is still a portrayal of young men who are deprived of life early. Jacob stands for those brave and intellectual young men who joined the war full of patriotism, enthusiasm and sense of duty toward their country.

## **Time and Process**

At the same time, as in Woolf's other fiction, war is but one aspect of those inexorable forces which hold human beings in their grip, the forces of natural process and time that reveal human

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<sup>103</sup> Michael Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: New York U. P., 1979), 78.

<sup>104</sup> Nancy Topping Bazin and Jane Homovit Lauter, "Virginia Woolf's Keen Sensitivity to War: its Roots and its Impact on her Novels", *Virginia Woolf and War Fiction, Reality and Myth*, ed. Mark Hussey (Syracuse: Syracuse U. P., 1991), 15.

<sup>105</sup> Linden Peach, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 70.

vulnerability, danger, and a sense of foreboding that dominates most of the characters of *Jacob's Room*. These images of time and process can be seen, for example, through vivid description of the natural process, the constant references to names of months and days, the sounds of clocks that together make the characters, and the reader, feel the passage of time, and sea and water images that make one further aware of the flux of time.

Time, portrayed by the processes of the natural world, shows varieties of violence and danger that make one feel that there is no security in human life. In Cornwall, where Mrs. Flanders spends her holiday with her children, there is “a hurricane out at sea” (*JR*, 6) that frightens Archer, the elder son of Mrs. Flanders, and deprives him of sleep; at the same time it invokes the reader's sense of foreboding:

For the wind was tearing across the coast, hurling itself at the hills, and leaping, in sudden gusts, on top of its own back. How it spread over the town in the hollow! How the lights seemed to wink and quiver in its fury, lights in the harbour, lights in bedroom windows high up! And rolling dark waves before it, it raced over the Atlantic, jerking the stars above the ships this way and that. (*JR*, 7)

The narrator continues describing the agitation of the elemental world, represented by this hurricane that brings darkness and makes Mr. Pearce feel its danger: “Lying on one's back one would have seen nothing but muddle and confusion—clouds turning and turning, and something yellow-tinted and sulphurous in the darkness” (*JR*, 8). Near the end of the Cornwall scenes, the processes of the natural world provoke insecurity in Mrs. Flanders herself: “[P]ulling them [her children] along, and looking with uneasy emotion at the earth displayed so luridly [...] this astonishing agitation and vitality of colour, which stirred Betty Flanders and made her think of responsibility and danger” (*JR*, 5).

Even in the gentle world of Cambridge the processes of the natural world are shown, again vividly portraying a sense of the flow of time, as the early summer arrives:

[T]he trees bowing, the grey spires soft in the blue, voices blowing and seeming suspended in the air, the springy air of May, the elastic air with its particles—chestnut bloom, pollen, whatever it is that gives the May air its potency, blurring the trees, gumming the buds, daubing the green. And the river too runs past, not at flood, nor swiftly, but cloying the oar that dips in it and drops white drops from the blade. (*JR*, 30)

To stress the passage of time, Woolf portrays the processes of the natural world, as specific human-measured hours flow by. In the Scilly Isles, the description of the natural world shows how this world is affected and changed every hour:

By six o'clock a breeze blew in off an icefield,; and by seven the water was more purple than blue; and by half-past seven there was a patch of rough gold-beater's skin round the Scilly Isles [...] By nine all the fire and confusion had gone out of the sky, leaving wedges of apple-green and plates of pale yellow; and by ten the lanterns on the boat were making twisted colours upon the waves. (*JR*, 46)

Nothing it seems is stable in this world, nor the human lives that exist within it.

In another chapter, Woolf depicts images of a severe winter as it affects the natural world: "The stream crept along by the road unseen by any one. Sticks and leaves caught in the frozen grass. The sky was sullen grey and the trees of black iron. Uncompromising was the severity of the country. At four o'clock the snow was again falling" (*JR*, 93). Woolf continues painting the severe image of natural process, as the snow falls, bringing a deathly sense of stasis: "Spaces of complete immobility separated each of these movements. The land seemed to lie dead" (*JR*, 93).

In Chapter Ten, in which Jacob intends to go to Paris, the processes of the season are again evident in the natural world around him:

A sparrow flew past the window trailing a straw—a straw from a stack stood by a barn in a farmyard. The old brown spaniel snuffs at the base for a rat. Already the upper branches of the elm trees are blotted with nets. The chestnuts have flirted their fans. And the butterflies are flaunting across the rides in the Forest. (*JR*, 118-119)

In the next chapter, Chapter Twelve, the processes of nature, represented by the blowing of the wind, seem to bring a sign of warning that makes some creatures seek protection: "So when the wind roams through a forest innumerable twigs stir; hives are brushed; insects sway on grass blades; the spider runs rapidly up a crease in the bark; and the whole air is tremulous with breathing; elastic with filaments" (*JR*, 158).

As the world flows indifferently in its seasons, the sounds of bells and clocks, by which humans attempt to measure, and implicitly control, time echo in most of the scenes of *Jacob's Room*. For Mrs. Flanders, time, portrayed by the sound of the church bell, suggests death and grief. While

she is caught by her thoughts about her husband, “she hear[s] the bell for service or funeral, that was Seabrook’s voice—the voice of the dead” (*JR*, 10). When she wanders with her sons in Scarborough, Mrs. Flanders’s thoughts are interrupted by the passage of time: “Mrs. Flanders sat on the raised circle of the Roman camp [...] but absent-mindedly [...] thinking how Archer had been awake again last night; the church clock was ten or thirteen minutes fast” (*JR*, 13). Sometimes the sounds of the clocks draw not only the characters’ attention but even the reader’s. At Cambridge, the striking of the clock conveys to the reader an image of mortality and makes one aware of the forces that may threaten human life:

The stroke of the clock even was muffled; as if intoned by somebody reverent from the pulpit; as if generations of learned men heard the last hour go rolling through their ranks and issued it, already smooth and time-worn, with their blessing, for the use of the living. (*JR*, 39)

Jacob, who is presented standing by the window of his room, “while the last stroke of the clock purred softly round him” (*JR*, 39), becomes aware of the passage of time and, thus, thinks of his future: “[T]he sound of the clock conveying to him (it may be) a sense of old buildings and time; and himself the inheritor; and then to-morrow; and friends” (*JR*, 39). Woolf continues to infuse her reader’s consciousness with a constant awareness of the passage of time, not only through the sounds of clocks but also other suggestive means. After spending time with his friend Simeon, Jacob leaves the latter’s room to return to his own; the sound of his footsteps seems like the sound of a clock, again suggesting the passage of time:

He went back to his rooms, and being the only man who walked at the moment back to his rooms, his footsteps rang out, his figure loomed large. Back from the Chapel, back from the Hall, back from the Library, came the sound of his footsteps, as if the old stone echoed with magisterial authority: ‘The young man—the young man—the young man—back to his rooms.’ (*JR*, 40)

At the same time, the echo of ‘the old stone’ stresses the effects of time here: the life of this single ‘young man’ (and we register the adjective) set against the old stones which have seen many generations of young men pass, and fade. The description of the houses at Cambridge, where Jacob lodges, again stresses the age of the place, especially when compared with the finite length of the human inhabitants: “These houses [...] were built, say, a hundred and fifty years ago [...] The eighteenth century has its distinction. Even the panels, painted in raspberry-coloured paint, have their distinction” (*JR*, 64).

Time is portrayed as a heavy visitor that reminds individuals of life and its progressing, often stressing his/her aloneness. Sitting at home alone, Mrs. Pascoe feels the emptiness of her life:

The summer's day may be wearing heavy. Washing in her little scullery, she may hear the cheap clock on the mantelpiece tick, tick, tick...tick, tick, tick. She is alone in the house. Her husband is out helping Farmer Hosken; her daughter married and gone to America. Her elder son is married too, [...] She is alone in the house. (*JR*, 47)

Time is not just a matter of minutes ticking, but reminds Mrs. Pascoe of the series of changes that have happened in her life. Although Mrs. Pascoe is still only forty five, she has experienced life, and that inevitably affects her present. Mrs. Pascoe, who seems to spend most of her time alone in the house, feels the heaviness of time that makes her look for someone to talk to and she welcomes any guest to break her solitary life, even if she does not know him/her: "Although it would be possible to knock at the cottage door and ask for a glass of milk, it is only thirst that would compel the intrusion. Yet perhaps Mrs. Pascoe would welcome it" (*JR*, 47).

In November, at night, the striking of Scarborough's church bells, which interrupts the conversation between Mrs. Flanders and Captain Barfoot, conveys an image, which is, it seems, quite different from that of life in London:

Church bells down in the town were striking eleven o'clock [...] And all the bedroom windows were dark—the Pages were asleep; the Garfits were asleep; the Cranches were asleep—whereas in London at this hour they were burning Guy Fawkes on Parliament Hill. (*JR*, 67)

The striking of the bells here that shows the time of sleep, shows also the comparative emptiness and quietness of the life in this town, which contrasts the bustling life of London. The city is commemorating a historic event, as it does every year. Again the dynamic physicality of the processes of the fire is caught: "The flames had fairly caught [...] the flames were struggling through the wood" (*JR*, 68).

In London, the striking of the clocks can provoke concern in the individual: "[T]hough it was only striking ten on one of the city clocks. No one can go to bed at ten. Nobody was thinking of going to bed. It was January and dismal, but Mrs. Wagg stood on her doorstep, as if expecting something to happen" (*JR*, 89). Woolf continues to portray time even in London, in terms of the natural world which changes every hour: "The snow, which had been falling all night, lay at

three o'clock in the afternoon over the fields and the hill [...] At four o'clock the snow was again falling. The day had gone out [...] At six o'clock a man's figure carrying a lantern crossed the field" (*JR*, 92-93). Woolf ends this scene with sounds of clocks, and suggestive images of the earth: "The land seemed to lie dead [...] Stiffly and painfully the frozen earth was trodden under and gave beneath pressure like a treadmill. The worn voices of clocks repeated the fact of the hour all night long" (*JR*, 93).

The vast flux of time is set against the achievements of human civilisation, as fragile to these processes as they are to human-created disasters; at night, the description of the British Museum makes the image more subtle:

The British Museum stood in one solid immense mound, very pale, very sleek in the rain [...] The night-watchmen, flashing their lanterns over the backs of Plato and Shakespeare, saw that on the twenty-second of February neither flame, rat, nor burglar was going to violate these treasures— poor, highly respectable men, with wives and families at Kentish Town, do their best for twenty years to protect Plato and Shakespeare. (*JR*, 103)

Here the processes of earth, life and even time itself provoke a sense of insecurity that envelopes the British Museum. Moreover, the lives of the night-watchmen are mortal compared to the British Museum, seen as a great receptacle of human history. Generally, the whole image implies the view that civilisation is subject to threat and danger. The same view is repeated in another image portrayed in one of the scenes in Greece: "As for the weather, no doubt the storm would break soon; Athens was under clouds" (*JR*, 146). And again the ancestors of these night-watchmen have existed through time and its changes, natural and human: "The old man has been crossing the Bridge these six hundred years, with the rabble of little boys at his heels, for he is drunk, or blind with misery" (*JR*, 107). Almost inevitably it is Waterloo Bridge.

Time is also portrayed as a destructive power that deprives women of their beauty: "As for the beauty of women, it is like the light on the sea, never constant to a single wave. They all have it; they all lose it. Now she [Fanny Elmer] is dull and thick as bacon; now transparent as a hanging glass" (*JR*, 110). For Sandra Wentworth Williams, time is also a threat to her beauty; she keeps looking at the mirror, proud of her looks: "'I am very beautiful,' she thought" (*JR*, 137), and worries at the same time about her beauty fading: "I enjoy the spring more than the autumn now. One does, I think, as one gets older" (*JR*, 140). Sandra feels the accumulating of time: "Ten

minutes, fifteen minutes, half an hour—that was all the time before her” (*JR*, 154). The passing of time makes her worried, indeed gives rise to more metaphysical thoughts: “Meanwhile, the great clock on the landing ticked and Sandra would hear time accumulating, and ask herself, ‘What for? What for?’” (*JR*, 157). The future of Sandra is connected with keeping her beauty, but, as she begins to ask, to what end? As Woolf puts it in her significantly-titled essay “The Moment: Summer’s Night”: “If you are young, the future lies upon the present, like a piece of glass, making it trembler and quiver. If you are old, the past lies upon the present, like a thick glass, making it waver, distorting it”.<sup>106</sup> The sense of her aging draws Sandra to Jacob, the handsome young man, as she herself confesses: “When one is your age—when one is young. What will you do? You will fall in love—oh yes! But don’t be in too great a hurry. I am so much older” (*JR*, 154). Sandra Williams grasps at the opportunity to attract young men like Jacob, poignantly aware that such opportunities are inevitably going to become fewer:

The flight of time which hurries us to tragically along; the eternal drudge and drone, now bursting into fiery flame like those brief balls of yellow among green leaves (she was looking at orange trees); kisses on lips that are to die; the world turning, turning in mazes of heat and sound—though to be sure there is the quiet evening with its lovely pallor, ‘For I am sensitive of it,’ Sandra thought. (*JR*, 148-149).

The fertility of the natural world will continue through the centuries, but not for Sandra Wentworth Williams.

In one of the scenes in Greece, Jacob is presented as if in a race with time: “He stood on the exact spot where the great statue of Athena used to stand, and identified the more famous landmarks of the scene beneath [...] This was on Monday” (*JR*, 144). Then the reader is informed that “on Wednesday he [writes] a telegram to Bonamy, telling him to come at once” (*JR*, 144). The following day, Jacob engages himself in something else: “Next day he climb[s] Pentelicus” (*JR*, 145), and “[t]he day after he [goes] up to Acropolis” (*JR*, 145). The hectic repetition of time’s passing helps to show it as an irresistible power that makes one feel the characters, including a young man like Jacob, are relentlessly struggling against it.

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<sup>106</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Moment: Summer’s Night”, in *Virginia Woolf: Collected Essays Volume Two* (London: Hogarth, 1966), 293.



In the countryside, time provokes a sense of mortality, mystery and darkness. Mrs Flanders and Mrs Jarvis are presented together climbing a dark hill till they reach the Roman camp, where ancient dead bodies are buried. The scene gives an impression of loss and mystery that envelopes the atmosphere of this place: “The rampart rose at their feet—the smooth circle surrounding the camp or the grave. How many needles Betty Flanders had lost there! And her garnet brooch” (*JR*, 127). Mrs. Flanders’ brooch had been a present from Jacob; the loss of the brooch here where the soil holds the remains of Roman soldiers is, again, perhaps a foreshadowing of future events. While they keep chatting there, they are again interrupted by the passage of time “The clock struck the quarter [...] the church clock divided time into quarters” (*JR*, 128). The striking of the clock, heard here, is a reminder of the mortality and decay of the dead; the creeping of time means nothing for those who lay in the tombstones, whose names counterpoint the living women's voices:

Yet even in this light the legends on the tombstones could be read, brief voices saying, ‘I am Bertha Ruck,’ ‘I am Tom Gage.’ And they say which day of the year they died, and the New Testament says something for them, very proud, very emphatic, or consoling. (*JR*, 128)

The interweaving between the past, represented by the voices of the dead, and the present, represented by the striking of the clock, makes time lose its function, since the striking of the clock does not make a difference to the dead; they become part of the past, which seems more safe than the present and the future time, as Woolf puts it: “The Roman skeletons are in safe keeping. Betty Flanders’s darning needles are safe too and her garnet brooch” (*JR*, 129). Mrs. Jarvis herself looks at the world of the dead that becomes part of the past as being more secure than the world of her present time: “I never pity the dead, [...] since] [t]hey are at rest” (*JR*, 127). Again the individual's anxiety about his/her future is registered, an anxiety, as the reader in 1922 would be acutely aware, that was ultimately to be all too justified.

### **Sea and Water Images**

Virginia Woolf colours many scenes in *Jacob’s Room* with sea and water images that have their own significance here. In Cornwall, sea imagery is used to show human vulnerability and to convey a sense of insecurity. On the seashore, Jacob, the little boy “begins his journey on weakly

legs on the sandy bottom” (*JR*, 3); Jacob is shown trying to pick up “a huge crab” (*JR*, 3). The same image of the crab is portrayed a slightly later scene in which Jacob is in his bed while, outside, Jacob’s crab struggles in danger, represented by the terrible weather:

Outside the rain poured down more directly and powerfully as the wind fell in the early hours of the morning. The aster was beaten to the earth. The child’s bucket was half-full of rainwater; and the opal-shelled crab slowly circled round the bottom, trying with its weakly legs to climb the steep side; trying again and falling back, and trying again and again. (*JR*, 8)

Describing both of them, Jacob and the crab, as having ‘weakly legs’, Woolf underlines Jacob’s own vulnerability and weakness; he, like his hopeless crab, cannot control things now, or indeed much later as the storms of the war engulf him. Sea images portray also the vulnerability of a “large black woman” (*JR*, 4), whom Jacob sees on the beach: “The waves came round her. She was a rock. She was covered with the seaweed which pops when it is pressed” (*JR*, 4).

Sea images sometimes show the anxiety and uneasiness of an individual. Mrs. Flanders’s grief caused by the death of her husband, a grief that makes her spend her time on the seashore of Cornwall thinking of her dead husband, is painted through sea images: “The waves showed that uneasiness, like something alive, restive, expecting the whip, of waves before a storm. The fishing-boats were leaning to the water’s brim. A pale yellow light shot across the purple sea; and shut” (*JR*, 5). During the hurricane in Cornwall, the lodging house, where the Flanders spend their night, seems as if filled with water: “The lodging-house seemed full of gurgling and rushing; the cistern overflowing; water bubbling and squeaking and running along the pipes and streaming down the windows” (*JR*, 6).

Sea and water images are repeatedly used to suggest mortality and grief; in the description of Jacob’s room at Cambridge, even a little domestic feature is seen in terms of these sea images implying transience and vulnerability: “His slippers were incredibly shabby, like boats burnt to the water’s rim” (*JR*, 33). More universally, sailing by boat to the Scilly Isles, Jacob and his friend, Timmy Durrant look at the view in front of them that invokes sadness: “Yes, the chimneys and the coastguard stations and the little bays with the waves breaking unseen by any one make one remember the overpowering sorrow” (*JR*, 43).

Woolf continues painting water images with these connotations of foreboding even when the scene is in London. Describing the street close to St. Paul's, the narrator says: "Beneath the pavement, *sunk* in the earth, hollow drains [were] lined with yellow light" (*JR*, 61. My italics). In another scene, St. Paul's is described as "floating on the uneven white mist" (*JR*, 68). Sitting with Florinda, in the dining-room of a hotel in London, Jacob, who is surrounded by dancers, is presented as being at the mercy of the sea:

So they [two of the dancers] wreathed his head with paper flowers. Then somebody brought out a white and gilt chair and made him sit on it. As they passed, people hung glass grapes on his shoulders, until he looked like the figure-head of a wrecked ship. (*JR*, 69)

After lunch in one of the restaurants, Fanny Elmer wanders in the London streets; the narrator, describing things there, again uses water images to show the restive mind of people and Fanny, of course, is one of them: "For if the exaltation lasted we should be blown like foam into the air [...] we should go down the gale in salt drops" (*JR*, 115).

Relatedly, and more profoundly, Woolf uses sea imagery to show the political tension, represented by the Third Irish Home Rule Bill about which Jacob reads in the *Daily Mail*, while he is in Greece:

He would go into Parliament and make fine speeches—but what use are fine speeches and Parliament, once you surrender an inch to the black waters? Indeed there has never been any explanation of the ebb and flow in our veins—of happiness and unhappiness. (*JR*, 134)

The 'black waters' take on connotations which seem to transcend time, to become images of the ultimate futility of human actions. And again the reader in 1922 would take the point.

By the end of Chapter Twelve, in which Jacob is still in Greece, one of the foundations of European civilisation, darkness and agitation envelop the sea and make sea animals seek protection and escape the violence of the relentless waves:

The mainland of Greece was dark; and somewhere off Euboea a cloud must have touched the waves and spattered them—the dolphins circling deeper and deeper into the sea. Violent was the wind now rushing down the Sea of Marmara between Greece and the plains of Troy. (*JR*, 155)

The reference to that previous site of savagery and military disaster is manifestly not an accident.

## Images of Death, Danger and Mortality

In this novel, Virginia Woolf inserts a variety of images of death and danger that further enhance the novel's sense of foreboding, reflecting the post-war perspective on the pre-war period. These images can be seen through the vivid descriptions of tombstones, graveyards, skulls, and, more directly, sounds of guns. In the presentation of Jacob's childhood, images of mortality and danger are very subtle. While he plays on the sand, Jacob "saw a whole skull—perhaps a cow's skull, a skull, perhaps, with the teeth in it [...] he ran farther and farther away until he held the skull in his arms" (*JR*, 4). The sheep skull horrifies Jacob's mother, who immediately shouts at him: "Put it down Jacob! Drop it this moment! Something horrid, I know" (*JR*, 4). Observing Jacob's insistence on keeping the skull, Mrs. Flanders starts warning her children not to play with dangerous things; she narrates to them the story of the gunpowder explosion, "in which poor Mr. Curnow [has] lost his eye" (*JR*, 4). But his mother's warning does not make him get rid of the skull; Jacob keeps it with him even when he is asleep: "The sheep's jaw with the big yellow teeth in it lay at his feet. He had kicked it against the iron bedrail" (*JR*, 8).

In the Second Chapter of the novel, death and mortality are portrayed directly in the life of Mrs. Flanders, who keeps visiting the grave of her husband: "True, there's no harm in crying for one's husband, and the tombstone, though plain, was a solid piece of work, and on summer's days when the widow brought her boys to stand there one felt kindly towards her" (*JR*, 9-10). Mortality and death are embodied by the butterflies and beetles that are collected by John, Jacob's younger brother: "The stag-beetle dies slowly [...] Even on the second day its legs were supple. But the butterflies were dead. A whiff of rotten eggs had vanquished the pale clouded yellows which came pelting across the orchard and up Dods Hill and away on the moor" (*JR*, 17). Even the moths that are caught seem to be subject, indeed to epitomise, death: "Rebecca had caught the death's-head moth in the kitchen" (*JR*, 17). More mysteriously danger seems to be present in the wood, where Jacob goes to catch moths: "There had been a volley of pistol-shots suddenly in the depths of the wood" (*JR*, 17). This anticipates a similar sound heard at Cambridge, where Jacob studies: "A terrifying volley of pistol-shots rings out—cracks sharply; ripples spread—silence laps smooth over sound. A tree—a tree has fallen, a sort of death in the forest. After that, the wind in the trees sounds melancholy" (*JR*, 26). The episode is, again, unexplained but if anything here, among these young men in the calm of Cambridge, is even

more prophetic; manifestly the novelist is clear in her intentions and her meaning for the reader in 1922.

Spending his holiday on the seashore at Falmouth with his friend Timmy Durrant, Jacob looks at the meadow that is coloured unexpectedly by an image of death: “The meadow was on a level with Jacob’s eyes as he lay back; gilt with buttercups, but the grass did not run like the thin green water of the graveyard grass about to overflow the tombstones, but stood juicy and thick” (*JR*, 31). Tombstone images are even, rather oddly but revealingly, evoked, as Jacob and Timmy Durrant reach the Scilly Isles, in the sunshine:

The Scilly Isles now appeared as if directly pointed at by a golden finger issuing from a cloud; and everybody knows how portentous that sight is, and how these broad rays, whether they light upon the Scilly Isles or upon the tombs of crusaders in cathedrals, always shake the very foundations of scepticism and lead to jokes about God. (*JR*, 45)

The tombstones of great men and men of militarism, like that of Nelson and, again, Wellington, are juxtaposed with the lives of ordinary men and women, like the elderly Mrs. Lidgett: “Mrs. Lidgett took her seat beneath the great Duke’s tomb, folded her hands, and half closed her eyes. A magnificent place for an old woman to rest in, by the very side of the great Duke’s bones, whose victories means nothing to her, whose name she knows not” (*JR*, 59-60). For “[o]ld Spicer, the jute merchant” (*JR*, 60), the whole image of this tombstone seems a “gloomy old place... Where’s Nelson’s tomb?” (*JR*, 60).

Tombstone images are used to show how human love is subject to decay. On Waterloo Bridge (again) “a mason’s van with newly lettered tombstones [appears] recording how some one loved some one who is buried at Putney” (*JR*, 107). In one of the London scenes, Fanny Elmer, the artistic model and part-time prostitute, whose life seems aimless and meaningless, is presented—for reasons that are otherwise not quite clear—wandering in the disused graveyard of St. Pancras parish: “Fanny Elmer strayed between the white tombs which lean against the wall, crossing the grass to read a name, hurrying on when the grave-keeper approached, hurrying into the street” (*JR*, 109). As a young woman, one might not expect Fanny to walk in such a gloomy place, among the dead, but her behaviour here perhaps suggests her dismal life, a life that seems lifeless like that of the dead.

During the First World War, of course, even something as usually mundane as the postal delivery seems to be connected with death and horror: “Morning after morning you’d dread to see the postman going to the doors, because the postman used to come round with notices ‘killed’ or ‘missing’ you know”.<sup>107</sup> In *Jacob’s Room*, vivid attention is given to letters: “Let us consider letters—how they come at breakfast, and at night, with their yellow stamps and their green stamps, immortalised by the postmark—for to see one’s own envelope on another’s table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien” (*JR*, 86). Moreover, most of the characters are presented as being engaged in reading or writing letters, especially Mrs. Flanders: “Am I doomed all my days to write letters, send voices, which fall upon the tea-table, fade upon the passage, making appointments, *while life dwindles*, to come and dine?” (*JR*, 87. My italics). For this mother, writing letters seems to be the only way of communicating with Jacob, since from the time of Jacob’s being at Cambridge till the end of the novel, no scene presents Mrs. Flanders and Jacob together; they keep in touch by letters. She is not the only mother who communicates with her sons by letters: “Mrs. Jarvis wrote them; Mrs. Durrant too; Mother Stuart actually scented her pages” (*JR*, 88). Probably, Mrs. Flanders is informed by Jacob’s death by post. In Chapter Eleven, the post is related to yet another image of time; Mrs. Flanders, who opens the first scene here talking about her son Archer, who “will be at Gibraltar to-morrow” (*JR*, 120), seems to be waiting for the post when she hears the sound of the clock:

[T]he clock striking four straight through the circling notes [...] the post, with all its variety of messages envelops addressed in bold hands, in slanting hands, stamped now with English stamps, again with Colonial stamps [...] the post was about to scatter a myriad messages over the world [...] But that letter-writing is practised mendaciously nowadays, particularly by young men travelling in foreign parts, seems likely enough. (*JR*, 120)

The tenuous links between people, especially between mothers and sons, even before wartime, is suggested in such passages.

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<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Martin Pugh, *‘We Danced All Night’: A Social History of Britain between the Wars*, 4.

## Human vulnerability

In commenting about *Jacob's Room*, Leonard Woolf suggests that “the people are ghosts” (*DII*, 186). Accordingly, most of the characters here seem vulnerable and ultimately tired; they are characterised through the narrator’s post-war perspectives that make them seem as if they live among the ghosts of the dead. The vulnerability of the characters is shown most in the female characters, some of whom as we have seen, are presented as widows, deprived of their husbands in the prime of life, like Mrs. Flanders, who “had been a widow for these two years” (*JR*, 2), but still remembers her husband, as if he becomes a ghost in her life: “Seabrook is dead. Tears made all the dahlias in her garden undulate in red waves and flashed the glass house in her eyes” (*JR*, 1). Mrs. Durrant, Timmy’s mother, is also a widow whose husband's death “was a tragedy” (*JR*, 54); he had ridden the sea and faced his end there, as Mrs. Durrant herself narrates: “My husband, who knew a good deal about sailing, for he kept a yacht before we married...and then how rashly they had defied the fishermen” (*JR*, 55-56).

Other characters are also seen as unfulfilled, their lives somehow incomplete. Not only is Captain Barfoot lame but his wife, Ellen, is an invalid; thus, “in her bath-chair on the esplanade [she is] a prisoner” (*JR*, 19), a physical incapacity which means her husband is deprived of becoming a father: “A man likes to have a son” (*JR*, 9). Barfoot's relationship with Mrs. Flanders and her boys is thus, evidently, in many aspects compensatory. Such symptomatic characterisation ultimately makes the whole ‘world’ of the novel, as Michal Rosenthal describes, “a fragmental world of disparate souls cut off from one another”.<sup>108</sup> The description of the gloomy faces of the passengers at Oxford Street shows how they seem not to see each other, even though they are close:

The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other’s faces. Yet few took advantage of it. Each had his own business to think of. Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title. (*JR*, 59)

In portraying people’s life in the streets of London, Woolf again presents people as being in various ways deprived, as victims:

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<sup>108</sup> Rosenthal, 79.

Long past sunset an old blind woman sat on a camp-stool with her back to the stone wall of the Union of London and Smith's Bank, clasping a brown mongrel tight in her arms and singing out loud, not for coppers, no, from the depths of her gay wild heart—her sinful, tanned heart—for the child who fetches her is the fruit of sin. (*JR*, 61)

The vulnerability and misery of this 'old blind woman' are again portrayed in the narrator's post-war perspective, as Woolf herself indicates in her diary in June 1920, in which she describes a similar woman she saw in London:

An old beggar woman, blind, sat against a stone wall in Kingsway holding a brown mongrel in her arms & sang aloud [...] she was singing shrilly, but for her own amusement, not begging [...] Nowadays I'm often overcome by London; even think of the dead who have walked in the city. (*DII*, 47)

In the context of *Jacob's Room*, it is clearly not insignificant that the vulnerability of the 'old beggar woman' in Woolf's diary makes Woolf remember the war and 'the dead' who are seen by Woolf as ghosts who 'walked in the city'. In one of the nights in London, the drunk men and women are portrayed in a way that makes them seem prisoners, and hardly human: "The street lamps do not carry far enough to tell us. The voices, angry, lustful, despairing, passionate, were scarcely more than the voices of caged beasts at night. Only they are not caged, nor beasts" (*JR*, 75).

In the pre-war scenes, most of the characters in *Jacob's Room* are presented as being tired and/or caught by a sense of discomfort and uneasiness that dominates their feelings. In Cornwall, where she spends her holiday with her children and has to be in her ease, Mrs. Flanders is "aware all the time in the depths of her mind of some buried discomfort" (*JR*, 4). Like his mother, Jacob is also presented as being dominated by such a feeling that accompanies him at Cambridge even in times of enjoyment: "Every time he lunches out on Sunday [...] there will be the same shock—horror—*discomfort*—then pleasure" (*JR*, 30. My emphasis). At times Jacob sees the whole world as unpleasant, reflecting his, usually temporary mood: "'Bloody beastly', he said to Timmy Durrant, summing up his discomfort at the world shown him at lunch-time" (*JR*, 29). Sometimes such a feeling of discomfort might come to Jacob when he observes an unpleasant scene; while he looks through his window at Conduit Street, he sees the "van [of the post office] rounded the corner by the pillar box in such a way as to graze the kerb and make the little girl



who was standing on the tiptoe to post a letter look up, half frightened, half curious” (*JR*, 58). This scene makes Jacob feel unease: “It is seldom only that we see a child on tiptoe with pity—more often a dim discomfort [...] that’s our feeling” (*JR*, 58). Even in Paris, Jacob, who is accompanied by Edward Cruttendon, the painter, and Miss Jinny, is dominated by a sense of discomfort:

And finally under the arc lamps in the Gare des Invalides, with one of those queer movements which are so slight yet so definite, which may wound or pass unnoticed but generally inflict a good deal of discomfort, Jinny and Cruttendon drew together; Jacob stood apart. (*JR*, 125)

Such unfocussed, at times only half-conscious, ‘discomfort’ is a manifestation of the characters’ restlessness, their sense of not being at ease with life, or at home in the world. One might suggest that this is a very 1920s projection back onto the life of the pre-war world. It is a tone which breaks out most dramatically—in very 1920s tones—in the words of Rose Shaw, one of the guests of Mrs. Durrant, “[l]ife is wicked—life is detestable!” (*JR*, 81); it is Rose who recalls, as we have seen, the tragic end of the love of Helen and Jimmy, he who “feeds crows in Flanders” (*JR*, 91).

## **Masculinity**

Virginia Woolf, who looks at the masculine world as being connected to, indeed responsible for, war, stresses the prevailing masculine role in this novel. Masculinity is embodied, for instance, in the character of Captain Barfoot, the former soldier, whose mutilation was caused by war: “[H]e was lame and wanted two fingers on the left hand, having served his country” (*JR*, 19), presumably in the Boer War or one of Britain’s other Imperial wars. The outlook of this man who is “over fifty” (*JR*, 23) indicates, though, that his militarism is still an essential part of his character, as his continued use of his military rank suggests: “In spite of his lameness there [is] something military in his approach” (*JR*, 20). Captain Barfoot’s masculine history is still fresh in the minds of people he knows, like Mrs. Jarvis; she still remembers the “visions of shipwreck and disaster, in which all the passengers come tumbling from their cabins, and there is the captain, buttoned in his pea-jacket, matched with the storm, vanquished by it but by none other” (*JR*, 22). The Captain’s boldness that is shown in his being the only one who has challenged the

storm, reflects the masculine instinct that motivates Captain Barfoot to fight even if the result might be failure. Even though there is “something rigid about him” (*JR*, 22) and he is “a man with a temper; tenacious” (*JR*, 22), Captain Barfoot has got the admiration of women who find his masculine authority reassuring: “Women would have felt, ‘Here is law. Here is order. Therefore we must cherish this man [...]’” (*JR*, 22). They see in this man features of leadership, and suggest he “stand for the Council” (*JR*, 23). For Mrs. Flanders, Captain Barfoot, as T. E. Apter describes, “has become the focus of her romantic fantasies”; he is the only man of whom she asks advice and she likes to listen to his views.<sup>109</sup> Captain Barfoot seems to be her main support, who gains her confidence; she receives him in her house with great respect, “as if she were very confident, very fond of the Captain” (*JR*, 22).

Masculinity can be obviously seen at Cambridge, where one can see “nothing but young men all day long, in streets and round tables” (*JR*, 25). The domination of masculinity here again underlines that there is no room for females, who were deprived of getting degrees from Cambridge; it is a place distinguished by its male authority: “What certainty, authority controlled by piety, although great boots march under the gowns. In what orderly procession they advance. Thick wax candles stand upright; young men rise in white gowns” (*JR*, 26). Ultimately this domination makes young men plan their own future, in full assurance that they have a role in their society: “[I]f men went down, became lawyers, doctors, members of Parliament, business men” (*JR*, 28).

### **War and Political Tension**

War images, political events and tension, in the Empire and even out of it, are vividly presented in *Jacob's Room* in the pre-war period and in the time leading up to the catastrophe of the First World War. At Mrs. Durrant's party, the guests make reference to political events that seem to disturb their peaceful life: “Happily we are not governed by the evening papers” (*JR*, 80), said Mr. Salvin to Miss Eliot, who replied: “I never read them [...] I know nothing about politics” (*JR*, 80). The conversation here might hint at the continued violence in Albania which recurred

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<sup>109</sup> T.E. Apter, *Virginia Woolf: A Study of her Novels* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 31.

in the period 1910 to 1912, in which the Albanians revolted against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>110</sup> It also might refer to more local events in Britain, like the issues of Irish Home Rule in 1911 or the Liverpool general transport strike that paralysed commerce in that important part for most of the summer of 1911.<sup>111</sup>

The Irish Home Rule Bill of 1911 and of 1912 and issues related to the Empire that Captain Barfoot talks about, occupy also the mind of Mrs. Flanders and even her letter to Jacob: “[T]he Captain says things look bad, politics that is, for as Jacob knew, the Captain would sometimes talk, as the evening waned, about Ireland or India” (*JR*, 85). Jacob himself is aware of such events; in one of the scenes in Chapter Eight, Jacob is reading the *Globe*: “The Prime Minister’s speech was reported in something over five columns [...] The Prime Minister proposed a measure for giving Home Rule to Ireland. Jacob knocked out his pipe. He was certainly thinking about Home Rule in Ireland—a very difficult matter” (*JR*, 92). Probably Jacob is here reading of debates related to the Irish Home Rule Bill of 1912.<sup>112</sup>

Even while he is in Greece, Jacob keeps aware of the political world in Britain, especially the third Irish Home Rule Bill of 1913 that was carried by the House of the Commons: “But then there was the British Empire which was beginning to puzzle him; nor was he altogether in favour of giving Home Rule to Ireland. What did the *Daily Mail* say about that?” (*JR*, 134). Through presenting such scenes Woolf makes her reader aware of the time of the action and also the stress and instability of the period which preceded the war, and in some ways anticipated it. By doing so, Woolf does not detach politics from the daily life of people, especially Jacob’s life. Jacob is aware of the political events round him, and gives importance to such issues.

Near the end of Chapter Twelve, Woolf presents a military naval scene that seems to be a preparation for the war; it also shows how the military system deals with soldiers as cattle rather than human beings:

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<sup>110</sup> Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans: Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1983).

<sup>111</sup> See Richard Price, *Labour in British Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 144.

<sup>112</sup> Home Rule effectively started in Ireland in 1870 but in the British politics was converted to it in 1880s. Home rule was the name given to the process of allowing Ireland to establish a parliament in Dublin responsible for domestic affairs. One of the main barriers to the Home Rule for decades had been the House of Lords. Once the power of the Lords had been limited by the Parliament Act of 1911, the Liberals introduced a Third Home Rule Bill (1912). See A. W. Palmer, *A Dictionary of Modern History: 1789-1945* (London: Penguin, 1964), 156.

The battleships ray out over the North Sea, keeping their stations accurately apart. At a given signal all the guns are trained on a target [...] With equal nonchalance a dozen young men in the prime of life descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea [...] Like blocks of tin soldiers the army covers the cornfield, moves up the hillside, stops, reels slightly this way and that, and falls flat, save that, through field-glasses, it can be seen that one or two pieces still agitate up and down like fragments of broken match-stick. (*JR*, 151)

The scene here, as Zwerdling points out, describes the military world of that period (here presumably on exercise), in a satiric style, which helps to portray the situation of soldiers during that time.<sup>113</sup> A situation that portrays the way of mobilizing young men for war, it also shows the carelessness of those who waged the fire of the war.

In January 1915, Woolf wrote: “This afternoon we went over the houses in Mecklenburg Sqre [Square]; which has led to a long discussion about our future, & a fresh computation of income. The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think” (*DI*, 22). The image of darkness and the sense of having a dark and mysterious future, which occupied Woolf’s mind during the war, are directly echoed in many scenes in *Jacob’s Room*. Darkness envelops the hearts of lovers; Clara Durrant, who loves Jacob, seems to know that the latter does not love her. Therefore she tries to forget about him: “Then two thousand hearts in the semi-darkness remembered, anticipated, travelled dark labyrinths; and Clara Durrant said farewell to Jacob Flanders” (*JR*, 62). In Chapter Eight, Woolf portrays London as being covered with darkness: “The lamps of London uphold the dark *as upon the points of burning bayonets*” (*JR*, 91. My emphasis). By the end of Chapter Twelve, darkness transcends national boundaries; it does not only envelope London, but even other capitals: “Now it was dark. Now one after another lights were extinguished. Now great towns—Paris—Constantinople—London—were black as strewn rocks” (*JR*, 156).<sup>114</sup> The image of darkness here that seems to cover the whole of the civilised world hints at the darkness of the war itself, and is reinforced again in the same chapter, in which the intense and terrible weather makes the whole world seem in chaos:

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<sup>113</sup> Zwerdling, 896.

<sup>114</sup> The passage seems to echo the equally apocalyptic tones of *The Waste Land*; the poem was published in the same year as *Jacob’s Room* but it is possible that Woolf had heard Eliot read it: “Falling towers/ Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna London/ Unreal”. See T. S. Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 41.

But the wind was rolling the darkness through the streets of Athens, rolling it, one might suppose, with a sort of trampling energy of mood which forbids too close an analysis of the feelings of any single person, or inspection of features. All faces—Greek, Levantine, Turkish, English—would have looked much the same in that darkness. (*JR*, 157)

Near the end of the novel, the sounds of guns are heard, which will be discussed below, and this is immediately followed by an image of darkness that seems to show the outbreak of the war: “Darkness drops like a knife over Greece” (*JR*, 172).

By the beginning of the war, Jacob is aged twenty seven, since he is nineteen when he enters Cambridge in 1906, and in Greece, which is supposed to be in 1913, Sandra Williams refers to his age as being “twenty-six” (*JR*, 149). In the next chapter—Thirteen—which is supposed to be 1914, Jacob returns from Greece. Woolf refers to the political tension in this year that occupies the characters' conversation in Mrs. Durrant's house: “Mrs Durrant discussed with Sir Edgar the policy of Sir Edward Grey” (*JR*, 162). The conversation might refer to July crisis of 1914, in which Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary of Britain, attempted to play the role of mediator in the dispute between Austria-Hungary and Serbia that started immediately when Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to Austro-Hungarian Throne, was assassinated by a member of a group of Serb and Croat nationalists in Sarajevo. The efforts of the Foreign Minister to end this struggle came to nothing; ultimately this dispute led to the outbreak of the war.<sup>115</sup>

Near the end of this chapter—Thirteen—which as we said presents events of 1914, the sounds of guns that are heard in Greece seem to refer to the outbreak of the war: “The sound spread itself flat, and then went tunnelling its way with fitful explosions among the channels of the islands” (*JR*, 172). Woolf ends this chapter also with the sounds of guns that are heard by Jacob's mother: “‘The guns?’ said Betty Flanders, half asleep, getting out of bed and going to the window [...] her sons fighting for their country” (*JR*, 172). The sound of guns here is described as being “the dull sound, as if nocturnal women were beating great carpets” (*JR*, 172). These sounds echo what Woolf called “our thunder on earth”, in her essay “Heard on the Downs: the Genesis of Myth”, in 1916.<sup>116</sup> In this essay Woolf depicts a similar echo of the sounds that are heard by Mrs.

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<sup>115</sup> See James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Longman, 1992), 10-38.

<sup>116</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1918*, 41.

Flanders, the sounds of guns on the Western Front that could be heard in the countryside of Rodmel at Sussex, near her Asheham House:

More prosaically, it [the sound of the guns] sounds like the beating of gigantic carpets by gigantic women, at a distance. You may almost see them holding the carpets in their strong arms by the four corners, tossing them into the air, and bringing them down with a thud while the dust rises in a cloud about their heads.<sup>117</sup>

Thus, in *Jacob's Room* part of the battle of France is portrayed through the sounds of the guns rather than narration.

In the next chapter, which is the last one, we are abruptly made aware of the death of Jacob. Woolf directly opens this chapter in one of the years of the war, in which Bonamy, Jacob's friend, is "standing in the middle of Jacob's room" (*JR*, 173), with Jacob's mother, both grieving: "'Jacob! Jacob!' cried Bonamy" (*JR*, 173). Woolf has not directly informed us that Jacob has become a soldier; moreover, Woolf in this novel, as Laura Marcus indicates "transcribes Jacob's absence and circumscribes his loss but does not represent his death".<sup>118</sup> By doing so, Woolf makes us concentrate on the cause of Jacob's death: "The point is, however, that we have been brought up in an illusion" (*JR*, 133). It is the illusion of the war and of the responsive patriotism that Jacob and his generation are influenced by. The personality of Jacob, which has been discussed previously, is that of a young man, who is romantic, poetic and has a sense of the heroic, and is likely therefore to have been affected by the war climate in 1914, especially by poems that motivate young men to fight. Therefore he seems likely to have enlisted as a volunteer rather than being called up. In other words, given Jacob's sentimentality, "mixed with the stupidity which leads him into these absurd predicaments" (*JR*, 135), the predicaments of the war that cause his death, he becomes a victim of those who waged the war. The same dominant power that has granted Jacob the chance to study at Cambridge has deprived him of his life. The Front seems to be the final 'room', in which Jacob lives and in which he ends his life. Jacob joins the war healthy, full of life and hope, since as we see in the moving final scene he has "left everything just as it was [...] Nothing arranged" (*JR*, 173). Jacob presumably "think[s] he would come back" (*JR*, 173). He evidently has a kind of optimism that makes him think that

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>118</sup> Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Northcote, 2004), 87.

he will return from the war intact, as he has from his other adventures in Italy, France and Greece. But, this time, Jacob does not return. Only his friends will notice, and his mother; the death of this young man does not stop the wheels of life that can be seen out of Jacob's room, as Bonamy observes, through the window: "Pickford's van swung down the street. The omnibuses were locked together at Mudie's corner. Engines throbbed, and carters, jamming the brakes down, pulled their horses sharp up" (*JR*, 173). Nothing remains of Jacob, just his absence and the memories left to his poor mother, and her deep grief:

‘What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?’

She held out a pair of Jacob's old shoes. (*JR*, 173)

## **II. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway***

Even though Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* was published in 1925, in the post-war period, the First World War still casts its shadows over human life in England; indeed to a great extent that is a key theme in the novel. Commenting on *Mrs. Dalloway*, or 'The Hours', as she first called it, Woolf writes in her diary in June 1923: "In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense" (*DII*, 248). Accordingly, Woolf tackles the war explicitly through the bitter human aftermath of the war itself—'life, death, sanity & insanity'—and implicitly through images of time and transience, danger and the sense of human vulnerability that fill numerous scenes in the novel, as well as the sense of isolation and unreality that colour the feeling of most of the characters: new post-war states of consciousness. At the same time, as in most of her novels, Woolf here stresses the masculinity that dominates the behaviour of some characters, a gender polarity that is deeply implicated in the war and its aftermath.

### **Shift of Consciousness/ New Post-War Consciousness**

The narrative events of *Mrs. Dalloway* are presented through the details of a single day in June in 1923, almost five years after the war's end. Despite the generally pleasant activities she is

engaged in, and the June sunshine of the London morning, even in the opening pages Clarissa Dalloway's consciousness is coloured by thoughts of the war:

For it was the middle of June. The War was over, except for someone 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.<sup>119</sup>

Even though they have experienced the bitterness of the war, the characters try to go on in their post-war lives and to overcome their sufferings; it is a state of mind powerfully and movingly encapsulated in Clarissa's thoughts as she goes to buy flowers for her party: "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tear. Tears and sorrow; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing" (*MD*, 7). When she pauses at the window of a glove shop, in Bond Street, Clarissa Dalloway again remembers the war: "[B]efore the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves. And her Uncle William used to say a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves. He had turned on his bed one morning in the middle of the War" (*MD*, 8). Here, through Clarissa's thought, Woolf shows the way that in the people's minds the war becomes a habitual means of measuring time, of comparing modes of life.

The severe experience of the war makes *Mrs. Dalloway's* characters see life as insecure and unsafe; this consciousness is demonstrated from the opening of the novel, through Woolf's portrayal of images of the ways in which individuals react to what might be sources of danger. While being engaged in the flower shop, choosing a bunch of flowers for her party, Mrs. Dalloway hears the sound of an explosion that makes her 'jump'; she immediately thinks it is "a pistol shot in the street outside" (*MD*, 10). Later, when it becomes obvious that the explosion "came from a motor car which had drawn to the side of the pavement" (*MD*, 10), the people, who gather and stop to see what the source of the explosion is, "heard the voice of authority [...]" 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*, 11). Again, from the outset, Woolf here suggests the prevalence of patriarchal power which remains, through the image of 'the voice of authority' that draws the attention of people and of Septimus Warren Smith himself who is

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<sup>119</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Hogarth, 1990), 2. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *MD*.



with his wife on his way to Dr. Bradshaw's office. The sound of the car's backfiring engine provokes Septimus's fear and takes him back to the horror of the Front: "[T]his 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" (*MD*, 12). Thus, the first appearance of Septimus in the novel comes accompanied by, for him, a sense of danger, represented by "the violent explosion" (*MD*, 10) of the car's engine.

Some aspects of post-war anxiety are more subtle, though perhaps more obvious to the reader in 1923. Martin Pugh points out that the war had some negative consequences as regards attitudes to, and within, the British Empire. As a result of Colonial national movements, the Empire was no longer as unquestionably secure as it had been pre-war. Due to the great number of Australian casualties in the war, agitation against British military and political attitudes reached a peak in Australia. In India, the Indian troops no longer looked at Britain as such an unquestionably dominant power in the world.<sup>120</sup> In the novel, Woolf refers to this sense of stirrings of unrest within the Empire in the post-war period. In Brook Street, "in all the hat shops and tailors' shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire. In a public house in a back street a Colonial insulted the House of Windsor which led to words" (*MD*, 14).

The effects that the war had had on individuals can be seen through the daily life of the public. Coming to the gate of Buckingham Palace, Mr. Bowley is negatively affected by the sight of the crowd of poor people, whose images remind him of the war: "[P]oor women waiting to see the Queen go past—poor women, nice little children, orphans, widows, the War—tut-tut—actually had tears in his eyes" (*MD*, 16). The image of the war that is embodied in 'poor women', 'orphans' and 'widows' reminds the reader, as it does Mr. Bowley, that the war had damaged the lives of millions of such ordinary people, many of whom have lost their bread-winners.

Woolf continues drawing her reader's attention to the war that still marks the lives of people in the post-war period. In Whitehall, Peter Walsh, the old friend and lover of Clarissa Dalloway, who has recently returned from India notices how "[b]oys in uniform, carrying guns, marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff, and on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of

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<sup>120</sup> Pugh, 17.

England” (*MD*, 44). These young men in their military training and their patriotic sense remind the reader of similar young men who had marched with similar feelings less than a decade previously. At the same time, they stimulate the admiration and sense of masculinity of Peter Walsh:

[O]n they marched, past him, past everyone, in their steady way, as if one will worked legs and arms uniformly [...] One had to respect it [...] he thought. There they go, [...] and all the exalted statues, Nelson, Gordon, Havelock, the black, the spectacular images of great soldiers stood looking a head of them, as if they too had made the same renunciation (Peter Walsh felt he, too had made it, the great renunciation), trampled under the same temptations, and achieved at length a marble stare. (*MD*, 44)

The ‘exalted statues’ of the military figures here make one directly remember the imperial past, the wars and, as Peter is aware, the price that has been paid for imperial power. War images accompany Walsh even in Regent’s Park, where he sits alone and finds himself like a ‘solitary traveller’, who has returned and found things have been changed and again, almost inevitably, life is coloured by a sense of what has been lost (however sentimentally evoked by Peter’s imagination):

The solitary traveller is soon beyond the wood; and there, coming to the door with shaded eyes, possibly to look for his return, with hands raised, with white apron blowing, is an elderly woman who seems [...] to seek, over the desert, a lost son; to search for a rider destroyed; to be a figure of the mother whose sons have been killed in the battles of the world. (*MD*, 50)

Over and over again in these pages the reader is reminded of the way the war’s bitterness and grimness still colours people’s life: “[T]he evening seems ominous; the figures [of women and men] still; as if some august fate, known to them, awaited without fear, were about to sweep them into complete annihilation” (*MD*, 50).

On his way home after lunch with Lady Bruton, Richard Dalloway, the Conservative member of Parliament, buys a bunch of flowers for his wife, Clarissa; while he thinks how to express his love to her, the memories of the war leap to confuse his feelings. He has survived to live on, and love Clarissa, and even to feel guilty about having been able to do so: “‘I love you.’ Why not? Really it was a miracle thinking of the war, and thousands of poor chaps, with all their lives before them, shovelled together, already half forgotten; it was a miracle” (*MD*, 101). The war not

only colours his mind, but even his way of “[b]earing his flowers like a weapon” (*MD*, 102) rather than a gift. Moreover, continued conflict is among the issues that are discussed in Richard Dalloway’s Committee: “He was already half-way to the House of Commons, to his Armenians, his Albanians” (*MD*, 106). Probably, Woolf here refers to the Albanian struggle that broke out after the elections of 1923, which led to the success of the Liberal Opposition and at the same time, signalled the beginning of a struggle which continued till 1924 between the new government and its opponents.<sup>121</sup> The Albanian conflict shows that peace, especially in Eastern Europe, where the gunshots that had precipitated war had been fired, still might be a fragile thing.

The sense of threat that fills the scenes of *Mrs. Dalloway* shows itself also through the characters’ sense of isolation and aloneness. Most of the characters in this novel are in need of human relationships or comradeships to feel secure; such a lack makes them feel isolated even when they are among their relatives or friends. J. Hillis Miller suggests that each character longs to be in one way or another part of a whole from which he or she is detached.<sup>122</sup> But it seems that each person in *Mrs Dalloway* yearns to be in communication with the person he/she likes rather than the whole. Even though she marries Richard Dalloway, who gives her the stability she needs, Clarissa sometimes feels her need to be with Peter Walsh, although “with Peter everything had to be shared” (*MD*, 5). Peter Walsh himself comes to see Clarissa as soon as he has “reached town last night” (*MD*, 34), forgetting that he is engaged to Daisy. Even though he proposes to marry a young woman, Walsh still sees Clarissa as more beautiful than any young woman: “Daisy would look ordinary beside Clarissa” (*MD*, 37). Sally Seton, the old friend of Clarissa, feels a kind of aloneness at the party, when she meets Clarissa herself: “[W]hat can one know even of the people one lives with every day? She asked. Are we not all prisoners?” (*MD*, 170).

The psychological effects of the war can be seen most vividly through the sense of unreality that dominates the characters’ feelings. Most of the characters of *Mrs. Dalloway* have a sense of seeing things as being unreal, uncertain and unfamiliar to them, a feeling that had been interpreted in Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny”, written, we note, in 1919:

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<sup>121</sup> See R. J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1994), 145-146.

<sup>122</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “*Mrs. Dalloway*: Repetition as Raising of the Dead”, *Mrs. Dalloway and To The Lighthouse*, ed. Su Reid (London: Macmillan, 1993), 51.

The uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper [...] a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property including the properness of the proper names, one's so-called 'own' name, but also the proper names of the others, of places, institutions and events.<sup>123</sup>

As Nicholas Royle argues, one of the characteristic manifestations of the 'Uncanny' is feelings of defamiliarisation, the ways in which those places which are usually (or were in the past) familiar now seem alien and unfamiliar. Those places in which the characters once felt at home are now alien.<sup>124</sup> Crossing Victoria Street, in her morning journey to buy flowers, Clarissa Dalloway is occupied by a sense of seeing things which were familiar to her as being unfamiliar; she wonders “how *strange*, on entering the Park, the silence; the mist; the hum; the slow-swimming happy ducks; the pouched birds waddling” (*MD*, 3. My emphasis). When she reaches Park gates, Clarissa again finds herself estranged and alienated: “She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone” (*MD*, 5-6). In Bond Street, Clarissa has the same feeling of being an outsider: “She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown” (*MD*, 8). At her party, even in the midst of the people she knows, Clarissa observes things round her as being unreal: “Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another. It was she thought, partly their clothes, partly being taken out of their ordinary ways, partly the background” (*MD*, 151).

The sense of unfamiliarity and estrangement particularly, and for more obvious reasons, dominates Peter Walsh, who returns from India to find himself like a stranger, wandering lonely in London: “London [...] after this voyage, still seemed an island to him, the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square overcame him. What is it? Where am I” (*MD*, 45). In the eyes of Walsh, London life as a whole, which should be familiar to him, seems different and unfamiliar: “Those five years—1918 to 1923—had been, he suspected, somehow very important. People looked different. Newspapers seemed different” (*MD*, 62). In Regent's Park, Walsh is again occupied by the same sense of seeing things as being unfamiliar, especially once he passes the depressed couple, Septimus and his wife: “[W]hat

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<sup>123</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2003), 1.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

awful fix had they got themselves into, both to look so desperate as that on a fine summer morning? [...] anyhow the first days, things stand out as if one had never seen them before” (*MD*, 62).

### **Woolf and War Combatants**

Although herself a non-combatant, of course, like so many others in the period, Woolf had been in close contact with those who had experienced the full horror of the First World War, and she had seen its effects. Not only had her brother-in-law, Cecil Woolf been killed, but Leonard Woolf’s other brother Philip, had been badly wounded. Woolf observed the psychological suffering of Philip Woolf when she visited him at Fishmongers’ Hall Hospital in December 1917: “I suppose to Philip these days pass in a dream from which he finds himself detached. I can imagine that he is puzzled why he doesn’t feel more. He still talks of ‘we’ & ‘our’ things” (*DI*, 92). Philip Woolf cannot stop thinking of the war and the life of the trenches he spent with his fellow soldiers, a place in which he somehow feels he still belongs: ‘we & our things’. The disturbed state of mind of this man draws Woolf’s attention; she writes in her diary in March 1918: “[Philip] is obviously very wretched; has no future wishes evidently, save to get out to France” (*DI*, 123). When he physically recovered, Philip Woolf did return to the Front and in October 1918, he was again “in the thick of it” (*DI*, 200). Suffering the loss of many friends, among them his brother Cecil, Philip Woolf whose “regiment suffered heavy casualties”,<sup>125</sup> seemed psychologically ill even after the end of the war, as Leonard Woolf notes: “I do not think that Philip ever completely recovered from Cecil’s death”.<sup>126</sup> In the eyes of Virginia Woolf, Philip Woolf also looked unrecovered psychologically; she notes in her diary in 1919 that “he always feels himself now—an outsider, a spectator; unattached & very lonely” (*DI*, 248); sadly “when he [Philip Woolf] was in his seventies, he committed suicide”.<sup>127</sup> Even though this happens after Virginia Woolf’s death, it is a measure of the continued disturbance of Philip Woolf’s life by his experience, and an ironic and tragic echo of the fate of Virginia Woolf’s own ex-soldier, Septimus Smith.

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<sup>125</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 182.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 182.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

Moreover, even as a non-combatant, Woolf experienced albeit peripherally the danger of the war: through the sounds of the guns of the Western Front, heard by people in Asham (or Asheham as Virginia Woolf's spelt it in her diaries) in Sussex, where Leonard and Virginia Woolf lived from 1912, the year of their marriage, to 1919.<sup>128</sup> Woolf refers to these echoes of the war as we have seen in her essay "Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth", in 1916; in this essay she describes the distant sounds of guns in Flanders, as a sound that affects even the non-human world. Woolf portrays the shaking of the earth caused by the guns there, based not only on what she had experienced, but on a story she had heard from local shepherd's daughter:

His daughter has evidence of the supernatural state of things now existing without going farther than the shed in which her hens are sitting. When she came to hatch out her eggs, she will tell you, only five of dozen had live chicks in them, are the rest were addled. This she attributes unhesitatingly to vibrations in earth caused by the shock of great guns in Flanders.<sup>129</sup>

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf again refers to the 'vibrations in earth' caused by gun's thunder of battles. These vibrations cannot be forgotten by Septimus; they still disturb his peaceful moments of sleep: "He lay back in his chair, exhausted but upheld. He lay resting, waiting before he again interpreted, with effort, with agony, to mankind. He lay very high, on the back of the world. The earth thrilled beneath him" (*MD*, 59).

### **Septimus's Trauma and Siegfried Sassoon's Poems**

Virginia Woolf's direct knowledge of the life of the soldiers in the trenches of France came not only from Cecil and Philip Woolf in fact. She knew Siegfried Sassoon personally, and mentions him in her diaries in the years in which she is writing *Mrs. Dalloway*; she notes in her diary in January 1924: "The clock striking six, & Lord Berners, Siegfried Sassoon & [...] the chauffeur just gone. [...] they tell good stories [...] Old S.S. is a nice dear kind sensitive warm-hearted good fellow" (*DII*, 287). Undoubtedly, Sassoon narrated stories to Woolf about the war and the suffering of soldiers in the front line, a suffering that is portrayed in Woolf's character Septimus Smith. Woolf was also familiar with Sassoon's graphic poems written out of his experience in

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<sup>128</sup> See *Ibid*, 56-62.

<sup>129</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1918*, 41.

the front line. Sassoon's war poems, most of them written at the Front and published during the war itself, appeared in *The Old Huntsman and other Poems* in 1917, *Counter-Attack and other Poems*, published in 1918 and *War Poems* in 1919, were read and some of them reviewed by Woolf.<sup>130</sup> Concentrating on some of Sassoon's war poems, in two essay-reviews, "Mr. Sassoon's poems", in 1917 and "Two Soldier-Poets", in 1918, demonstrates that Woolf has engaged with what is delineated by Sassoon in these poems, since she "liked his poems very much" (LII, 158). In her essay "Mr. Sassoon's Poems", in which she reviewed *The Old Huntsman and other Poems*, Woolf, describes Sassoon's poems as being "chiefly designed with its realism and its surface cynicism to shock the prosperous and sentimental".<sup>131</sup> In his poem "Survivors", which appeared in *Counter-Attack and other Poems*, Sassoon portrays the horror of the war not only through the physical appearance of the young soldiers but with a sense of their psychology, the way that they have been emotionally traumatised, as well as physically damaged:

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain  
 Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.  
 Of course they're "longing to go out again,"—  
 These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.  
 They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed  
 Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—  
 Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud  
 Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride...  
 Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;  
 Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.<sup>132</sup>

The sardonic tones are characteristic. (One remembers Woolf's reference to his 'cynicism'). Sassoon knew all too well, not least from his time at Craiglockhart Hospital, that these mental scars, the 'haunted nights' and awful flashbacks to lost friends will not 'soon' heal. The 'old scared faces' of these soldiers are painted also by Woolf in describing the traumatised ex-soldier Septimus Smith, "pale-faced [...] with hazel eyes which had that look of apprehension in them

<sup>130</sup> Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., Introduction, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (London: Faber, 1983), 11. See also Nigel Nicolson, Footnote 1, *The Questions of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1922*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1976), 158.

<sup>131</sup> Virginia Woolf "Mr. Sassoon's Poems", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1918*, 120.

<sup>132</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, "Survivors", *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, 97.

which makes complete strangers apprehensive too” (*MD*, 11). Similar haunting visions are also the subject of Sassoon’s poem “The Poet as Hero”, published in the *Cambridge Magazine* in 1916,<sup>133</sup> a journal which Woolf used to read and mentioned in her diary<sup>134</sup>: “And my killed friends are with me where I go”.<sup>135</sup> Septimus, of course, is also haunted by the ghosts of dead soldiers—“The dead were with him” (*MD*, 81)—and especially by his dead friend, Evans, who remains a ghostly companion by turn both comforting and horrifying: “[A]nd now the dead, now Evans himself” (*MD*, 61).

In her essay “Two Soldier-Poets”, in 1918, in which she reviewed *Counter-Attack and other Poems*, Woolf delineates the terror of the war, imagined by Septimus, through what is described by Sassoon.<sup>136</sup> In his poem “To Any Dead Officer”, referred to by Woolf, Sassoon portrays the disaster of the war and the pain of soldiers staggering through ‘stacks’ of dead bodies: “But we’ve got stacks of men... I’m blind with tears”.<sup>137</sup> Being absorbed in visions of the horrific scenes of the war, Septimus imagines himself in a battle and sees soldiers falling dead behind him: “(and Septimus half rose from his chair), and with legions of men prostrate behind him he, the giant mourner, receives for one moment on his face the whole” (*MD*, 61). In the same poem—“To Any Dead Officer”—Sassoon describes the war as a ‘hell’ the burning of which cannot be stopped: “Three years... It’s hell unless we break their line”.<sup>138</sup> In “Suicide in the Trenches”, which is also referred to in “Two Soldier-Poets”,<sup>139</sup> Sassoon again repeats the image of ‘hell’ as being the end of young men: “The hell where youth and laughter go”.<sup>140</sup> It is a vision of ‘hell’ and its ‘flames’ which explicitly torments the traumatised Septimus, who cannot overcome this horror even while he is in the crowded streets of London, in which he sees: “[t]he world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames” (*MD*, 12). As Septimus is ‘laying on the sofa’, he relives the horror of the war through his dominant feeling of being drawn ‘into the flames’ of hell: “He lay on the sofa and made her [his wife] hold his hand to prevent him from falling down, down, he cried, into the flames!” (*MD*, 58).

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<sup>133</sup> See Hart-Davis, ed., Footnote, 61.

<sup>134</sup> See Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. I: 1915-1919*, 310.

<sup>135</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, “The Poet as Hero”, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, 61.

<sup>136</sup> See Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1918*, 269-272.

<sup>137</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, “To Any Dead Officer”, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, 83.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>139</sup> See Virginia Woolf, “Two Soldier-Poets”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. II: 1912-1918*, 270.

<sup>140</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, “Suicide in the Trenches”, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, 119.



When, contemplating the only way he can see of putting an end to his suffering, by committing suicide, Septimus says flatly: “Now we will kill ourselves” (*MD*, 58). We notice that Septimus still identifies himself as one of a group, living with his fellow soldiers, as he uses the plural pronoun ‘we’ rather than ‘I’. Manifestly in the actual trenches many soldiers had contemplated the idea of killing themselves to escape their reality, as Sassoon himself puts it in “Suicide in the Trenches”:

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain  
No one spoke of him again.<sup>141</sup>

In “The Triumph”, also published in *Counter-Attack*,<sup>142</sup> Sassoon writes about the sense of depression that the soldiers suffered from and their feelings of guilt at the desperate, violent acts they had committed in the extreme experience at the Front:

With death in the terrible flickering gloom of the fight  
I was cruel and fierce with despair; I was naked and bound;  
I was stricken: and Beauty returned through the shambles of night;  
In the faces of men she returned; and their triumph I found.<sup>143</sup>

(Again, we noticed Sassoon’s sardonic juxtaposition of ‘triumph’ with ‘shambles’, presumably using the word in its original sense: a place where animals were butchered.) Septimus shares this sense of guilt in the office of his doctor Sir William Bradshaw; he blurts out his sense of lost innocence: “‘I have—I have,’ he began, ‘committed a crime—’” (*MD*, 84).

### **Septimus Warren Smith**

The portrayal of Septimus Warren Smith shows Woolf’s consciousness of the misery of young soldiers in the war, a misery that she realised through the experience of both her relative Philip

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>142</sup> See Hart-Davis ed., Footnote, 127.

<sup>143</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, “The Triumph”, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, 127.

Woolf and her friend Siegfried Sassoon; these combatants endured the horror of the war even after the end of it. As Martin Pugh points out, in the post-war period, the reminders of the horror of the war were a physical presence in England, including the streets of London, in the unavoidable presence of ex-soldiers, disabled by their injuries, men racked by coughs from being gassed in the trenches, and ‘survivors’, too, shell-shocked and too demoralised to adjust to civilian life.<sup>144</sup> Hence, Woolf presents Septimus Warren Smith, “aged about thirty” (*MD*, 11) as an example of those combatants whom the ghosts of the war still frighten and disturb, one of a countless number, his surname carefully chosen by Woolf: “London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith” (*MD*, 74). Septimus's first appearance in the novel is in one of London's streets, where he is accompanied by his wife, Lucrezia, on his way to see the doctor; Septimus feels utterly detached from London life and the world round him, since he is still painfully tormented by the horror of the war that cannot be forgotten. The medical treatment prescribed by his G. P., Dr. Holmes, to “tak[e] an interest in things outside himself” (*MD*, 17), to help him be conscious of his present, may be well-intentioned but is beyond Septimus’s capacity, despite his wife’s constant efforts to draw his attention to his ordinary surroundings: “Look, look, Septimus!” (*MD*, 17). Septimus does not pay any attention to the actual, like the advertising words, drawn in the sky, for instance; instead he shows his own sensitivity, the rawness of his perceptions coming after years of repressing his feelings: “[H]e could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him [...] Tears ran down his cheeks” (*MD*, 17-18). The ‘feminine’ response that Septimus reveals—his tears—are in sharp contrast to that of the hardened combatant. Like a child who newly starts learning, Septimus is taught and guided by his wife: “It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t...o...f...” (*MD*, 18). But Septimus’s psychological illness grows worse: “He started violently [...] and made everything terrible” (*MD*, 18-19). Most of the time Septimus is isolated within himself, “staring, talking aloud” (*MD*, 20) and desperately writing notes sometimes that reflect his tormented psychology: “Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down)” (*MD*, 20). Even though Septimus mentions the name of God in his notes, he has lost his

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<sup>144</sup> Pugh, 4.

belief in Him, and later he decides to get rid of these notes, to “[b]urn them” (*MD*, 130). Septimus believes that the things he has written—“there is God”—contradict the visions of the dead he sees: “how there is no death” (*MD*, 20). Martin Pugh points out that during the war the churches played a great role in motivating the patriotic sense of people and encouraging them to fight; Bishops and clergymen had justified the war and involved themselves in recruitment campaigns. To serve your country was a sacred duty. Faced by the reality of the Front, many soldiers could only reject such notions, and the God who supposedly by justified such horrific realities.<sup>145</sup> This is why Septimus here has lost his religious belief; for him, one pessimistic view has occupied his own thinking: “The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?” (*MD*, 11).

Through “dig[ging] out beautiful caves behind [...her] characters” (*DII*, 263), as she comments on her writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* in her diary in August 1923, Woolf makes her reader know Septimus’s history. Like Philip Woolf and Siegfried Sassoon, Septimus had followed the sense of patriotism that had prevailed during war time: “Septimus was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save an England” (*MD*, 75). At the Front, Septimus tries to prove his manliness: “There in the trenches the change which Mr. Brewer desired when he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name” (*MD*, 75). It seems that Septimus does not appear very vigorous or manly before the war, as an office clerk, but a ‘change’ in Septimus occurs at the Front, where he shows ‘manliness’, but even this ‘manliness’ can be seen as something transient. Karen L. Levenback suggests Septimus’s manliness at the Front is the outcome of the horror of the war; it is stimulated to overcome the fear of death, a way of coping by not feeling.<sup>146</sup> But at the Front Septimus is not left alone; he keeps himself close to Evans as if the latter becomes his protector: “They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other” (*MD*, 75). It is Evans, “a nice quiet man; a great friend of Septimus” (*MD*, 57), and Evans’s ‘manliness’ that encourages Septimus and keeps him brave or at least make him look so. Initially, faced by the death of Evans, Septimus’s false manliness that seems to be motivated by the support and comradeship of Evans, remains for a time intact: “When Evans was killed, just

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>146</sup> Karen L. Levenback, “Virginia Woolf and Returning Soldiers: The Great War and the Reality of Survival in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Years*”, *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol. 2, 1996 (New York: Pace U. P., 1996), 76.

before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably” (*MD*, 76), since his mind is occupied by the idea of surviving the war and “[t]he last shells missed him” (*MD*, 76). But after the war, the immediate threat removed, Septimus’s carapace of manliness collapses. The horror of the war, made worse by the loss of his protector, ultimately makes Septimus suffer shell shock, an illness the symptoms of which are diagnosed by his doctor as “headaches, sleeplessness, fears, dreams—nerve symptoms” (*MD*, 80). Septimus now seems quite different, “as he threaten[s] to kill himself” (*MD*, 20), an idea that contradicts his ‘bravery’: “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” (*MD*, 19).

The relation between Septimus and Evans in some ways seems to be similar to the one between Philip Woolf and his brother Cecil, since the latter was in the same regiment as his brother and in the same trenches. In France, Philip Woolf actually saw the death of Cecil, as he told Leonard Woolf:

They were forgotten, no orders coming to them all day. They were shelled mercilessly all day. Their left flank was uncovered, for the line regiment melted away in the afternoon [...] a shell burst near the major and he was severely wounded. Philip and Cecil left the trench to bring him in, but a shell fell between them; it killed Cecil, and wounded Philip.<sup>147</sup>

Having been with his brother as a fellow soldier, it was especially difficult for Philip Woolf to forget him. Virginia Woolf herself was aware of the strong relationship between the two brothers: “They [Cecil and Philip] had always done everything together and I don’t know how he’ll get on alone” (*LII*, 209). Thus, Philip Woolf’s courage seems likely to have been stimulated by the companionship of his brother, but once he found himself alone, and wounded his resilience collapsed. The sensitivity and romance of Septimus, who likes John Keats, and Philip Woolf, who shows “passionate interest in men, women, and animal, in literature and art”,<sup>148</sup> make it impossible for them to continue to resist the trauma of their experience.

Being imprisoned by the terror and deadly images of the war, Septimus cannot get himself out of it; he is detached from the world round him; he lives in his own ‘world’, a place Gillian Beer

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<sup>147</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918*, 182.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

sees as “an absolute world, bare of locality except for the dead places of the war”.<sup>149</sup> Septimus, as he sits in the peace of a London park, sees nothing, just ghosts of the dead and his friend Evans: “There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings!” (*MD*, 20). The memories of the war become part of Septimus’s present life; Karen Levenback points out that “For Septimus there is but one time, time that is unmeasured, undifferentiated. For Septimus there is only the present; there is no future; there is no past. And if there is no past, there is nothing to remember”.<sup>150</sup> But Septimus is imprisoned by the past-in-the-present; if he can detach himself from the past he would forget his dead friend Evans, whose name is mentioned by Septimus even more than the name of Lucrezia, his wife, and to him Septimus cannot stop talking: “A voice spoke from behind the screen. Evans was speaking [...] 'Evans, Evans!' he cried” (*MD*, 81-82). It is the past that terrifies Septimus and leads him to be captured by it; Septimus tries to be united with those who shared the horrors of his past, like Evans, muttering: “Communication is health” (*MD*, 82).

After the end of the war, Septimus tries to enjoy peace with Lucrezia, a peace he fails to live. Ultimately, it would seem, his marriage to Lucrezia is in some ways a compensatory act for the loss of Evans, a seeking of comfort and solace when the war finally ends. Tragically not only can he not enjoy the peace, but in fact “[Septimus] had married his wife without loving her” (*MD*, 80); it is a relationship born of emotional need, a desperate desire for stability. Meeting her in Milan, where she used to make hats with her sisters, he clings to her in his emptiness: “[H]e became engaged one evening when the panic was on him—that he could not feel” (*MD*, 76). In this action, of course, as Woolf must have been aware, Septimus was not alone. Martin Pugh points out that the trauma of war time made many people seek security and comfort through marriage. Soldiers who returned from the Front showed great desire to marry, while those who were married returned home seeking for emotional support offered by their wives.<sup>151</sup>

Eventually, Septimus’s marriage to Lucrezia, makes the latter to be like him, a victim of the war. With her traumatised husband, she gains nothing save suffering and pain. In London and far from her family, she is herself an isolated, tragic figure, tired and vulnerable: “Her wedding ring

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<sup>149</sup> Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 1996), 53.

<sup>150</sup> Karen L. Levenback, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War* (New York: Syracuse U. P., 1999), 50.

<sup>151</sup> Pugh, 127.

slipped—she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered—but she had nobody to tell” (*MD*, 19). Lucrezia endures alone her husband’s psychological illness; she “would never, never tell that he was mad” (*MD*, 20). Lucrezia seems almost to be as tormented by Septimus’s suffering as he himself, a suffering that she herself cannot bear: “But Lucrezia Warren Smith was saying to herself, It’s [*sic*] wicked; why should I suffer? [...] No; I can’t stand it any longer” (*MD*, 56-57). Even though she is accompanied by her husband all the time, Lucrezia ultimately—like so many of Woolf’s post-war characters—feels herself utterly lonely: “I am alone! She cried” (*MD*, 20). Lucrezia finds herself “rocked by this malignant torture” (*MD*, 57)—her husband’s illness—that makes her feel unprotected in a world that is (literally) unfamiliar to her: “She was exposed; she was surrounded by the enormous trees, vast clouds of an indifferent world, exposed; tortured; and why should she suffer? Why?” (*MD*, 57). She wishes to cry and tell people what she feels: “I am unhappy” (*MD*, 73). Masami Usui describes Lucrezia as being Septimus’s nurse rather than his wife.<sup>152</sup> Hence, she no longer feels that Septimus is her husband, since the latter “ha[s] grown stranger and stranger” (*MD*, 57-58). The destruction of the war, represented by Septimus’s illness, condemns Lucrezia to her own mental anguish; she has no hope in life and her dream of having children turns out to be fruitless: “One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that” (*MD*, 78).

## **Time and Process**

Images of time and human vulnerability in the face of time and history, of which the war is ultimately one grim aspect, are present in most of the scenes of *Mrs Dalloway*, initially to be called, we remember, *The Hours*; such images are presented through the sense of human aging and vulnerability and, again, images of the sea and the striking of bells and clocks. A number of the characters are presented as being anxious about their ages; even though they are vulnerable, they keep carrying on their lives against the flux of time. Woolf herself was not unfamiliar with such feelings; in January 1923, while writing the novel, she notes in her diary: “Middle Age then. Let that be the text of my discourse. I’m afraid we’re becoming elderly. We are busy &

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<sup>152</sup> Masami Usui, “The Female Victims of the War in *Mrs. Dalloway*”, *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality and Myth*, ed. Mark Hussey (Syracuse: Syracuse U. P., 1991), 156.

attach importance to hours [...] It is easy, at least, to pretend that pressure is upon us” (*DII*, 222). Having “broken into her fifty-second year” (*MD*, 31), Clarissa Dalloway does not stop thinking of her age; she shows her fear of aging, especially once she thinks of meeting Peter Walsh again after many years: “[W]ould she see him thinking when he came back, that she had grown older?” (*MD*, 31). Coming close to one of the book-shops, Clarissa stops to “read in the book spread open” some lines that seem to draw her attention: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun/ Nor the furious winter’s rages” (*MD*, 7). The lines, which are derived from William Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, suggest, in their original context, process, the inevitability of aging and mortality that the individual cannot escape. Clarissa herself feels the threat of her aging, a feeling that she tries to overcome by reading Shakespeare’s poetic lines, which seem to her a kind of solace:

Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,  
Nor the furious winter’s rages,  
Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art done, and ta’ en thy wages.  
Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.<sup>153</sup>

Clarissa’s consciousness of aging is also shown clearly through her constant looking in the mirror: “How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass” (*MD*, 31). Even in the eyes of her next door neighbour, Clarissa looks tired: “[S]he was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness” (*MD*, 2). Clarissa herself still feels this vulnerability, caused by her illness, a vulnerability that she feels on one occasion as she hears the striking of Big Ben in Victoria Street: “[A]n indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, [Clarissa’s], affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable” (*MD*, 2). Through Clarissa’s specific illness, Woolf again reminds the reader—especially her reader in the 1920s—not only of the war but also the disastrous events that occurred at the end of it: the Spanish influenza epidemic.<sup>154</sup> In the view of Miss Pym, the owner of the flower shop, Clarissa “looked older, this year” (*MD*, 10).

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<sup>153</sup> William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline* (London: Methuen, 1955), 139.

<sup>154</sup> See Pugh, 5-6.

But Clarissa Dalloway is not the only character aware of his/her gradual aging. Peter Walsh also seems anxious about his advancing years, an anxiety that is increased once he has left Clarissa's house with a feeling that "[t]here was always something cold in Clarissa" (*MD*, 42); Peter Walsh tries to convince himself of his continued youth: "I am not old, he cried, and marched up Whitehall, as if there rolled down to him, vigorous, unending, his future" (*MD*, 43). Susan Dick, noting the characters' sense of their increasing age, sees them as seeking to assert their vitality.<sup>155</sup> By doing so they try to struggle against the flow of time and to escape its pressure upon them. Moreover, the characters are also conscious of the aging and vulnerability of their friends. Peter Walsh himself sees Clarissa as having "grown older" (*MD*, 34). Clarissa herself notices the physical change created by time on her friend, Sally Seton, who attends her party: "The lust had left her. Yet it was extraordinary to see her again, older, happier, less lovely" (*MD*, 152).

Woolf registers the passing of time, the ways in which these various survivors of war are still trapped in an inexorable process, at one interesting and telling moment, when the vulnerability of Lucrezia and Septimus draws the attention of Maisie Johnson. Maisie is young, with her future before her. But the narrator registers both how she will inevitably age, *and* how this moment, this 'spot of time' in which she sees Lucrezia and Septimus will, unaccountably, remain with her:

[S]o that should she be very old she would still remember and make it jangle again among her memories how she had walked through Regent's Park on a fine summer's morning fifty years ago. For she was only nineteen and had got her way at last, to come to London; and now how queer it was, this couple. (*MD*, 21-22)

The vitality and optimism at this point in Maisie's life—she is 'nineteen'—she feels to be in sharp contrast to the evident unhappiness of the not very old couple themselves. But Woolf registers the brevity of Maisie's youth, her inexorable movement into age.

Doris Kilman, the history tutor of Elizabeth Dalloway, is also acutely, and bitterly, aware of her life passing by. She is no longer young and is not any longer, if she were ever, attractive. She no longer, she knows, has to worry about her appearance; she is never going to attract a man: "Miss Kilman stood on the landing, and wore a mackintosh; but had her reasons. First, it was cheap;

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<sup>155</sup> Susan Dick, "Literary Realism in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*", *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, eds. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2000), 55.



second, she was over forty; and did not, after all, dress to please” (*MD*, 108). The period of the war has brought suffering, unemployment and poverty to Miss Kilman, as well as personal tragedy: “[S]he was never in the room five minutes without making you feel [...] how she lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be [...] her dismissal from school during the War” (*MD*, 9). Even though “her brother had been killed” (*MD*, 109) in the war, fighting for England, Miss Kilman has been accused of being loyal to the Germans: “They turned her out because she would not pretend that the Germans were all villains—when she had German friends, when the only happy days of her life had been spent in Germany!” (*MD*, 109). Due to the racial struggle that the war created, people looked at the Germans as being savages and brutish, and German names were subject to hatred and suspicion. This made people change their names; even the royal family’s name had been changed from ‘Saxe-Coburg-Gotha’ to ‘Windsor’.<sup>156</sup> Probably Miss Kilman has altered her family name from the German ‘Kielman’ to ‘Kilman’ to escape the danger that the name might bring to her. Moreover, Martin Pugh points out that the loss of life during and after the war, made some people resort to religion, seeking consolation and enabling themselves to comprehend the tragic events of the war.<sup>157</sup> Miss Kilman seems to be one of them. To rationalise what happens to her, the loss of her brother and her loss of her job, her income, and professional status, Miss Kilman turns to religion for comfort and compensation: “Bitter and burning, Miss Kilman had turned into a church two years three months ago” (*MD*, 109).

Time is delineated in terms of human mortality and death; love relationships are mere eddies in the flow of time. The pain of her love for Peter years before, her decision not to marry him, seems to have remained in Clarissa’s mind, suddenly and painfully surfacing unexpectedly on occasion; she had kept his letters: “For they might be parted for hundreds of years, she and Peter; she never wrote a letter and his were dry sticks; but suddenly it would come over her, [...] some days, some sights bringing him back to her calmly, without old bitterness” (*MD*, 4). Meeting Clarissa “after five years in India” (*MD*, 34), Peter Walsh equally seems to be attacked by memories that leap to disturb his present moments with Clarissa: “Looking back over that long friendship of almost thirty years her theory worked to this extent [...] the effect of them on his life was immeasurable” (*MD*, 135). Walsh’s meeting with Clarissa is interrupted by the entrance

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<sup>156</sup> Robb, 6-9.

<sup>157</sup> Pugh, 7.

of her daughter Elizabeth, an entrance that stimulates Clarissa's sense of looking at Peter Walsh as a failure, a sense that is revealed through her words of introducing her daughter: "Here is my Elizabeth', said Clarissa, emotionally, histrionically, perhaps" (*MD*, 41). Clarissa's words come accompanied by the striking of the clock that registers the process of time, a process that in Clarissa's view has given her success—a child—and at the same time strengthens the gap between her and Peter Walsh, who is not only childless, but failed to establish a happy marriage: "[T]he sound of Big Ben striking the half-hour struck out between them with extraordinary vigour, as if a young man, strong, indifferent, inconsiderate, were swinging dumb-bells this way and that" (*MD*, 41). On his way outdoors, Walsh hears Clarissa's voice reminding him of her party; her voice seems to struggle against time itself, represented by the sound of the clocks: "[S]he cried, having to raise her voice against the roar of the open air, and, overwhelmed by the traffic and the sound of all the clocks striking, her voice crying 'Remember my party to-night!' sounded frail and thin and very far away as Peter Walsh shut the door" (*MD*, 41).

Woolf's imagery insistently draws attention to the endless process of the passing of time. In the motor car scene at the novel's opening, the evolution of time is connected to the life of people themselves. The 'ruins' that are caused by time, of which the war is a part, make the humans look fragile, transient:

[G]reatness was passing [...] removed only by a hand's-breadth from ordinary people who might now, for the first time and last, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England [...] sifting the ruins of time, when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along the pavement this Wednesday morning are but bones with a few wedding rings mixed up in their dust and the gold stopping of innumerable decayed teeth. (*MD*, 13)

It is a remarkable moment in Woolf's narrative, and deeply revealing of her vision in the novel. Even as the present day, the bustling post-war London streets, is recorded, the narrative is aware of the transience of all this, of a future time when this great hub of Empire will have gone the way of other empires, and its inhabitants are only material for the archaeologist. A similar intuition is present when an old working-class woman sings for a few coins from passers-by. The woman, in Woolf's perspective, is not a focus for socio-economic concern, but becomes emblematic of something more timeless. Her song of a dead lover shades into being, again, an expression of the transience in time of all human lovers:

Through all ages—when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the ages of tusk and mammoth, through the ages of silent sunrise—the battered woman [...], stood singing of love—love which has lasted a million years, [...], and millions of years ago, her lover, who had been dead these centuries. (*MD*, 71)

Even though this singer tries to immortalise her love through her song, she seems to be futilely challenging the irresistible flux of time that makes her love mortal: “[S]he had walked in May, where the sea flows now, with whom it did not matter—he was a man, oh yes, a man who had loved her. But the passage of ages had blurred the clarity of that ancient May day” (*MD*, 71-72). Again we notice that time’s flow is, almost inevitably, registered in terms of the inexorable movements of the sea.

Again, water imagery—so unexpectedly recurrent in this London novel—is also used to reveal the characters’ sense of aloneness. In Piccadilly, Clarissa Dalloway looks at the bustle of life, represented by ‘omnibuses and taxicabs’, but feels as if—despite her immediate surroundings—she is alone at the sea: “She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day” (*MD*, 6). Woolf delineates the post-war life through water imagery, in which the human seems to be struggling in the grip of the restless movements of time’s waves. Clarissa, who is on her way to Bond Street, recalls the war and sees how human beings are still resisting the waves of life: “[D]id it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces” (*MD*, 6).

Woolf presents the post-war world and human beings themselves as being sunk into waves or floating on water. In the flower-shop, while she is engaged in choosing her bunch of flowers, Clarissa sees the beauty of flowers as waves: “[A]s if this beauty, this scent, this colour [...] were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up” (*MD*, 10). The annoyance of Clarissa, caused by being informed that Ellie Henderson would like to attend her party, makes her see things round her as immersed in water: “[B]ut she must remember all sorts of little things besides—Mrs. Marsham, Ellie

Henderson, glasses for ices—all sorts of little things came flooding and lapping and dancing in on the wake of that solemn stroke which lay flat like a bar of gold on the sea” (*MD*, 112-113).

Like Clarissa, Septimus is occupied by sea images that dominate his own thoughts. Septimus who is unconscious of the world round him, save the sounds of things, hears a nursemaid pronouncing words to a child in Regent's Park; the sounds of her words are heard like sounds of waves: “Septimus heard her say ‘Kay Arr’ close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke” (*MD*, 18). The idea of being drowned by the sea prevents Septimus from having rest and disturbs his own sleep: “But he himself remained high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock. I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still [...] it was awful, awful!” (*MD*, 60). The same image of sinking under water is seen by Septimus, when he looks at his wife, Lucrezia, who seems vulnerable because of his illness: “She looked pale, mysterious, like a lily, drowned, under water” (*MD*, 78). The sea image that is connected with horror and the danger of extinction makes Septimus live in constant anxiety and fear of being overwhelmed by the flood of life around him and his perception directly echoes Clarissa's intuitions of mortality, expressed in the lines from *Cymbeline*:

Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting-room; watching the watery gold glow and fade with the astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wall-paper. Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room, and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he has seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves [...] Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more. (*MD*, 123)

Septimus of course still fears the horror of the Front, portrayed by the irresistible 'waves' of the sea that bring back to him the image of death, represented by the 'screaming' of gulls: “He was drowned, he used to say, and lying on a cliff with the gulls screaming over him. He would look over the edge of the sofa down into the sea” (*MD*, 124).

Woolf continues delineating water images to show the ultimately fragile processes of human activities, however seemingly important. After lunching with Lady Bruton, Richard Dalloway

feels that “there are tides in the body. Morning meets afternoon. Borne like a frail shallop on deep, deep floods” (*MD*, 100). In the eyes of Peter Walsh, London life is seen through water imagery that shows the change of the life in the post-war period: “It seemed as if the whole of London were embarking in little boats moored to the bank, tossing on the waters, as if the whole place were floating off in carnival” (*MD*, 145).

This same nexus of images dramatizes the restive psychology of the individual. Sitting with his wife in Regent’s Park, Septimus Smith responds negatively to the word ‘time’ when his wife reminds him of time of their appointment with the doctor: “It is time” (*MD*, 61). Time here brings back Septimus’ awful thoughts and the horror of the war, represented by the death of his friend:

The word “time” split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane without his making them, hard, white, imperishable, words, [...]; an immortal ode to Time. He sang Evans answered from behind the tree. (*MD*, 61)

Once he recalls Evans, Septimus starts talking to him: “‘I will tell you the time,’ said Septimus very slowly, very drowsily, smiling mysteriously at the dead man in the grey suit. As he sat smiling, the quarter struck—the quarter to twelve” (*MD*, 61-62). Septimus’s anguished thoughts are interrupted by the striking of the clock that comes as if to mock at the present moments of this traumatised man.

The striking of the clocks is also used to show the pressure of time on the individual. The sorrow and frustration of Lucrezia caused by the authoritative speech of Sir William Bradshaw, who “dismissed them” (*MD*, 87), are underlined through the mocking tones of time itself, represented by the sounds of clocks:

Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of promotion, until the mound of time was so far diminished that a commercial clock, suspended above a shop in Oxford Street, announced, genially and fraternally, as if it were a pleasure to Messrs. (*MD*, 90)

Time here seems to aid the patriarchal power of Sir William Bradshaw to whom Septimus and Lucrezia are obliged to surrender.

Watching the aeroplane advertising, a crowd of people in one of London's streets, is interrupted by time through the striking of the clocks: "As they looked the whole world became perfectly silent, and a flight of gulls crossed the sky, first one gull leading, then another, and in this extraordinary silence and peace, in this pallor, in this purity, bells struck eleven times, the sound fading up there among the gulls" (*MD*, 17). Crossing Green Park, Richard Dalloway "look[s] at the memorial to Queen Victoria" (*MD*, 103) that brings him back to the Victorian age, the time he likes: "[H]e liked continuity; and the sense of handing on the traditions of the past. It was a great age in which to have lived. Indeed, his own life was a miracle; let him make no mistake about it; here he was, in the prime of life, walking to his house in Westminster" (*MD*, 103). Mr. Dalloway's thoughts are stopped by "Big Ben [which] was beginning to strike, first the warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable" (*MD*, 103). The striking of the clock here marks the passing of time, another hour in the continuity of the past and its traditions.

Sometimes, inevitably, time, represented by the sounds of clocks, sea images and the process of time itself, conveys signs of warning and threat. Sitting alone in her drawing room, Clarissa is caught by a sense of anxiety that is provoked by the striking of Big Ben, which warns her of the possible outcomes of Elizabeth's relation with her tutor: "And there was Elizabeth closeted all this time with Doris Kilman [...] Prayer at this hour with that woman. And the sound of the bell flooded the room with its melancholic wave; which receded, and gathered itself together to fall once more" (*MD*, 103-104). Here the recurrent images of human clock-time dissolve into the imagery of the more universal sense of process, imaged again by the sea. Time brings grimness to Clarissa, a sense of the routine of life that invokes her sense of finding the world mortal: "All the same, that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park [...] After that, how unbelievable death was!—that it must end" (*MD*, 108). At the party, Clarissa who is engaged in welcoming her guests, is shocked by the tragic news of the death of Septimus, whom she does not know: "A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party [...]; her dress flamed, her body burnt" (*MD*, 163). The unpleasant end of Septimus affects Clarissa deeply; she drifts herself apart from her guests into her own room; while doing so, she hears, almost inevitably, the striking of the clock: "The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on" (*MD*, 165). Clarissa seems to understand Septimus's suffering; and "[s]he feel[s]

somehow very like him” (*MD*, 165). It seems that Septimus’s death invokes Clarissa’s fears of death, caused in fact, we might speculate, by her recollection of the death of her sister, which occurred years ago at Burton: recalled by Peter Walsh: “To see your own sister killed by a falling tree [...] a girl too on the verge of life, the most gifted of them, Clarissa always said, was enough to turn one bitter” (*MD*, 68). Clarissa’s internal suffering makes her feel the futility of life, a suffering that leads her “[to] feel glad that he [Septimus] had done it; thrown it away while they went on living” (*MD*, 165). For Clarissa, Septimus’s “Death was defiance” (*MD*, 163), since he has succeeded in escaping the process of time and aging: “If it were now to die, ‘twere now to be most happy” (*MD*, 163). The line Clarissa quotes from *Othello* not only refers to Septimus’s suicide but also perhaps registers again the magnitude of Clarissa’s own youthful feelings for Sally. In the play, *Othello* fervently loves his wife, Desdemona, but eventually kills her out of mistaken jealousy. Tortured by regret, Othello then kills himself. Othello cannot trust his good fortune, and loses it. By likening herself to Othello and Sally to Desdemona, Clarissa suggests not only the depth of her feeling, but also that it is she who killed the possibility of love with Sally and with that some part of herself.

### **Change of Woman’s Life**

The Great War created the opportunity for women to be involved in male jobs, since men entered the armed force. Accordingly, women abandoned their domestic work to join male employment, like engineering, munitions, public transport, agriculture and even banking. After the end of the war, Britain’s economic problems, caused in part by the rundown of heavy industry after the war effort, resulted in increasing unemployment; as a result women had been pulled out of the areas of work they occupied in the time of the war—back into home. By 1921 half a million women were without paid work; moreover, many of those in work were victimised by the discriminatory policies such as the marriage bar, widely operated by the local authorities who simply terminated female employees, notably teachers, nurses, doctors and cleaners, as soon as they married.<sup>158</sup> The changes of life that occurred after the war, especially the life of women can be seen through the style of women and the way of their everyday life. Being independent and having freedom to

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<sup>158</sup> Pugh, 181-182.

earn their living in the time of the war, women found themselves reluctant to give up such liberty. For women of all classes, the war had opened the way for them to enjoy more liberty. For many, especially the young women who were single and in employment, such freedom remained, in a society whose moral values had been subtly altered by the war.<sup>159</sup> Walking in the London streets, Peter Walsh's attention is caught by the life of people, especially, women, whose behaviour shows the changes in social culture after the war: "The girl would stand still and powder her nose in front of everyone [...] she would marry when it suited her to marry; marry some rich man and live in a large house near Manchester" (*MD*, 63). Walsh also notices other changes in British life: "[E]verybody dining out [...] Doors were being opened for ladies wrapped like mummies in shallows with bright flowers on them, ladies with bare heads" (*MD*, 145).

As a young woman, "at seventeen" (*MD*, 108), Elizabeth Dalloway represents the liberated woman in her capacity to enjoy freedom, "in her very well-cut clothes" (*MD*, 119) and "with her hair done in the fashionable way" (*MD*, 150). Rachel Bowlby describes Elizabeth as "the bearer of new opportunities for her sex".<sup>160</sup> Miss Kilman herself asserts that "all professions are open to women of your [Elizabeth's] generation" (*MD*, 115). In spite of Miss Kilman's attempts to prevent her from joining her mother's party, Elizabeth shows that she is a young woman not always willing to be guided by others, especially in things related to her liberty: "Ah, but she must not go! Miss Kilman could not let her go! [... but Elizabeth] would like to go" (*MD*, 116).

## **Masculinity**

Insistently in the novel, for all its awareness of the shifts in gender roles that were gradually taking place, it is the male world, the masculine drive to power and aggression that has brought about the cataclysm of war. And this masculine power is still dominant. At St. James Street, the domination of the masculine world can be seen through the figures of men in London gentlemen's club, who keep looking at the royal car that draws their attention: "Tall men, men of robust physique, well-dressed men with their tail-coats and their white slips and their hair raked

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<sup>159</sup> John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties: Aspect of Writing, Politics and Culture* (London: Five Leaves, 1997), 69.

<sup>160</sup> Bowlby, 70.



back [...], were standing in the bow window of White's with their hands behind the tails of their coats" (*MD*, 14). Wandering in Whitehall, Peter Walsh "glare[s] at the statue of the Duke of Cambridge [...]. Still the future of civilisation lies, he thought, in the hands of young men like that" (*MD*, 43). In the masculine view the glory of civilisation is associated with militarism, represented by the Duke of Cambridge—Prince George of Cambridge— as being a colonel in the British army, a man of action.

Masculinity is consistently embodied through the presentation of men of authoritative power like Hugh Whitbread, Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw. Through such characters, Woolf stresses the prevailing of patriarchy that still dominates English society even after the war. Recalling the past, Peter Walsh still remembers "an argument one Sunday morning at Bourton about women's rights" (*MD*, 64), an argument that makes Sally Seton attack Hugh Whitbread: "Sally suddenly lost her temper, flared up, and told Hugh that he represented all that was most detestable in British middle-class life. She told him that she considered him responsible for the state of 'those poor girls in Piccadilly'" (*MD*, 64). Sally here seems to present the voice of Virginia Woolf; she criticises the authoritative dominating power of patriarchy, represented by Hugh Whitbread: "He was a perfect specimen of the public school type, she said. No country but England could have produced him" (*MD*, 64). As doctors, both Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw do not show any of the kindness that doctors are supposed to have in dealing with their patients. Woolf draws the reader's attention to the masculine authority through these two doctors' lack of sensitivity. Dr. Holmes, for example, treats Septimus as if he is not unwell, but just incapable of behaving as a husband should: "Talking nonsense to frighten your wife?" (*MD*, 82). Like Dr. Holmes, Sir William Bradshaw also shows his roughness to Septimus: "Try to think as little about yourself" (*MD*, 86). In the scene of Septimus's suicide, the arrival of Dr. Holmes is portrayed in a way that makes him seem like an enemy invading the security of his patient; he not only provokes the fear of Septimus but also of his wife, who cries: "No I will not allow you to see my husband" (*MD*, 131). Septimus himself becomes anxious and restive; even though he is already dominated by the idea of killing himself, "[h]e d[oes] not want to die" (*MD*, 132). Septimus's psychological condition and bad temper are aggravated by the intrusive visit of Dr. Holmes: "Holmes was at the door. 'I'll give it you!' he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down to Mrs. Filmer's area railings" (*MD*, 132).

Septimus's tragic end is seen in the eyes of his wife as an end that embodies patriotism. Being faint and "falling asleep" (*MD*, 132), because of the shock, Lucrezia hears the striking of the clock: "four, five, six" (*MD*, 132) that seems to salute Septimus, the soldier who chooses to put an end to his life: "The clock went on striking [...] She [Lucrezia] had once seen a flag slowly rippling out from a mast when she stayed with her aunt at Venice. Men killed in battle were thus saluted, and Septimus had been through the War" (*MD*, 132). Listening to Septimus's death story narrated by Sir William Bradshaw at her party, Clarissa thinks that the latter has been involved in causing his patient's tragic end: "If this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said [...] Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that?" (*MD*, 163). Even though Clarissa does not know Septimus and has never seen him, since he belongs to a different world, she seems to share with him a negative view of Bradshaw.

But it is not only men who embody the qualities—militarism, authoritarianism, patriarchal power—associated with 'masculinity'. Such qualities are embodied in the features and behaviour of Lady Millicent Bruton, the upper class woman who is "[n]ow being forty" (*MD*, 94). In the scene at her lunch, Hugh Whitbread gives her some flowers; Lady Bruton "take[s] Hugh's carnations with her angular grim smile" (*MD*, 91). Lady Bruton holds Hugh's flowers like a military man: "Lady Bruton raised the carnations, holding them rather stiffly with much the same attitude with which the General held the scroll in the picture behind her" (*MD*, 92). Being "the General's great-grand-daughter [...] of Sir Roderick, Sir Miles, Sir Talbot" (*MD*, 92), Lady Bruton "should have been a general of dragoons herself" (*MD*, 92). Saying nothing, but giving orders by gestures, all Lady Bruton's orders must be obeyed at once: "Lady Bruton had only to nod, or turn her head a little abruptly, and Milly Brush took the signal [...] Lady Bruton had only to nod, and Perkins was instructed to quicken the coffee" (*MD*, 94). Speaking "in her offhand way" (*MD*, 93), to Richard Dalloway, Lady Bruton seems like a man rather than a woman. Even the name of this woman echoes no kindness; the first part of it—'brut'—seems to be derived from 'brute' or 'brutality'.

Woolf presents Lady Bruton as an authoritative woman, a woman, whose "[p]ower was hers, position, income. She had lived in the forefront of her time. She had had good friends; known the ablest men of her day" (*MD*, 98). Like most of her male friends, "Lady Bruton had the reputation

of being more interested in politics than people; of talking like a man; of having had a finger in some notorious intrigue of the eighties” (*MD*, 93). Being “very proud of her family” (*MD*, 97), Lady Bruton still keeps a photograph of her grandfather General Sir Talbot Moore, “who had written there (one evening in the eighties) in Lady Bruton’s presence, with her cognisance, perhaps advice, a telegram ordering the British troops to advance upon an historical occasion” (*MD*, 93). The militarism of her family inspires Richard Dalloway’s writing: “And Richard Dalloway strolled off as usual to have a look at the General’s portrait, because he meant, whenever he had a moment of leisure, to write a history of Lady Bruton’s family” (*MD*, 97). Noticing Richard gazing at the picture, Lady Bruton happily recalls the glory and militarism of her forefathers, since “looking at the picture; meaning that her family, of military men, administrators, admirals, had been men of action, who had done their duty” (*MD*, 97). Alex Zwerdling suggests that this woman represents “a picture of a class impervious to change in a society that desperately needs or demands”.<sup>161</sup> In spite of the change that the war brought to the British society, Lady Bruton still has her own Victorian beliefs and views. Virginia Woolf, manifestly, certainly did not disapprove of women involving themselves in politics; indeed, to the contrary, such involvement would be all to the good, in that women would bring to public life different modes of feeling from those currently dominant: a sensitivity, a concern with the feelings of the individual and the familial that would change Britain. But Lady Bruton does not represent such ‘feminine’ impulses; Virginia Woolf makes it clear that Lady Bruton endorses the masculine and patriarchal states. She believes that men, “but no woman, stood to the laws of the universe; knew how to put things; knew what was said; so that if Richard advised her, and Hugh wrote for her, she was sure of being somehow right” (*MD*, 96). The vigorous support for her country makes Lady Bruton ready to fight if there is a chance to do it: “[A]nd if ever a woman could have worn the helmet and shot the arrow, could have led troops to attack, ruled with indomitable justice barbarian hordes and lain under a shield noseless in a church, [...], that woman was Millicent Bruton” (*MD*, 160). She is concerned with public affairs, but it is only with the help of Richard Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread, that the authoritative Lady writes a letter to the *Times* tackling the theme of emigration: “[T]hat project of emigrating young people of both sexes born of respectable parents and setting them up with a fair prospect of doing well in Canada [...] She had perhaps lost her sense of proportion. Emigration was not to others the

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<sup>161</sup> Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (California: California U. P., 1986), 124.

obvious remedy, the sublime conception” (*MD*, 95). Through this project, Lady Bruton intends to participate in solving the problems of unemployment in Britain, a project that shows a masculine solution. Lady Bruton does not cease aiding her country and the Empire even in the time of the war, as she tells her secretary: “And one letter to the *Times*, she used to say to Miss Brush, cost her more than to organise an expedition to South Africa (which she had done in the war).” (*MD*, 96). Militarism is the subject of Lady Bruton’s dreams; while lying on the sofa after her lunch she dreams of “some imaginary baton such as her grandfathers might have held [...] to be commanding battalions marching to Canada, and those good fellows walking across London, that territory of theirs, that little bit of carpet, Mayfair” (*MD*, 98-99).

Despite its title, *Mrs. Dalloway* is not a novel that merely presents the life of a middle-class woman called Clarissa Dalloway, but it is a novel that shows the suffering of individuals in the post-war life, a life that is still coloured by the war and its negative consequences; it is a novel that shows the shift in human consciousness in Britain that the war has brought about.

## Chapter Two: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*

### I. *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* was published in 1927. Woolf divides this novel into three sections: 'The Window', 'Time Passes' and 'The Lighthouse'; in each of these sections Woolf explicitly and implicitly engages the First World War. At the same time, the war is once again seen as one, albeit catastrophic, phase in human entrapment in the destructive processes of time. In her diary on 20 July 1925, when Woolf was already working on the novel, she writes: "It might contain all characters boiled down [...] & then this impersonal thing, which I'm dared to do by my friends, the flight of time, & the consequent break of unity in my design".<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, images of time and process, human vulnerability, the absence of community, the human awareness of the changes of life as well as the human sense of seeing the post-war world as 'unreal' are all manifested here. Through the portrayal of the Ramsays, an English middle-class family, Woolf presents the danger and bitterness of the war, and its negative consequences on the life of the humans.

#### 'The Window'

Although 'The Window' presents events before the First World War, it was of course written in the mid 1920s. Anticipations of what was to come cast shadows across the scenes, which would be recognised by the reader in 1920s. Woolf draws the attention of her reader, who will have experienced the war and its danger, to the stability and security of the individual life before the war itself. On one of the Scottish islands—the Isle of Skye—in September, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay with their eight children and their guests spend their holiday in their summer house, where life can be seen through the rhythm of the sea and its waves, which at the same time suggests vivid and subtle images of time and process. Although, the characters in this section enjoy a secure life, full of intimacy and order, they do seem also to exhibit profound moments of anxiety.

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume III: 1925-1930*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1980), 36. Hereafter references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *DIII*.

## Images of Time and Process in 'The Window'

In June 1925, Woolf, engaged in writing *To the Lighthouse*, notes in her diary that “the sea is to be heard all through it” (*DIII*, 34). Hence, images of natural process, represented again by the sea, fill most of the scenes in ‘The Window’; the life of characters is seen in terms of the flowing of the sea and its rhythms, images that have a range of cognate meanings. The sea reflects the changeability of life that ruins the individual’s plans and dreams. This can be seen through the desire of James Ramsay, a child “at the age of six”,<sup>2</sup> who wishes to go on a trip to the Lighthouse the next day but because of the expectation of “a positive tornado” (*TL*, 14) the trip might be cancelled and James keeps asking his mother “Are we going to the Lighthouse?” (*TL*, 57). As a mother, Mrs. Ramsay tries to please her son: “‘Perhaps it will be fine to-morrow’” (*TL*, 14), but the sounds of the waves that she hears makes one feel that the destructive power of the sea itself might ruin James’s dream to go to the Lighthouse; while at one moment she can hear:

The monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, ‘I am guarding you—I am your support’ (*TL*, 14-15)

she also hears opposing, more menacing tones:

[L]ike a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, [...] it was all ephemeral as a rainbow—this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror. (*TL*, 15)

Mrs. Ramsay, who thinks of those who live in the Lighthouse itself, looks at the sea as a jailor that might imprison the individual’s liberty: “For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in a stormy weather [...] and to see nobody [...] to see the same dreary waves breaking week after week, [...] and not to be able to put your nose out of doors for fear of being swept into the sea” (*TL*, 4-5 ). From the outset, therefore, we have a sense of human ineffectiveness in the face of larger forces.

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Hogarth, 1990), 3. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *TL*.

Time and process, then suggest mortality and danger. On the beach Minta cries that she has lost her grandmother's brooch "the sole ornament [...] it [is] set in pearls (*TL*, 71). The loss of her brooch here shows the vulnerability of the things which humans value, especially since the brooch is lost in the incoming tide as darkness falls: "The tide was coming in fast. The sea would cover the place where they had sat in a minute There was not a ghost of chance of their finding it now" (*TL*, 71). The tale of the "The Fisherman and his Wife" that is read by Mrs. Ramsay to please James has related significance. The tale tells the story of a fisherman who catches a golden flounder that claims to be an enchanted prince; the fisherman, who sympathises with this flounder, releases it but, surrendering to his wife, he returns to it and asks it to fulfil his wife's wishes, such as having a house, a mansion, making her a king, emperor, pope or be like God.<sup>3</sup> Alex Zwerdling points out that this story reflects "Mrs. Ramsay's belief that wives must be subordinate to their husbands".<sup>4</sup> Reading the lines that are selected by Woolf from this tale shows that the tale in fact goes further than reflecting the role and duty of a wife in a patriarchal society; the lines serve to show the mortality of human desires, a mortality that is painted through the process of the sea:

And when he came to the sea, it was quite dark grey, and the water heaved up from below, and smelt putrid. Then he went and stood by it and said, 'Flounder, flounder, in the sea, / Come and I pray thee, here to me; / For my wife, good Ilsabil, / Wills not as I'd have her will.' (*TL*, 52)

The image of the sea—here smelling 'putrid'—is repeated several times in the novel as being either 'dark grey' or "quite purple and dark blue, and grey and thick" (*TL*, 39) and emphasises the destructive flow of time engulfing the will of the individual, represented here by the wife's wishes. Natural process, embodied in the sea, is a source of danger and threat:

But outside a great storm was raging and blowing [...] houses and trees toppled over, the mountains trembled, rocks rolled into the sea, the sky was pitch black, and it thundered and lightened, and the sea came in with black waves as high as church towers and mountains, and all with white foam at the top. (*TL*, 56)

At the same time, the description of the terrible weather here shows the end of the peaceful and comfortable life of the fisherman and his wife which is destroyed by the love of power of this

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<sup>3</sup> See *The Fisherman and his Wife: A Story by the Brothers Grimm* (London: The Bodley Head, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (California: California U. P., 1986), 191.

woman, since she returns to her filthy house after this wish. More than that, the words of the tale of the “The Fisherman and his Wife” help to create a sense of foreboding. Moreover, Mrs. Ramsay’s wish, that her children should not grow up, that they should escape time, is followed by lines from the tale: “When she read just now to James, ‘and there were numbers of soldiers with kettle-drums and trumpets’” (*TL*, 54), as if Woolf wants to suggest, and underline, the ominous future that awaits the children.

In 1926, one year before the publication of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf wrote her essay “The Cinema”, in which she describes the human world after the war as having been engulfed by destructive forces:

We are beholding a world which has gone beneath the waves. Brides are emerging from the abbey—they are now mothers; ushers are ardent—they are now silent; mothers are tearful; [...]; this has been won and that has been lost, and this is over and done with. *The war sprung its chasm at the feet of all this innocence and ignorance.*<sup>5</sup>

Woolf paints similar images in “The Window”, in which she presents images to suggest a time beyond the period in which this section is set; Woolf knows that her twentieth-century reader, who has experienced the war is aware of its danger, a danger that is mirrored here by the sea and its dark threat. In the eyes of Mrs. Ramsay, “life sank down for a moment [...] Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface” (*TL*, 58). Images of the erosive power of the ebb and flow of the sea, seen by Mr. Ramsay—“a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away” (*TL*, 41), and “the sea eats away the ground we stand on” (*TL*, 41)—show the insecurity and vulnerability of human life, and even the cruelty of time itself: “[T]he land dwindling away, the little island seemed pathetically small, half swallowed up in the sea” (*TL*, 64). Such images are at times connected with loneliness that in turn provokes its own anxiety and sense of insecurity. In recalling his past, Mr. Ramsay reminds himself of some emblematic, deserted places he has seen: “There were little sandy beaches where no one had been since the beginning of time. The seals sat up and looked at you” (*TL*, 64). Like Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe also sees the turmoil of life in terms of water images: “[Life is] like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach” (*TL*, 44).

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<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Cinema”, *Collected Essays*, Volume Two (London: Hogarth, 1966), 269. My italics.



At the dinner-party at the Ramsay's island house, the whole atmosphere seems to be one of community, order, stability and security, but this atmosphere seems something fleeting and transient in the eyes of Mrs. Ramsay; something that remains 'just now', in the present time of the dinner itself: "Everything seemed right. Just now [...] just now she had reached security [...] all of which rising in this profound stillness [...] there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change" (*TL*, 97). The life "of peace, of rest" (*TL*, 97) of the dinner that dominates the whole family with their guests, shows the social unity of the Ramsays, of which Mrs. Ramsay is the backbone. She is the source of intimacy and warmth of the whole family and is seen as a "superhuman figure",<sup>6</sup> who succeeds in pleasing all those round her, even reassuring the other sex: "[S]he had the whole of the other sex under her protection" (*TL*, 5). Seeing Charles Tansely at the dinner as seemingly detached from the others and "[e]verything about him ha[s] that meagre fixity" (*TL*, 79), Mrs. Ramsay sympathises with him and tries to make him talk: "'Do you write many letters, Mr Tansely?' asked Mrs. Ramsay, pitying him too [...] she pitied men always" (*TL*, 79). Mrs. Ramsay shows all her kindness and love to her family and guests; "[s]he put a spell on them all" (*TL*, 94), as if they need to be protected from an impending danger and they respond to her to ensure her love and protection, especially Paul and Minta, whose engagement Mrs. Ramsay blesses: "[She] exalted that, worshiped that; held her hands over it to warm them, to protect it, and yet, having brought it all about, somehow laughed, led her victims [...] to the altar" (*TL*, 94). Mrs. Ramsay here seems to be, as Hermione Lee suggests, "a pagan deity presiding over a sacrificial rite in which Paul and Minta are victims".<sup>7</sup> Paul and Minta are victims, since they need protection, a protection that is offered here by Mrs. Ramsay, and after the death of her, they will be deprived of this protection. Woolf here hints at some looming danger that will violate the peaceful life of the Ramsays after the death of their protector, Mrs. Ramsay.

The harmony, protection, unity and order of the dinner that are achieved by the presence of Mrs. Ramsay, contrast the natural process of the outside world, though that ominous insecurity can never finally be removed: "[H]ere, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily" (*TL*, 90). It seems that at this point only Mrs. Ramsay is conscious of what is going outside their 'world' of pleasure and

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<sup>6</sup> Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1977), 128.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, 129.

security; for a time, she sees, they have “their common cause against that fluidity out there” (*TL*, 90). The change that time would bring to their life, is hinted at in the poetic lines of Charles Elton’s “Luriana Lurilee”, which the Ramsays read to enjoy themselves: “And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be/ Are full of trees and changing leaves” (*TL*, 102). Mrs. Ramsay herself feels this change that time might bring to their lives, once she hears these words: “The words (she was looking at the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all” (*TL*, 102).

As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf also portrays the inexorable process of time and mortality through the aging of the humans and the fading of the non-human world. Looking at herself in the glass, Mrs. Ramsay sees herself as old: “[She] saw her hair grey, her cheek sunk, at fifty” (*TL*, 6). Mrs. Ramsay also feels herself tired and vulnerable, at the end of the day when she starts reading to James the story of ‘The Fisherman and his Wife’: “[S]he had only strength enough to move her finger, in exquisite abandonment to exhaustion, across the page of Grimm’s fairy story” (*TL*, 36). She fears time itself: “she never wanted James to grow a day older or Cam either” (*TL*, 54) and is anxious that her children will “[n]ever [...] be so happy again” (*TL*, 55). Walking with Lily Briscoe, William Bankes sees himself “old enough to be her father” (*TL*, 17). The same feeling of aging and ultimately of vulnerability comes to Mr. Bankes when Cam, the little daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay refuses to give him a flower: “She would not give a flower to the gentleman [...] She clenched her fist. She stamped. And Mr. Bankes felt aged and saddened” (*TL*, 20). The sense of aging is repeatedly present in Mr. Ramsay’s thoughts: “[P]aling the colour of his eyes, giving him, even in the two minutes of his turn on the terrace, the bleached look of withered old age” (*TL*, 32). And of course, it is not only people who are in the grip of time; gazing at the summer house itself, Mrs. Ramsay sees things as no longer bright and pleasant: “[T]hings got shabbier and got shabbier summer after summer. The mat was fading; the wallpaper was flapping [...] What was the use of flinging a green Cashmere shawl over the edge of a picture frame? In two weeks it would be the colour of pea soup” (*TL*, 25).

## Death, Danger, Masculinity and Sense of Foreboding in 'The Window'

Although the first part of *To the Lighthouse* presents events before the advent of the war, hints of danger, death and mortality are evoked in terms more overt than the nexus of images related to the sea. Almost immediately at the beginning of 'The Window', an image of mortality is presented through birds' skulls:

[T]he Swiss girl sobbing for her father who was dying of cancer in a valley of the Grisons, and lit up bats, flannels, straw hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, beetles, and the skulls of birds, while it drew from the long frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a smell of salt and weeds, which was in the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing. (*TL*, 7-8)

The image of the 'skulls of birds', which is accompanied with a tragic image related to the fatal illness of the Swiss girl's father, manifestly invokes a sense of the mortality that envelopes human life itself. For no apparent reason beyond the evocation of the themes we are discussing the narrator mentions that the Lighthouse keeper's "little boy [...] threatened with a tuberculous hip" (*TL*, 4). The skull imagery that is portrayed as an icon of death in *Jacob's Room*, is also used here to show the same connotation. In the children's room, the skull of a boar, with "great horns" (*TL*, 106) horrifies Cam the young daughter of the Ramsays and prevents her from sleeping: "But Cam thought it was a horrid thing, branching at her all over the room" (*TL*, 106). In order to make her daughter sleep in peace, Mrs. Ramsay suggests covering up the skull: "[Mrs. Ramsay] quickly took her own shawl off and wound it round the skull, round and round" (*TL*, 106) till it hides the skull. Probably the covering of the skull by Mrs. Ramsay's shawl can be interpreted as a kind of protection of her children from the implications represented by the skull. In the second section of the novel, the same beast's skull draws the attention of Mrs. Bast, the cleaner who looks at it astonished by its ugly shape: "Mrs. Bast [...] wondered, putting her cup down, whatever they hung that beast's skull there for?" (*TL*, 134). In addition to that Mrs. Ramsay "call[s] life terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance" (*TL*, 55).

In the town, Mrs. Ramsay, who is accompanied by Charles Tansley, notices a man pasting up a poster for a visiting circus. Not unreasonably she notes his handicap; again the very fact of this handicap is surely carefully placed by Woolf: "It was terribly dangerous work for a one-armed man [...] to stand on top of a ladder like that—his left arm had been cut off in a reaping machine

two years ago” (*TL*, 10). It seems that the whole episode shows Mrs. Ramsay as seeing life as being full of harmful and dangerous things. The ‘reaping machine’ perhaps suggests death itself. From the Middle Ages onward, death has been seen as a grim reaper that deprives the human of his life; moreover, the figure, whose ‘left arm had been cut off in a reaping machine’ (now death has been mechanised) is still taking risks on his ladder, presumably because of his economic circumstances.

More specifically military danger is continually evoked by Mr. Ramsay's repeated declamations of lines from Tennyson's poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade”. His reciting of passages from the poem hints at Mr. Ramsay's dramatizing of his own sense of his intellectual heroism. But even when the poem was published the heroism of the charge was undercut by the awareness that “someone had blunder'd”.<sup>8</sup> By the post First World War period, when Tennyson's stock was anyway low, such incompetence and culpability by the upper ranks of the army had even greater resonance: not “six hundred” but hundreds of thousands of men had died. This almost choric allusion to the follies of imperial militarism is a repeated reminder to the reader in the 1920s of what was to come in the world of the novel. Moreover, a similarity between Mr. Ramsay and the ‘blundering’ commander of Tennyson's poem is also suggested in the admiration of male heroism, a heroism that Mr. Ramsay wishes to see in his son Andrew: “Andrew would be a better man than he had been” (*TL*, 64); it is an ideal that leads the latter to his death in the ‘Time Passes’ section.

As elsewhere in her novel, Virginia Woolf stresses the connection between masculinity and war; she portrays the masculine power in ‘The Window’ throughout its scenes. The sensitivity of Mr. Ramsay and with regard to his own concerns and his insensitivity to his family shows the authoritative male power of this man. He is “incapable of untruth” (*TL*, 4) when it comes to delicacy of feeling, even in dealing with his little child James, who becomes upset at his father's unrelenting predictions about the likelihood of bad weather preventing the trip to the Lighthouse: “Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him” (*TL*, 4). The male selfhood of Mr. Ramsay is presented in a way that provokes James's hatred; indeed James sees his father as a rival to him for the sympathy of

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<sup>8</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, “The Charge of the Light Brigade”, *Lord Tennyson: Selected Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 139.

Mrs. Ramsay: “James felt all her [his mother's] strength flaring up to be drunk and quenched by the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again, demanding sympathy” (*TL*, 35). Mr. Ramsay encourages the domination of masculinity: he reveals that he “should be very proud of Andrew if he got a scholarship” (*TL*, 62), though nothing is mentioned in relation to his daughters. Mr. Ramsay appears even in the eyes of his guests, like Lily Briscoe, as an oppressive man: “He is petty, selfish, vain, egotistical; he is spoilt; he is a tyrant” (*TL*, 23). More than that, Lily thinks that “[Mr. Ramsay] wears Mrs. Ramsay to death” (*TL*, 23).

Interestingly, in the “The Plumage Bill”, an essay written in 1920, a few years before *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf deals with a masculinity that tortures and starves birds: “We may fairly suppose then that the birds are killed by men, starved by men, and tortured by men”.<sup>9</sup> In ‘The Window’ section, Woolf also delineates the torturing of birds by masculine hands. Lily Briscoe is frightened and her thoughts are cut off by “a shot [going] off close at hand, and there [comes], flying from its fragments, frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of starlings” (*TL*, 23). The shot is fired by Jasper, one of the sons of Mr Ramsay, who hunts the starlings with his gun. Mr. Ramsay, who watches Jasper’s shooting the birds, does not show any reaction against this merciless action.

Masculinity is obviously seen through the attitude of both William Banks and Charles Tansely towards Lily Briscoe’s painting. Through the whole section, Charles Tansely, who sees women as “ma[king] civilisation impossible with all their ‘charms’, all their silliness” (*TL*, 80), sees no need to moderate his own insensitive comment on Lily’s painting: “Women can’t write, women can’t paint” (*TL*, 80). William Bankes also seems to agree with Tansely’s view, but indirectly. While Lily is engaged in her painting, Bankes “take[s] out a penknife [...and] tap[s] the canvas with the bone handle” (*TL*, 48). Again, we notice that phallic blade, echoing the slicing; offensive scimitar images associated with Mr. Ramsay.

The authoritative masculine power is mirrored even in the non-human world. Mrs. Ramsay, who looks out of the window at the sight of “the rooks trying to decide which tree to settle on” (*TL*,

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<sup>9</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Plumage Bill” *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. III: 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1988), 242.

74), feels the domination of the male rook in treating the female bird: “[T]hey seemed to change their minds and rose up into the air again, because [...] the old rook, the father rook [...] was a bird of a very trying and difficult disposition. He was a disreputable old bird” (*TL*, 75).

### ‘Time Passes’

At the very beginning of ‘Time Passes’, Woolf again makes her reader aware of the coming of danger through the characters’ expectations of a near future that might bring unpleasant events. The opening scene of this section presents characters before leaving the Ramsay summer house; they make no direct reference to the war, but their conversations show that they expect war. Hence the speech of William Bankes makes the situation very obvious: “Well, we must wait for the future to show” (*TL*, 119). In addition to that the darkness that envelops the whole atmosphere and that makes it “hard [to] tell which is the sea and which is land” (*TL*, 119), takes Woolf’s 1920s reader back to the darkness that will cover the individual lives in the war itself. In the second part of this section, the emphasis on time and process, represented by the darkness and the rain, helps to create a very grim foreboding atmosphere that might hint at the war itself and the uncertainty of the future. It seems that the human has no light of hope to avoid the inexorable hazard, which is referred to as a ‘flood’, one that threatens to engulf the lives of all human individuals:

So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a down-pouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. (*TL*, 119-120)

Here, Woolf’s image echoes the remarkable words of Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, who declared on the eve of the war: “The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our time”.<sup>10</sup> As Woolf is acutely aware by the 1920s, individual lives will be snuffed out by the inexorable darkness. There is even a reference to ‘nothingness’ at

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and The English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1990), 3.

the end of the first paragraph of this part: “Sometimes a hand was raised as if to clutch something or ward off something, or somebody groaned, or somebody laughed aloud as if sharing a joke with nothingness” (*TL*, 120). It is a ‘nothingness’ that exemplifies the fragility of the human and his/her vulnerability in the time of the approaching hazard.

### **Images of Time and Process in ‘Time Passes’**

Although most of the events of ‘Time Passes’ occur during the First World War, no military pictures or scenes from battles are portrayed, and no bombing or gunfire directly heard. In spite of the absence of such images of human destruction, the Ramsays’ summer house, deserted for a long time because of the war, has been invaded by the forces of time and the natural process that bring erosion and destruction to it. The coming of the war is suggested, again, through images of natural violence and destruction: “The nights now are full of wind and destruction [...] and choke rain pipes and scatter damp paths. Also the sea tosses itself and breaks itself” (*TL*, 122). It is difficult for the Ramsays in “such confusion” (*TL*, 122)—the war—to return to their summer house. Thus, the house which remains empty is subject to the erosion and destruction of “great armies” represented by time and its process: “So with the house empty and the doors locked and the mattresses rolled down, those stray airs, advanced guards of great armies, blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in bedroom or drawing-room that wholly resisted them” (*TL*, 122-123). No light can be seen in the house; it is enveloped by dimness created by time itself: “Now, day after day, light turned, like a flower reflected in water” (*TL*, 123). Time, represented by “night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together” (*TL*, 128), makes one see the universe as “battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself” (*TL*, 128).

By the beginning of summer, the house is occupied by destructive inhabitants that play a great role in making it a house “that life had left” (*TL*, 131). Accordingly, ‘flies’ and ‘weeds’ fill and surround the whole house: “And now in the heat of summer the wind sent its spies about the house again. Flies wove a web in the sunny room; weeds that had grown close to the glass in the night tapped methodically at the window pane” (*TL*, 126). In the bedrooms and study, spiders build their webs and dwell there: “[N]ow the more arduous, more partial triumph over long rows

of books, black as ravens once, now white-stained, breeding pale mushrooms and secreting furtive spiders” (*TL*, 133). The images are of infiltrations by 'spies' and then a gradual takeover or invasion.

Time brings silence to the house itself, a silence that makes it a haunted house that evokes one's fear: “Nothing it seemed could break [...] or disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week, in the empty room, wove into itself the falling cries of birds, ship hooting, the drone and hum of fields, a dog's bark, a man's shout, and folded them round the house in silence” (*TL*, 123). Even though this silence is broken by the arrival of Mrs. McNab, the housekeeper, the house is ever more subject to the invasion of dust, the assault of time, a force that makes Mrs. McNab feel hopeless to protect the house: “What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature?” (*TL*, 132). At the same time, this force—time—makes the house itself subject to a ‘gigantic chaos’:

Night after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference. Listening (had there been any to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightning cloud have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the wind and waves disported themselves. (*TL*, 128)

Woolf describes the gloomy years of the war through these images of ‘chaos’ and elemental confusion.

### **Direct References to the war in ‘Time Passes’**

The war brings sorrow and death to the Ramsay family itself. We are suddenly, almost casually, informed of the death of Andrew Ramsay, the elder son of Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay: “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]” (*TL*, 127). Echoes of these events gradually sounds in the silence of the island. Mrs. McNab, the housekeeper hears of Andrew's death: “The young gentleman was dead. That she was sure. She had read his name in the papers” (*TL*, 134). Andrew, the beloved son of the Ramsay family, has become just another name in a list of casualties in the newspaper. Like the death of Jacob Flanders, no more details are given before the abrupt announcement of Andrew Ramsay's death. Ignoring telling details related to Andrew



Ramsay's joining the war—did he volunteer or was he called up?—Woolf wants to say that soldiers are doomed to be killed in the war whether they join it willingly or unwillingly. Even though it is not directly mentioned, it seems that Andrew Ramsay has volunteered to be a soldier rather than been called for military service. Like many young men, Andrew it seems likely is motivated by his sense of manliness and patriotism to join the war, a sense that is revealed in 'The Window' section, in which Andrew accompanies Paul Rayley and Minta to the beach; he shows his sense of adventure that provokes his mother's anxiety: "Andrew had his net and basket. That meant he was going to catch crabs and things. That meant he would climb out on to a rock; he would be cut off [...] He would roll and then crash" (*TL*, 56-57). When Minta shouts that "she ha[s] lost her grandmother's brooch" (*TL*, 71), Andrew volunteers to help Paul in finding the brooch:

The men (Andrew and Paul at once become manly, and different from usual) took counsel briefly and decided that they would plant Rayley's stick where they had sat and come back at low tide again [...] If the brooch was there, it would still be there in the morning, they assured her. (*TL*, 71)

Andrew here tries to prove that he is a man and can manage things. In the masculine view—his father's—Andrew proves his manliness: "Andrew could look after himself" (*TL*, 63).

In addition the friendship between Andrew and Mr. Augustus Carmichael, the poet guest of the family, shows "how devoted he [the latter] was to Andrew, and would call him into his room, and, Andrew said, 'show him things'. And there he would lie all day long on the lawn brooding presumably over his poetry" (*TL*, 89-90). Possibly the influence of Carmichael's poetry on Andrew leads the latter to join the war, since during the war Mr. Carmichael "was growing famous. People said that his poetry was 'so beautiful'. They went and published things he had written forty years ago" (*TL*, 185). Hence, the poetry of this man, which "was extremely impersonal; it said something about death; it said very little about love" (*TL*, 185), is about patriotism and seems to talk about sacrifice. It is the patriotic poetry that brings fame and success to Mr. Carmichael during the war itself: "[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry.]" (*TL*, 128). Virginia Woolf, one feels, would be all too sadly aware of the way literature can inculcate wrong-headed attitudes when it comes to patriotism and militarism.

There is no doubt that through Mr. Carmichael's patriotic poetry, Virginia Woolf refers to the futility of patriotism that was glorified by some poets during the war and how their poems helped in raising the spirit of people and encouraging them to be involved in the war, like the poems of Rupert Brooke, the close friend of Woolf. In his poem "The Dead", Rupert Brooke describes death in the front line as gaining great honour:

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,  
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.  
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth.  
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;  
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;  
And we have come into our heritage.<sup>11</sup>

Brooke's sense of sacrifice which he sees here as an 'Honour' and 'Nobleness' seems to satisfy the 'world' of the war, a 'world' that also makes Mr. Carmichael's "poetry [...] sailing serenely through a world which satisfied all his wants" (*TL*, 170), which is the world of manliness and militarism.

Death presides over these years; it deprives even non-combatants of their lives by the constant raids of the Zeppelins: "everyone had lost someone these years" (*TL*, 130). Death is present in 'Time Passes' even in ways not related to war but, again, to the wider processes of time and human mortality. Mrs. Ramsay, the central figure till now, a figure of security and order, dies, like her son, in a moment glimpsed only in parenthesis: "[Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.]" (*TL*, 122). Mrs. Ramsay's death leads to the fracturing of the intimacy of the family, as can be seen in the third section of this novel. But here, in 'Time Passes', Woolf reduces the importance of this event—Mrs. Ramsay's death—to show that sorrow and death were the prevailing images in Britain during the war: "many families had lost their dearest. So she was dead" (*TL*, 130). Attempting to fulfil her role as a woman, Prue Ramsay also dies: "[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said nobody deserved happiness more]" (*TL*, 126). Through the death of Prue Ramsay, Woolf shows that the rhythm and process

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<sup>11</sup>Rupert Brooke, "The Dead", "1914" *Five Sonnets* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915), np.

of life, the birth of a child, are also connected to death itself: “Miss Prue dead too [...] with her first baby” (*TL*, 130).

More directly, war images can be seen also through the description of the vibrations of the ‘ominous sounds’ that shake the Ramsays’ summer house. These sounds might be sounds of guns that seem like ‘the measured blows of hammers’ that ‘cracked the tea-cups’, and break the silence in the middle of the night:

But slumber and sleep though it might there came later in the summer ominous sounds like the measured blows of hammers dulled on felt, which, with their repeated shocks still further loosened the shawl and cracked the tea-cups. Now and again some glass tinkled in the cupboard as if a giant voice had shrieked so loud in its agony that tumblers stood inside a cupboard vibrated too. Then again silence fell; and then, night after night, and sometimes in plain midday when the roses were bright and light turned on the wall its shape clearly there seemed to drop into this silence this indifference, this integrity, the thud of something falling. (*TL*, 127)

It seems that Woolf here once again, as she has in *Mrs. Dalloway*, retrieves an experienced image of the vibrating of the earth, caused by the sounds of guns in Flanders, which is described in her essay “Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth”, written in 1916. Woolf in this essay delineates the sounds of the guns in France that she used to hear in her house at Rodmell, as a ‘sinister sound of far off beating’:

Two well-known writers were describing the sound of the guns in France, as they heard it from the top of the South Downs. One likened it to ‘the hammer stroke of Fate’; the other heard in it the pulse of Destiny’ [...] All walks on the Downs this summer are accompanied by this sinister sound of far-off beating, which is sometimes as faint as the ghost of an echo, and sometimes rises almost from the next fold of grey land.<sup>12</sup>

Even in her diaries, Woolf registers these sounds heard from the downs; for example, in August 1917, she notes: “Very fine hot day [...] Sounds of band in Lewes from the [d]owns. Guns heard at intervals. Walked up the down at the back” (*DI*, 40).

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Heard on the Downs: The Genesis of Myth”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume II 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1987), 40.

More practically, in ‘Time Passes’, Woolf draws the reader’s attention to some problems that are created by the war. Due to the circumstance of the war most of servants left their domestic service to undertake work left by men who became soldiers.<sup>13</sup> In October 1917, Virginia Woolf herself comments on the situation of her servants in war time saying: “Bert is wounded, & Nellie has gone to Liz. She felt it her duty & also her right—which shows how the servant is bettering her state in this generation” (*DI*, 65). More than that, as we have seen, Woolf was engaged during the year 1918 to find a servant for her pregnant sister, Vanessa Bell; and the shortage of labour is mentioned again here.<sup>14</sup> Mrs. McNab, the housekeeper of the Ramsays’ summer house finds it difficult to clean the house alone, since no servant is sent to her by the Ramsays and the house is “beyond the strength of one woman” to clean it (*TL*, 132). Karen L. Levenback suggests that it is only after the demobilisation of the war that Mrs. McNab is able to find the help she could not find during the time of the war to restore the house.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the return of Mrs. Bast and her son George from Glasgow enables Mrs. McNab to repair the house and put it in good condition. In addition to that, the difficulties of travelling prevent the Ramsay family returning to the house: “what with the war, and travel being so difficult these days; they had never come all these years” (*TL*, 130). The war, as we have seen, also caused a shortage of food, a shortage that makes Mrs. McNab “dreams of [...] a plate of milk soup” (*TL*, 132). The lack of necessary things during the war and “[p]rices [that] had gone up shamefully, and didn’t come down again neither” (*TL*, 130) make Mrs. McNab remembers the time of peace: “They lived well in those days. They had everything they wanted” (*TL*, 134).

### **Human Vulnerability in ‘Time Passes’**

Most of the characters who appear in ‘Time Passes’ seem vulnerable and tired. Both Mrs. McNab and Mrs Bast “creaked. They were old; they were stiff; their legs ached” (*TL*, 133). Laura Marcus points out that Woolf presents the life of these two women in the house as a kind

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<sup>13</sup> Michael H. Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Oxford. U. P., 2005), 48.

<sup>14</sup> See Virginia Woolf, *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume II: 1912-1922*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1976). 233-248.

<sup>15</sup> Karen L. Levenback, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War* (New York: Syracuse U. P., 1999), 108.

of life so primitive that makes them unable to act consciously.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the primitive condition of the Ramsays' summer house makes Mrs. McNab aimlessly look at its chaos: "How long, she asked, creaking and groaning on her knees under the bed, dusting the boards, how long shall it endure?" (*TL*, 124). Mrs. MacNab's old age and her physical fatigue are, almost inevitably, depicted through sea images that show human vulnerability; she is presented as a ship, struggling at sea, trying to find the right direction:

As she lurched (for she rolled like a ship at sea) and leered (for her eyes fell on nothing directly, but with a sidelong glance that deprecated the scorn and anger of the world—she was witless, she knew it), as she clutched the banisters and hauled herself upstairs and rolled from room to room, she sang. (*TL*, 124)

Human vulnerability can be seen also through the fatigue of Mr. Ramsay; he endures the grief caused by the loss of his wife—we see him almost symbolically blundering in the dark, a dark that is both literal and existential,—daughter and son, a grief that makes him vulnerable, tired and sometimes unconscious of what is going on around him; as Mrs. McNab describes: "she saw the old gentleman, lean as a rake, wagging his head [...] talking to himself" (*TL*, 133).

At the time of the Armistice and "when messages of peace breathed from the sea to the shore" (*TL*, 135), the characters who appear at this time look also vulnerable; they "prefe[r] sleeping" (*TL*, 136). Lily Briscoe, who is the first person returning to the summer house, spends her day sleeping: "Lily was tired out with travelling and slept almost at once" (*TL*, 136). Mr. Carmichael, who also appears here, stops his reading and "fall[s] asleep" (*TL*, 136). The vulnerability of the characters here, represented by their sleep, seems to be the result of being deprived of it during the war raids, and it also shows their need to escape their reality, exhausted by what they have lived through, the bitterness and sorrow: "[A]s the curtains of dark wrapped themselves over the house, over Mrs Beckwith, Mr Carmichael, and Lily Briscoe so that they lay with several folds of blackness on their eyes [...] nothing broke their sleep" (*TL*, 136).

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<sup>16</sup> Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Northcote, 2004), 107.

## **‘The Lighthouse’**

In ‘The Lighthouse’ section, the Ramsay family return to the summer house after an absence of ten years. In spite of the end of the war, the gloomy shadows of it still mark the lives of the characters. Accordingly, Woolf concentrates here on presenting a new post-war consciousness: alienation, a sense of aloneness and loss of communication that dominates post-war human relationships. Woolf also continues to focus on the role of time and process in shaping post-war life.

### **New Post-War Consciousness in ‘The Lighthouse’**

The characters in ‘The Lighthouse’ seem to be aware of the change of life caused by the war, a change that undoubtedly reflects negatively on their state of mind, emotions and even on their behaviour. Mr. Ramsay, for instance, directly confesses to Lily Briscoe: “You will find us much changed” (*TL*, 142). A sense of loss, estrangement and unreality dominates the characters here, especially, Lily Briscoe, who sees everything in the house as unreal, unfamiliar: “The extraordinary *unreality* was frightening” (*TL*, 141. My emphasis). Lily’s state of consciousness here—and it is a representative one—we can again relate to Sigmund Freud’s concept of the ‘Uncanny’, that which has been rendered unfamiliar: “[...] a matter of something gruesome or terrible [...] the return of the dead [...] It comes above all perhaps, in the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness”.<sup>17</sup> Hence, Lily Briscoe, who “come[s] back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead” (*TL*, 139), finds the house unfamiliar to her even though it has been so familiar previously: “[S]he feel[s] cut off from other people, and able only to go on watching, asking, wondering. The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her” (*TL*, 140). Lily has a feeling that she does not belong to this place; “[s]he ha[s] no attachment here, she feel[s] no relations with it” (*TL*, 140).

It is the silence that envelops everything in the house and, under it all, the pain caused by the loss of Mrs. Ramsay which evokes Lily’s sense of things being unreal: “All was silent. Nobody seemed yet to be stirring in the house [...] the faint thought she was thinking of Mrs. Ramsay

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<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2003), 2.

seemed in consonance with this quiet house; this smoke; this fine early morning air. Faint and unreal” (*TL*, 154). Lily feels the emptiness filling the whole house: “It was all in keeping with this silence, this emptiness, and the unreality of the early morning hour” (*TL*, 182). Even though the house is tidy and in order, it looks in the eyes of Lily as to be unfamiliar, out of order and without meaning: “How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal it was, she thought, looking at her empty coffee cup” (*TL*, 140). With such unfamiliarity around her, where she once felt so at home, Lily sees the whole of life as being insecure and unknown: “Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter [...] Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life?—starting, unexpected, unknown?” (*TL*, 171).

Lily’s sense of the uncanny, provoked by “the most extreme nostalgia or ‘homesickness’”,<sup>18</sup> makes her long to feel immune. Lily’s sentimental longing for the past is depicted in a scene, in which she shouts aloud the name of Mrs. Ramsay several times: “‘Mrs. Ramsay!’ Lily cried, ‘Mrs. Ramsay!’ But nothing happened. The pain increased” (*TL*, 172). Ruby Cohn points out that Lily’s uttering Mrs. Ramsay’s name aloud, “is a desperate cry that climaxes her violent need to know why life is so short and inexplicable”.<sup>19</sup> At the same time her shouting reveals her sense of pain, an estrangement that makes her feel the need of the protection and security of the past, represented by Mrs. Ramsay. Lily’s nostalgia for Mrs. Ramsay increases her pain: “‘Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!’ she cried, feeling the old horror come back—to want and want and not to have” (*TL*, 192).

Other characters also have Lily’s sense of unreality; Mr. Ramsay, for example, looks at Lily “as if he saw [...] her], for one second, for the first time” (*TL*, 140). Sitting silently in the boat, Cam Ramsay looks at the shore, where it “seemed refined, far away, unreal” (*TL*, 158).

Some characters in ‘The Lighthouse’ section resort to the world of unconsciousness, a ‘world’ that is tackled in Freud’s paper “The Unconscious”, in which Freud connects the unconscious emotions to anxiety and repression:

[T]he use of such terms as ‘unconscious affect and emotion’ has reference to the fate undergone, in consequence of repression, by the quantitative factor in the instinctual impulse. We know that an

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ruby Cohn, “Art in To the Lighthouse”, *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Criticism*, ed. Thomas S. W. Lewis (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 67.

affect may be subjected to three vicissitudes: either it remains wholly or in the part, as it is; or it is transformed into a qualitatively different charge of affect, above all into anxiety; or it is suppressed.<sup>20</sup>

Hence, the characters here try to escape their painful reality and anxiety ‘that ha[ve] reference to the fate undergone’, represented by their unpleasant experience, to escape into the unconscious world. The anxiety and pain that Lily feels, caused by the bitter experience of the war and the loss of Mrs. Ramsay, and that she tries to escape by painting, are aggravated once she recalls the speech of Charles Tansely: “Can’t paint, can’t write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously” (*TL*, 152). To escape all her anxiety and sorrow, Lily “lose[s] consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael was there or not” (*TL*, 152). This is why most of the time in this section Lily seems absorbed in her thoughts of the past, making her unaware of people round her: “[H]er mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas” (*TL*, 152). Like Lily Briscoe, Mr. Ramsay who endures the pain and loneliness caused by the death of Andrew, Prue and above all his wife, prefers to be ‘unconscious’ of such an unpleasant reality even while he is with his children in the boat in the middle of the sea: “[A]nd he went on reading quite unconscious of what they [his children] thought. It was thus that he escaped” (*TL*, 193).

### **Human Vulnerability in ‘The Lighthouse’**

In ‘The Lighthouse’ section, most of the characters who survive the war seem vulnerable and tired, and forget their intentions. Mr. Ramsay, who is now “seventy-one” (*TL*, 195) is seen here out of temper, because his children are still not ready to go to the trip to the Lighthouse: “What’s the use of going now? He had stormed [...] There he was, marching up and down the terrace in a rage” (*TL*, 139). The deaths of his wife, son and daughter make Mr. Ramsay look and feel tired, and depressed: “[H]e would have flung himself tragically backwards into the bitter waters of despair [...] He looked like a king in exile” (*TL*, 142). There is no one now to give Mr. Ramsay the comfort and calming sympathy that Mrs. Ramsay has offered in the first section. Therefore, Mr. Ramsay with his “sickly look” (*TL*, 145) hopelessly seeks Lily’s support and assistance:

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<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious”, *Collected Papers*, Vol. IV (London: Hogarth, 1949), 110.



“[H]is need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy” (*TL*, 144), a need that makes him become upset and “a very distinguished, elderly man” (*TL*, 148).

The bad mood of Mr. Ramsay reflects negatively on the behaviour of his children, who cannot endure his constant anger; “Nancy ha[s] vanished” (*TL*, 139) from his sight to escape his anger. Nancy, who is presented in ‘The Window’ section as “escap[ing] the horror of the family life” (*TL*, 68), seems here even more vulnerable and can’t escape the load of the family life that is increased after the death of her mother and that is aggravated by her father’s bad temper: “Nancy burst in, and asked, looking round the room, in a queer half dazed, half desperate way, ‘What does one send to the Lighthouse?’ as if she was forcing herself to do what she despaired of ever being able to do” (*TL*, 139-140).

Even the young James and Cam look tired, “their spirits subdued” (*TL*, 142). When they have been informed by their father to prepare themselves for the Lighthouse trip, they reluctantly show their agreement: “Doggedly James said yes. Cam stumbled more wretchedly” (*TL*, 142). Their acceptance to join their father is out of their fear of him—even more short-tempered and aggressive than in the pre-war years—rather than to entertain themselves: “Did they not want to go? he demanded. Had they dared say No” (*TL*, 142). James, who is sixteen and Cam, who is seventeen seem to Lily “a serious, melancholy couple” (*TL*, 147), since they “suffered something beyond their years in silence” (*TL*, 148). In the boat sailing to the Lighthouse, James and Cam sit silent; they need now to face their fate, represented by the anger of their father: “[T]o resist tyranny to the death” (*TL*, 155), a fate that is expected by their mother in the first section. Mr. Ramsay short of patience even in dealing with people beyond his home: “[H]e said something sharp to Macalister’s boy” (*TL*, 155).

Beyond the family, vulnerability dominates the appearance of Mrs. Beckwith albeit she is an almost invisible presence at the house: “Then, being tired, her mind still rising and falling with the sea, the taste and smell that places have after long absence possessing her [...] she had lost herself and gone under [...] She had slept at once” (*TL*, 142). Like this lady, Mr. Carmichael also seems vulnerable. Mr Ramsay sees him as a “rubicund, drowsy, entirely contented figure [...] reading a French novel [...] in a world of woe” (*TL*, 145). This outlook of Mr. Carmichael is “enough to provoke the most dismal thoughts of all” (*TL*, 145). As well as the general sense of exhaustion, after the death of Andrew, Mr. Carmichael feels guilty and becomes tired: “[W]hen

he had heard of Andrew Ramsay's death [...] Mr Carmichael had 'lost all interest in life'" (*TL*, 185).

Moreover, the characters here seem to forget what they intend to do or say. Sigmund Freud attributes this state of forgetting of impressions and experience and the forgetting of intentions to unpleasant feelings the fact that are dominating the person: "[I]n every case the forgetting turned out to be based on a motive of unpleasure".<sup>21</sup> Mr. Ramsay, who still suffers the pain of losing his dearest in the war seems tired to the extent that he forget things; while he intends to talk to Lily, Mr. Ramsay "noticed that his boot-laces were untied" (*TL*, 146). Even in the scene of the sailing to the Lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay forgets what he intends to tell Cam, his daughter: "But what? [...] he forgot the sort of thing one said" (*TL*, 160). Nancy Ramsay's feeling of frustration caused by her failure to manage things in the house after the death of her mother, makes her forget what she intends to do: "Nancy had forgotten to order the sandwiches" (*TL*, 139) for the trip to the Lighthouse.

### **Sense of Aloneness and Loss of Community in 'The Lighthouse'**

Woolf in this section emphasises, as she mentions in her diary, the "break of unity" (*DIII*, 36). Hence, most of the characters in 'The Lighthouse' suffer a sense of aloneness and the loss of human and social community that make them feel the absence of the human intimacy and relations that had filled their pre-war life. Lily Briscoe herself feels that the Ramsay summer house no longer shows social community: "But it was a house full of unrelated passions" (*TL*, 142). Laura Marcus suggests that the whole novel "explores the question of what lasts through time, memory and despite death and negation."<sup>22</sup> But, it seems that this question is explored primarily in 'The Lighthouse' section, in which the surviving characters seem half dead, detached from each other and from life itself, save the memories by which they relive the past with its security and stability. The lack of communication, for instance, dominates the behaviour of Lily Briscoe, who is "forty-four" (*TL*, 143) in this section. Even though she returns to the Ramsays', Lily tries her best to avoid communicating with Mr. Ramsay: "[S]he turned her back

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<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, ed. James Strachey, trans. Alan Tyson. (New York: Penguin, 1975), 186.

<sup>22</sup> Marcus, 101.

to the window lest Mr Ramsay should see her. She must escape somehow, be alone somewhere” (*TL*, 141). Lily does not even have the desire to talk to him: “Let him be fifty feet away, let him not even speak to you, let him not even see you” (*TL*, 143). Lily’s need of aloneness here, seems to be the outcome of her fear: “Every time he approached [...] ruin approached, chaos approached. She could not paint. She stopped” (*TL*, 141). Therefore, she seeks protection from Mr. Carmichael and even with the latter she is “not close to [him...], but close enough for his protection” (*TL*, 141). The pressure on Lily, represented by the approach of Mr. Ramsay, makes her see herself harshly and bleakly: “[W]ho am not a woman, but a peevish, ill-tempered, dried-up old maid presumably” (*TL*, 145). Lily’s failure to sympathise with Mr. Ramsay, her loss of female compassion, seems to be the result of the war: “But the war had drawn the sting of her femininity” (*TL*, 152). It seems that Lily finds it useless to attempt communication in a world where there is no room for security and order; she prefers to escape into the world of art, represented by her painting, rather than that of human beings: “A brush, the one dependable thing in a world of strife, ruin, chaos” (*TL*, 143). At the same time, absorbed in her painting, Lily feels that even there she is alone: “It was an odd road to be walking, this of painting. Out and out one went, further and further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea (*TL*, 163-164). Yet again, the sea embodies the threat of extinction for the human individual.

Even after the sailing of Mr. Ramsay and his children to the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe and Mr. Carmichael spend long hours silently alone; neither of them talks to one other. Even though the pressure on Lily is very great, caused by her constant thinking of the past, and she needs someone to talk to him, she finds it difficult to tell Mr. Carmichael:

She wanted to go straight up to him and say [...] But one only woke people if one knew what one wanted to say to them. And she wanted to say not one thing, but everything [...] 'About life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay' [...] one could say nothing to nobody. (*TL*, 169)

Mr. Carmichael himself shows no desire to talk, as Lily feels: “[O]ne could almost fancy that had Mr Carmichael spoken” (*TL*, 170); he escapes communication with others by being alone: “[He] was asleep, or he was dreaming, or he was lying there catching words” (*TL*, 162). The lack of the characters’ capacity to achieve human and social community shows their awareness of the change of their life, in which security had been replaced by violence and incoherence: “Was

there no safety [...]... No guide, no shelter [...] why was it [life] so short, why was it so inexplicable” (*TL*, 171). Till the end of the novel Lily Briscoe keeps painting and thinking of the past and present, without hearing any word said by Mr. Carmichael. At the end, Lily attempts a kind of communicating, with a few words addressed indirectly to Mr. Carmichael when she starts thinking aloud of Mr. Ramsay landing at the Lighthouse:

‘He has landed,’ she said aloud [...] Then, surging up, puffing slightly, old Mr. Carmichael stood beside her, [...], swaying a little in his bulk, and said, shading his eyes with his hand: ‘They will have landed,’ and she felt that she had been right. They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things. (*TL*, 197-198)

On his way, sailing to the Lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay himself does not show a desire to talk and no one can communicate with him even his children: “Speak to him they could not” (*TL*, 155). Mr. Ramsay prefers to be alone; even if he needs to talk, he says things that scarcely can be heard: “He would keep looking for a breeze, fidgeting, saying things under his breath, which Macalister and Macalister’s boy would overhear, and they would both be made horribly uncomfortable” (*TL*, 155). Mr. Ramsay is possessed by a sense of aloneness that is revealed through his murmuring not the heroic “Charge of the Light Brigade” but the more anguished lines of William Cowper’s “The Castaway”: “We perished [...] each alone” (*TL*, 158). It seems that the sea, its deepness and roughness, increases Mr. Ramsay’s sorrow and grief, caused by the death of his wife:

But I beneath a rougher sea  
Was whelmed in deeper gulfs than he. (*TL*, 158)

Through these poetic lines, Mr. Ramsay reveals the “explosion of passion that boiled in him” (*TL*, 195); his feeling shows the cruelty of time and life, represented again by the sea, that makes him see no hope for the happiness and security that he had lived in his pre-war life.

The absence of human relations can be seen also in the marital life of the Rayleys— Paul and Minta—brought to mind by Lily Briscoe: “Their lives appeared to her in a series of scenes” (*TL*, 164) that show the failure of their marriage and the change of their lives, especially Minta’s life, a life in which she seems more liberated and careless not only in her duty as a mother of “two little boys” (*TL*, 164), but even as a wife who pays no attention to her husband and home; she

spends most of her time out of home entertaining herself: “Paul had come in and gone to bed early; Minta was late. There was Minta, wreathed, tinted, garish on the stairs about three o’clock in the morning [...] and the carpet had a hole in it” (TL, 164). The love that dominates their relationship in the first section is replaced here by problems and quarrels: “But what did they say? [...] Something violent. Minta went on eating her sandwich, annoyingly, while he spoke. He spoke indignant, jealous words, abusing her” (TL, 164). Minta is “far too conscious, far too wary” (TL, 165) to think of the result of her negligence of her marital life, in which “they ha[ve] got through the dangerous stage by now” (TL, 165). Paul, who sees that Minta “ha[s] ruined his life” (TL, 165), is no longer in love with her; “he ha[s] taken up with another woman, a serious woman” (TL, 165). Paul now needs a woman with whom he can discuss the contemporary problems of his time, can share his thinking: “[Paul’s mistress] went to meetings and shared Paul’s views (they had got more and more pronounced) about taxation of land values and a capital levy” (TL, 165). It seems that things here go against the expectation of Mrs. Ramsay, who had encouraged this marriage and now “the marriage ha[s] not been a success” (TL, 166). This does not mean that Mrs. Ramsay had not been right, but it is life itself that becomes difficult and the individuals feel alone and vulnerable. The marital life of the Rayleys in the post-war period makes Lily Briscoe content of her own life: “I’m happy like this. Life has changed completely” (TL, 166).

### **Time and Process in ‘The Lighthouse’**

Even in this last section, Woolf does not stop painting images of time and process to show the negative effects of time on the lives of the humans. Time, portrayed by water images, shows the individual’s sorrow, grief and frustration. For Mr. Ramsay the death of his wife means the loss of a female, a loss that makes him sad and upset most of the time; his sadness is described as an “enormous *flood* of grief” (TL, 145. My emphasis) that makes him look painful and “horrible” (TL, 145) in the eyes of Lily Briscoe from whom he demands emotions: “[Mr. Ramsay’s] demand for sympathy *poured* and spread itself in *pools* at her feet” (TL, 146. My emphasis). Sailing to the Lighthouse, Cam is annoyed by her father’s question: “‘Tell me—which is the East, which is the West?’ [...] half laughing at her” (TL, 159). Her sorrow and frustration caused by not knowing the answer is portrayed in terms of the natural process:

[H]er face, sad, sulky, yielding. And as something happens when a cloud falls on a green hillside and gravity descends and there among all surrounding hills is gloom and sorrow, and it seems as if the hills themselves must ponder the fate of the clouded, the darkened [...] so Cam now felt herself overcast. (*TL*, 160)

Lily Briscoe, who tries to complete her painting after a break of ten years, finds herself in confrontation with time, represented, yet again, by the sea waves: “[S]he scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines [...] Down in the hollow of one wave she saw the next wave towering higher and higher above her” (*TL*, 151). Lily is disturbed by the reality of looking at herself as a woman who “[c]an’t paint and can’t write” (*TL*, 152), and this reality that attacks her here is described in an image of time: “[T]his formidable ancient enemy of hers—this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her, emerged stark at the back of appearance and commanded her attention” (*TL*, 151). Lily tries through her painting to stand against time itself to assert order, even permanence: “In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs Ramsay said” (*TL*, 154). But the sense of communal stillness, created briefly by Mrs. Ramsay, is now a matter of lonely individual effort. The ‘shape’ that Lily tries to keep is the stability of the pre-war life, represented by Mrs. Ramsay, a shape that she can achieve by “mak[ing] of the moment something permanent” (*TL*, 154), a moment in which she paints Mrs. Ramsay and James: “Mother and child [...] objects of universal veneration” (*TL*, 49), since Lily believes that “nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint” (*TL*, 170).

Time, represented by the sea, is portrayed as a monster, which can swallow human beings. “[S]tanding and looking out over the bay” (*TL*, 179), Lily feels that: “[t]he sea is stretched like silk across the bay. Distance had an extraordinary power; they [Mr. Ramsay and those in the boat] had been swallowed up in it” (*TL*, 179). The image of a ‘world which has gone beneath the waves’ that Woolf discussed in her essay “The Cinema”, mentioned previously, is also delineated in this section. When the boat comes very close to the Lighthouse, Cam, who is accompanied by her father and brother, gazes at the ‘expanse of the sea’ and she sees an ‘island’ which looks very small as if she has been invaded by a an enemy represented by a ‘big wave’: “The island had grown so small that it scarcely looked like a leaf any longer. It looked like the

top of a rock which some big wave would cover. (*TL*, 194). Again the image here shows that this island irresistibly surrenders to the power of the sea and its danger.

## II. *The Waves*

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* was published in 1931, a period in which the First World War still cast its shadows on the way people looked at, and thought about, life. However it is striking that the war is not, in fact, directly mentioned in *The Waves*, striking not only given the period in which it was written but also given the attention afforded to the war in the novels which preceded it. In fact, again in contrast to the previous three novels, there is an almost complete detachment from the actuality of social life in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. No public or political events are mentioned and, as a result, it is difficult to ascertain the supposed dates of the actions in the narrative. The action of the novel would seem to start not before 1901, since, for instance, Jinny refers to the picture of Queen Alexandra, who became queen in that year, on the Coronation of her husband, Edward VII: "But Miss Lambert [...] sits under a picture of Queen Alexandra".<sup>23</sup> In the last section we are informed that the characters are in their sixties: Bernard explicitly feels himself as elderly and Susan walks "heavily [...] with her stick" (*TW*, 184). But despite the starting date of the novel's action, the war receives no mention. If the action starts in 1901, when the children are young, we might have expected the boys to have faced life in the armed services since they would have been of an appropriate age, by 1914-1918. Moreover, if by the end of the novel the main characters are in their sixties, then the dates of the action at that point post-dates the time of the novel's publication in 1931. In other words, Woolf appears to have created a curiously *fictive* time-scheme for the lives of her characters, *out* of reality as it were.

This in fact accords with what Woolf herself says about her determination to separate the novel from reality, from day-to-day realism and certainly, as well as from the neat causal relation between events and facts necessitated by plot. In August 1930, Woolf writes to Ethel Smyth: "What question in particular was it about the Waves that delicacy forbade? [...] I am writing to a

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Hogarth, 1990), 19. Hereafter references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *TW*.

rhythm and not to a plot [...] And thus though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction”.<sup>24</sup> *The Waves* indeed rejects the tradition of realism as comprehensively as Woolf proposed the novel should in her essays of the 1920s, particularly in “Modern Fiction”. She clearly reaches *beyond* day-to-day events with their inevitable details and occasional mundanity, to engage the rhythms of life itself, the rhythms that lie beyond, or beneath, the everyday. Thus, she notes in her diary on 28 November 1928, as she writing *The Waves*:

As for my next book, [...] The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don[']t belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional [...] I want to put practically everything in; yet to saturate [...] I must include nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent. (*DIII*, 209-210)

But, manifestly, the things that are ‘put [...] in’, the impulses, sensory experiences, and intuitions of the characters as they engage the external world, human and natural, are also suffused, ‘saturated’, with recent events. Those consciousnesses are still shadowed by the catastrophic sense of loss, loss not only of life, of individuals, but also, and in a sense more profoundly, the loss of secure meaning and values. As powerfully as in the novels which precede it, life is registered in terms of the flow of time and process, human individuals as (merely) part of an indifferent process, the rhythms of which pulse through the natural world, occasionally visually beautiful, even tranquil, but also often darkly menacing to the vulnerable individual life and consciousness. In other words, the insecurity of the post-war world is still present and once again, in the character of Percival, we have the poignant, tragic loss of a young man.

### **Lack of Secure Meaning and Values**

In May, 1925, a few years before writing *The Waves*, Woolf notes in her diary:

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<sup>24</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. IV: 1929-1931*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1978), 204.



I sometimes think humanity is a vast wave, undulating: the same, I mean: the same emotions here that there were at Richmond [...] people look the same; & joke in the same way, & come to these odd superficial agreements, wh[ich] if you think of them persisting & wide spread—in jungles, storms, birth & death—are not superficial; but rather profound, I think. (*DIII*, 22)

As the title suggests, *The Waves* exemplifies Woolf's sense of life, human and the world beyond the human, as a flowing wave through time; it is a rhythmical flow explicitly delineated again in terms of the sea in its boundlessness and ultimate indifference to the human, to whom it offers no security, no assurance of order or value. The 'voice of sea' that Woolf refers to in her diary mentioned above, with its relentless waves, sounds consistently throughout the novel. Accordingly, the characters are caught by, they intuit life in terms of, the idea of being floated or sunk into water, an idea that images their insecurity. In a scene at Elvedon early in the novel, Bernard and Susan, as children, are presented there among the trees; here the place is literally marshy, but the sense of psychological insecurity is established from the outset: "We shall sink like swimmers just touching the ground with the tips of their toes. We shall sink through the green air of the leaves [...] The waves close over us, the beech leaves meet above our heads" (*TW*, 7). Lying under the bushes of the garden, Jinny feels that her "knees are pink floating islands" (*TW*, 12). Taking his shower, Bernard feels that he is on a seashore rather than in a bathroom: "Water pours down the runnel of my spine [...] I am covered with warm flesh. My dry crannies are wetted; my cold body is warmed; it is sluiced and gleaming. Water descends and sheets me like an eel" (*TW*, 14). Bernard feels the need to protect himself from the force of the sea that he cannot resist, even when he goes to bed: "Now I tie my pyjamas loosely round me, and lie under this thin sheet afloat in the shallow light which is like a film of water drawn over my eyes by a wave" (*TW*, 14). Being anxious most of the time, Rhoda feels insecure; she feels the danger of life, portrayed by images of the sea, that might engulf her even while she also is in bed; she unsuccessfully tries her best to avoid thinking of being sunk into water: "But I will stretch my toes so that they touch the rail at the end of the bed [...] Now I cannot sink" (*TW*, 15). At the boys' school, Bernard sees the headmaster, presenting his lesson, in related terms: "Now he lurches back to his seat like a drunken sailor" (*TW*, 21). Out of their classes, in the field of the school, Neville, who lies listening to the stories of Bernard, looks at the landscape that seems to him "as if the whole world were flowing and curving—on the earth the trees, in the sky the clouds" (*TW*, 22). In other words, Woolf stresses a vision of life as unstable, of the uncertainty of

all things in the individual's world, rendering meaningless any sense of the world as whole and coherent. This is why the images that are used in Bernard's stories are seen by Neville as bubbles, transient stories that ultimately make him feel himself being floated: "One floats, too, as if one were that bubble" (*TW*, 22).

The characters increasingly feel the sense of insecurity which envelopes their lives even in places where we might expect them to feel at home. At her boarding school, Susan recalls her days at home, where the sea waves are again connected to an image of threat: "At home, the waves are mile [*sic*] long. On winter nights we hear them booming. Last Christmas a man was drowned sitting alone in his cart" (*TW*, 27). Returning home to London after the end of the school term, Neville feels the approach of danger when he remembers the sea, albeit he is approaching an urban world: "[A]s we approach London, the centre, and my heart draws out too, in fear, in exultation [...] I will sit still one moment before I emerge into that chaos, that tumult [...] The huge uproar is in my ears. It sounds and resounds under this glass roof like the surge of a sea" (*TW*, 45-46).

In their adult lives, the characters keep feeling that they are floating or, at times, sunk into water, a feeling that again makes them see the rhythm of life as sea waves albeit such feelings are not always negative. Being absorbed in her night party, Jinny, who "rides like a gull on the wave" (*TW*, 69), expresses her exultation and ecstasy through water imagery: "I ripple. I stream like a plant in the river, flowing this way, flowing that way" (*TW*, 66); when she dances with a young man, Jinny sees the flood of waves, delineated by the music which sweeps around them, as something greater than they are: "We yield to this slow *flood*" (*TW*, 66. My emphasis). The image here shows that the individual feels him/herself in the grip of the flow of life and of process. At the restaurant, Rhoda, who comes with her friends to meet Percival, before he goes off to India, feels unease and detachment: "I am like the foam that races over the beach or the moonlight that falls arrowlike here on a tin can, here on a spike of the mailed sea holly, or a bone or a half-eaten boat" (*TW*, 85). In Section Seven, "Bernard is spending ten days in Rome" (*TW*, 124); when he gets the train, he feels the flow of life that ultimately makes him feel that he is riding a sea in a boat rather than being in a train: "The world is beginning to move past me like the banks of a hedge when the train starts, like the waves of the sea when a streamer moves"

(*TW*, 125). Thus, Woolf's characters are constantly aware of life as a place of changeability, a place of potential energy and pleasure but also of potential threat.

In Section Five, which tells of the death of Percival, the friends are engulfed by a deep grief that changes their lives; having invested so much hope in Percival's potential for heroism and achievement, his potential to bring at least some sense of meaning and order into their lives, the sense of loss when he is killed is all the more profound. The imagery in which their emotions are expressed is almost inevitable. Neville opens the first scene: "The sails of the world have swung round and caught me on the head" (*TW*, 98). Rhoda, who feels that they "have been hauled over the shingle, down to the sea" (*TW*, 107), buys a bunch of flowers for Percival; what she does with them is revelatory of the way she is feeling, a way she now sees the world: "Into the wave that dashes upon the shore [...] I throw my violets, my offering to Percival" (*TW*, 108).

Repeatedly, sea imagery is used to show human vulnerability. The characters, who still suffer the loss of Percival, are conscious of being immersed in something greater than their own potentiality and endurance. Near the end of Section Seven, Rhoda, who seems to be in love with Louis, declares that she is breaking off her relationship with him; her emotional disturbance here is portrayed through sea imagery that again ultimately shows her vulnerability:

Beneath us lie the lights of the herring fleet. The cliffs vanish. Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us [...] we may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears. The white petals will be darkened with sea water. They will float for a moment and then sink. Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me. (*TW*, 137)

The feeling of being 'dissolved' that Rhoda experiences shows that, as a human being, she feels profoundly vulnerable to the pressures of life, represented by Percival's death and the sense of anxiety that envelopes her. In Section Eight, the six friends are again united in a dinner scene, this time at Hampton Court, but without Percival now; even though they are all still "middle-aged" (*TW*, 140), they look fragile and tired, as Bernard describes: "We have to leap like fish, high in the air, in order to catch the train from Waterloo. And however high we leap we fall back again into the stream" (*TW*, 144). A sense of being vulnerable dominates even Jinny, usually more positive and energetic than the others, more buoyant: "[W]e have *sunk* to ashes, leaving no

relics, no unburnt bones, no wisps of hair to be kept in locket such as your intimacies leave behind them. Now I turn grey; now I turn gaunt” (TW, 148. My emphasis). For them, their lives seem like being at the mercy of a relentless sea, as Louis describes: “[W]e push off in the tide of the violent and cruel sea” (TW, 155). Near the end of the novel, Bernard shows the vulnerability of the humans through water imagery: “We are swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no shadow. We float, we float” (TW, 172).

The italicised interludes that precede each section of *The Waves* give intensive portrayals of the natural world of a single day that is separated from the time of the action of the novel itself. These interludes, forming the backdrop, or undertow, to the characters’ lives and experience, epitomise the world they inhabit in the scenes’ vivid and shifting descriptions of the seashore, through the process of a single day. Again, nothing is stable in time. The first section, for instance, shows: “*The sun had not yet risen [...] Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other*” (TW, 1). The vivid description of the natural world with all its slow alteration, represented by the sun, the movement of the waves, and the birds, suggests that human life is part of this world, and thus inescapably part of the process of time, and aging. The ‘non-human world’ is a reflection of the human one and, with its processes, it seems to counterpoint what occurs in the human world. In Section Three, just before Percival’s departure to India, the violent and the relentless waves of the sea show the violence of human beings, represented by both the coloniser and the colonised: “*The waves drummed on the shore, like turbaned warriors, like turbaned men with poisoned assegais, who, whirling their arms on high, advance upon the feeding flocks, the white sheep*” (TW, 47-48). A similar image is portrayed in the next section that suggests Percival’s journey to India: “[*T*]he sea which beat like a drum that raises a regiment of plumed and turbaned soldiers” (TW, 71). In Section Five that is related to Percival’s death, the waves with their violent movements show signs of danger that might soon attack the human world: “*The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping*” (TW, 98). Indeed, the motif of the image of the ‘stamping beast’ is sounded at the opening scene of the novel, where Louis voices an image of the chained beast stamping on the shore: “A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps” (TW, 2). At the graduation ceremony, Louis intuits danger in life by imaging the

same sound of the waves: “I hear always the sullen thud of the waves; and the chained beast stamps on the beach. It stamps and stamps” (TW, 36).

The disturbance and agitation that are portrayed in the natural world reflect that of the human mood; in Section Seven, the six friends are presented to be increasingly affected by the loss of Percival; the interlude of this section mirrors the gloomy mood and the sadness of these friends, a mood that is delineated in the slow movements of the waves, a loss of energy: “*The waves no longer visited the further pools or reached the dotted black line which lay irregularly marked upon the beach*” (TW, 120). With this dark image, the birds seem to be disturbed: “*Birds swooped and circled high up in the air. Some raced in the furrows of the wind and turned and sliced through them as if they were one body cut into a thousand shreds*” (TW, 120). The veiling of the sun, the agitated sea, and the gloomy colour of the horizon, all are images which subtly convey the mood of the human characters:

*The sun had now sunk lower in the sky. The islands of cloud had gained in density and drew themselves across the sun so that the rocks went suddenly black, and the trembling sea holly lost its blue and turned silver, and shadows were blown like grey cloths over the sea.* (TW, 120)

The bleak image here reflects what the characters feel in this section; Bernard, for example, still suffers Percival's loss, even though by now it happened years ago: “I think sometimes of Percival who loved me. He rode and fell in India [...] Uneasy cries wake me at dead of night. But for the most part I walk content with my sons” (TW, 127). Louis's gloom at the loss of Percival is increased by being separated from another friend: “Percival died. Rhoda left me. But I shall live to be gaunt and sere, to tap my way, much respected, with my gold-headed cane along the pavements of the city” (TW, 134-135).

While the time-scheme of the interludes is a different one to the characters' lives outlined in the main sections of the text, tracing as it does the passing of one day, one effect of this chronological counterpointing is to diminish the significance of the lives of this one group of individuals: the movement of their whole lives through the years, from childhood to late adulthood, is seen as if it occurs in merely one day. The same sense of the brief duration, and significance, of human lives is echoed by Bernard in the last section: “All these things happen in one second and last for ever” (TW, 160). Woolf ends her novel with “[t]he waves broke on the

*shore*” (TW, 199), an image through which, as Laurie F. Leach suggests, Woolf returns her reader to the voice of the interludes, to remind him/her that in *The Waves* she intends to balance the omniscient voice with the voices of her characters.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, this image stresses the continuity of life that Woolf portrays through the rhythms of the waves, and it also helps Woolf to unify the two worlds together: the wider, universal, natural one of the interludes and the human world of the characters.

### **Time and Process**

The growing insecurity that the characters are aware of is portrayed through the passage of time itself. When they move on to their respective boys’ and girls’ boarding schools, the characters keep responding negatively to time; Rhoda, for instance, still feels that time makes her lose her sense of secure existence, a feeling that ultimately increases her sense of being insecure, a feeling that accompanies her from early childhood: “Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is soft like wax near the flame of the candle” (TW, 27). Like her friend Rhoda, school for Susan is also connected with hatred and depression; Susan also feels the pressure of time: “For how many months [...] for how many years, I have run up these stairs, in the dismal days of winter, in the chilly days of spring?” (TW, 24). Time at school is presented as an enemy that deprives Susan of pleasant things and makes her see herself caged by it, like a prisoner who longs to be released: “So each night I tear off the old day from the calendar, and screw it tight into a ball [...] I revenge myself upon the day. I wreak my spite upon its image. You are dead now, I say, school day, hated day” (TW, 24). Susan has got bored of the rigid routine of life at school that chains her liberty: “They have made all the days of June—this is the twenty-fifth—shiny and orderly, with gongs, with lessons, with orders to wash, to change, to work, to eat” (TW, 24). The rigidity and conformity of the whole educational system in Susan’s school leads her to disdain her life there: she longs to finish her study and counts the days still she can go back home: “There are only eight days left. In eight days’ time I shall get out of the train and stand on the platform at six twenty-five. Then my freedom will be unfurl!” (TW, 33). In spite of being an optimist, Jinny indirectly dreads time; she

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<sup>25</sup> Laurie F. Leach, “The Difficult Business of Intimacy: Friendship and Writing in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*”, *South Central Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Winter, 1990), pp. 53-66, The Johns Hopkins University Press on Behalf of The South Central Modern Language Association.

is from early on acutely aware of the transience of the pleasures that time allows to her; time, she feels is consuming her physical beauty: “I have fifty years, I have sixty years to spend. I have not yet broken into my hoard. This is the beginning” (*TW*, 34). Stressing the beginning of her enjoyment, Jinny here is quite conscious that this beginning will have an end.

Time imagery shows human vulnerability; the characters feel their vulnerability that becomes especially acute after the death of Percival. In Section Six, the ticking of the clock makes Neville feel his aging and vulnerability: “Why, look [...] at the clock ticking on the mantelpiece? Time passes, yes. And we grow old” (*TW*, 117). In Section Seven, Jinny is, again, aware of her vulnerability caused by the fading of her beauty: “How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young. I am no longer part of the procession” (*TW*, 128). The passage of time makes Bernard feel equally fragile and tired: “I am exhausted with the strain and the long, long time—twenty five minutes, half an hour—that I have held myself alone outside the machine” (*TW*, 103). Bernard becomes conscious of his becoming physically older: “I have lost my youth” (*TW*, 122).

### **The Six Characters**

The varieties of the characters that Woolf presents in this novel, by which she intends “to write to a rhythm and not to a plot”, break and sail this way and that way on the waves of life that dominates their lives and feelings. Virginia Woolf presents, for instance, Jinny as being the most social, flighty, and possessing “the most superficial humour” of the group.<sup>26</sup> She is attracted to the ‘concrete world’ of her body through which she strives through the waves of life to gain happiness. In her early childhood, Jinny is attracted by the brightness of a piece of cloth: “I see a crimson tassel [...] twisted with gold threads” (*TW*, 2). What is bright draws Jinny’s attention directly; she feels everything round her to be colourful even the words written on the blackboards: “Those are yellow words, those are fiery words” (*TW*, 10). The innocence of Jinny’s childhood is expressed through a kind of physical contact with Louis, while they are playing, as he himself narrates: “But let me be unseen. I am green as a yew tree in the shade of the hedge

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<sup>26</sup> Hermione Lee, 169.

[...] She has found me. I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me” (*TW*, 5). This action makes “[Jinny’s] heart jum[p] under [...her] pink frock like the leaves, which go on moving” (*TW*, 5); her happiness here is again expressed in images suggestive of the vitality of the sea: “I dance. I ripple. I am thrown over you like a net of light. I lie quivering flung over you” (*TW*, 5).

At the boarding school, Jinny gives importance again to her body and clothes that show her physical beauty; Jinny loves the ornamentation of clothes and she has got to “pic[k] some flower forbiddenly, and stic[k] it behind her ear so that Miss Perry’s dark eyes smoulder with admiration, for [her]” (*TW*, 24). Jinny is not socially sensitive like Susan or Rhoda: “I do not dream” (*TW*, 25); she is sensitive only to the physical world and her body, a sensitivity which is driven from a concrete contact with the actual world that gives her body happiness, energy and vitality: “[W]hen I move my head I ripple all down my narrow body; even my thin legs ripple like a stalk in the wind” (*TW*, 25). Jinny looks at her future as a means of gaining physical pleasure, since it is connected with her physical beauty: “Now, too, the time is coming when we shall leave school and wear long skirts. I shall wear necklaces and a white dress without sleeves at night”. (*TW*, 34).

In the prime of her life, Jinny occupies herself by going to parties and night clubs, which she regards as a good chance for her to show off her physical beauty, to be seen as physically attractive by young men: “Yet night is beginning. I feel myself shining in the dark. Silk is on my knee. My silk legs rub smoothly together. The stones of a necklace lie cold on my throat. My feet feel the pinch of shoes. I sit bolt upright so that my hair may not touch the back of the seat. I am arrayed, I am prepared” (*TW*, 65). Ultimately, though, Jinny is imprisoned in her body, which seems to be her only location and she cannot be out of it: “My body lives a life of its own” (*TW*, 39). She is controlled by her body rather than her mind. Jinny is a representative of one type of the middle-class woman in the post war period that witnessed radical changes in women's lives: “Most of these changes, these new freedoms, applied to women in the broad range of the middle class”.<sup>27</sup> Jinny's liberty leads her to be detached from her family; we have not been informed of Jinny's domestic life, save that she “lives with her grandmother in London” (*TW*, 10), and even this information is given in her early childhood. In her relationships with young men, Jinny does

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<sup>27</sup> John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties: Aspects of Writing, Politics and Culture* (London: Five Leaves, 1997), 69.



not show that she is looking for love or a man to marry and create a family: “But I shall not let myself be attached to one person only” (*TW*, 34). Ultimately, Jinny’s sexual liberation is unsatisfying; what we see is the meaninglessness and emptiness of her life.

Unlike her friend Jinny, Rhoda is presented as being very afraid of life and of its rhythmical growing, afraid of communicating with people and with the world round her. In her childhood, she is presented playing alone with her ‘ships’ and ‘petals’, which she prefers to be white, clean, pure and non-passionate: “All my ships are white [...] I do not want red petals of hollyhocks or geranium. I want white petals that float when I tip the basin up” (*TW*, 9). Rhoda is like her ships, which she prefers to make sail in a very slow movement through ‘icy caverns’, far from being seen by others; she let her ships avoid confronting the high waves: “That is my ship. It sails into icy caverns where the sea-bear barks and stalactites swing green chains. The waves rise [...] my ship [...] mounts the wave and sweeps before the gale and reaches the islands where the parrots chatter and the creepers” (*TW*, 9). Here the description of the narratives Rhoda creates for her ships shows her fear of communication, preferring them to be about hiding in caverns or landing on islands where there are no human beings.

Her anxiety makes her see things round her as dark and gloomy. In one of her lessons in early childhood, Rhoda is presented as living in fear at the pressure of her lesson in class: “Now Miss Hudson [...] has shut the book. Now the terror is beginning. Now taking her lump of chalk she draws figures, six, seven, eight, and then a cross and then a line on the blackboard. What is the answer?” (*TW*, 10-11). In spite of having an imaginative mind, Rhoda’s fear and anxiety prevent her from being creative and active in the class or even thinking of an answer, like her friends. Feeling her vulnerability and looking at herself as being less than the others, Rhoda becomes upset and she loses confidence in herself: “I put off my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny” (*TW*, 15). Such a feeling makes Rhoda detach herself from the real world round her, a world in which she cannot really live, whose adversarial waves she cannot resist; instead she absorbs herself deeply in the ‘world’ of illusions. But even this ‘world’ does not seem to give her the security she needs: “I can think of my Armadas sailing on the high waves. I am relieved of hard contacts and collisions. I sail on alone under white cliffs. Oh, but I sink, I fall!” (*TW*, 15).

Rhoda’s anxiety accompanies her in her boarding school; on the first day there her fear is increased, because she has now to be introduced to people she does not know and to be in touch

with a larger community. Ultimately, Rhoda's anxiety towards the school atmosphere makes her feel that she is nothing: "We shall write our exercises in ink here. But here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity. We are all callous, unfriended" (*TW*, 19). Finding it difficult to communicate with her friends at school, since "[she] ha[s] no face" (*TW*, 25), Rhoda thinks that she does not belong to their world, which is a world of reality and existence: "Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy" (*TW*, 25). This, ultimately makes Rhoda psychologically tired and confused, feeling that she does not have courage to make choices and decisions, and afraid of being criticised by others: "[Susan and Jinny] say Yes, they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second. If they meet a housemaid she looks at them without laughing. But she laughs at me. They know what to say if spoken to" (*TW*, 25). This makes Rhoda resort hopelessly to try to be like Susan and Jinny by "copying what they do" (*TW*, 26), and by learning from them. Rhoda's inner torment caused by her sense of inadequacy leads her to have a split personality, either having a personality within her own self, but very hesitant and not sure of herself, or one who is dependent on others. Again, in this stage of life, Rhoda escapes her reality by resorting to her world of illusion: "I dream; I dream" (*TW*, 27). Hermione Lee points out that "Rhoda's [fearful instability] is an irreconcilable position: she is stretched between an ideal vision of impersonality and serenity, evoked by her imaginary journeys and the satisfaction that she finds in abstract shapes, and the torture of her [life]".<sup>28</sup> It seems that the illusions and dreams Rhoda resorts to are also due to her feeling of the emptiness of her life. Rhoda is isolated even in her family life; the description given to the children at the beginning of the novel shows that each has a father or a family, save Rhoda, who "has no father" (*TW*, 10); she feels that she is isolated and has no one to talk or even to love: "I will pick flowers; I will bind flowers in one garland and clasp them and present them—Oh! to whom? [...] Oh, this is pain, this is anguish! I faint, I fail" (*TW*, 35). Here Rhoda's wish to have someone to give her flowers, shows that she is ready to make communication with others and she needs to do it, but she is terrified to do it. On the first day of her summer holiday, Rhoda does not feel happy to go home like Susan, or very excited to live her life as a young woman like Jinny: "[T]his is the first day of the summer holidays. This is part of the emerging monster to whom we are attached" (*TW*, 41). Rhoda fears life itself as she grows up into it, since she is unable to face its relentless

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<sup>28</sup> Hermione Lee, 174.

waves: “So I detach the summer term. With intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea” (*TW*, 40).

In her maturity, Rhoda seems to fail to get rid of her anxiety and fear of life, a sense that makes her feel that something dangerous might happen and that ultimately makes her unable to be in a direct communication with people; she close in, self-protectively. In the first dinner scene, in which the six friends gather to say farewell to Percival before going to India, Rhoda shows her fear, the absence of security, as Louis describes:

Rhoda comes now [...] She must have made a tortuous course, taking cover now behind a waiter, now behind some ornamental pillar, so as to put off as long as possible the shock of recognition, so as to be secure [...] We wake her. We torture her. She dreads us, she despises us, yet comes cringing to our sides. (*TW*, 78)

Louis is evidently aware of her state of mind but is ultimately helpless to assist her. The sense of insecurity accompanies Rhoda at every time and in every place; she feels the hostility of life: “The tiger leapt, and the swallow dipped her wings in dark pools on the other side of the world” (*TW*, 82).

The death of Percival serves to confirm for Rhoda the truth of her pessimistic view of life; she becomes even more anxious and tired: “Percival, by his death, has made me this present, has revealed this terror, has left me to undergo this humiliation” (*TW*, 105). The growing anxiety tortures Rhoda and creates a feeling of hatred towards everything and everyone; she feels that she is chained by her life: “Oh human beings, how I have hated you! [...] how you chained me to one spot, one hour, one chair, and sat yourselves down opposite!” (*TW*, 135-136). Suffering an internal torture—“Oh, life, how I have dreaded you” (*TW*, 135)—Rhoda puts an end to her suffering by committing suicide: “[S]he had gone; she had killed herself” (*TW*, 188). Rhoda’s death represents “her refusal to strive any longer for continuity, [it is] an embrace of the blank space, a plunging into the gap. It shows directly her traumatic failure”.<sup>29</sup> It also shows her utter lack of herself in the possibility of having a good, secure life: “If I could believe [...] that I should grow old in pursuit and change, I should be rid of my fear: nothing persists” (*TW*, 84).

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<sup>29</sup> Garrett Stewart, “Catching the Stylistic D/rift: Sound Defects in Woolf’s *The Waves*”, *ELH*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Summer, 1987), pp. 421-461, The Johns Hopkins University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2873031>. Accessed: 08/11/2010.

Woolf portrays Rhoda as epitomising an extreme of human anxiety and vulnerability in the post-war world. They were impulses with which Woolf herself was to become ever more immersed.

Another female character Woolf presents in this novel is Susan. Through this character, Woolf embodies a mode of female passivity in the gender conventions of her time, including a notion of the feminine as driven by feelings: “I love [...] and I hate. I desire one thing only” (*TW*, 7). Susan's words here echo those in Woolf's essay “‘Jane Eyre’ and ‘Wuthering Heights’”, written in 1925, in which Woolf describes Charlotte Brontë's characters as being always imprisoned within human feelings: “[Charlotte Brontë] does not attempt to solve the problems of human life; she is even unaware that such problems exist; all her force, and it is the more tremendous for being constricted, goes into the assertion, ‘I love’, ‘I hate’, ‘I suffer’”.<sup>30</sup> Susan is constrained by the atmosphere of her home; she prefers to be an angel in the house; she cannot find herself in the wider world. At her boarding school, Susan reveals her hatred towards the atmosphere of her school, a place that deprives her of enjoying the natural world that she associates with safety and ultimately with stability, and domesticity:

I would bury the whole school: the gymnasium; the classroom; the dining-room that always smells of meat; and the chapel. I would bury the red-brown tiles and the oily portraits of old men—benefactors, founders of schools. There are some trees I like; the cherry tree with lumps of clear gum on the bark; and one view from the attic towards some far hills. Save for these, I would bury it all as I bury these ugly stones that are always scattered about this briny coast, with its piers and its trippers. (*TW*, 26-27)

Susan shows that she is emotionally connected with her family; she dreams of the moment of going back home and seeing her father, a moment at which she will “burst into tears” (*TW*, 33). Susan has chosen to stick to her home in the countryside, where she grows up, since she feels secure in the protective patriarchy: “I sit waiting for my father's footsteps as he shuffles down the passage pinching some herb between his fingers” (*TW*, 64).

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<sup>30</sup> Virginia Woolf, “‘Jane Eyre’ and ‘Wuthering Heights’”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol.IV: 1925-1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1994), 167.

Through Susan, Woolf stresses “the maternal sponge”<sup>31</sup> of the female, who devotes her life to others. Susan prefers to have a home and be an ‘ideal’ wife, showing obedience to her husband, like her mother: “To his one word I shall answer my one word. What has formed in me I shall give him. I shall have children [...] I shall be like my mother, silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards” (*TW*, 64). The possession of a home that she likes to have means that, as Eileen B. Sypher suggests, Susan has no separate identity; her identity is embodied in the security of her home.<sup>32</sup> Having such beliefs, Susan gains the admiration and satisfaction of masculinity, represented by Louis: “Susan, I respect; because she sits stitching. She sews under a quiet lamp in a house” (*TW*, 62), and even the love of Percival.

One of the distinctive male characters that Woolf presents in *The Waves* is Louis. Through this character, Woolf embodies the masculinity that dominates her society, and that Woolf sees as a cause of war. In the opening scene of the novel, Louis, the child, “hears something stamping [...] a great beast's foot is chained” (*TW*, 2). Hermione Lee suggests that “[this] image will be a constant symbol of his insecurity”.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, this image is connected to power or violence, born of that insecurity. Compared to what the other characters see and hear, Louis is the only one among his friends who shows a response to this sound of power and strength, which are the features of masculinity. Playing among the flowers alone in the garden, Louis, the little boy, again emphasises his masculine gender: “I am a boy in grey flannels with a belt fastened by a brass snake up here” (*TW*, 4). Louis is the son of a banker; from the outset, he is part of the world of masculine capitalism. He speaks in a distinctive accent that makes him feel less than his school friends: “Boasting begins. And I cannot boast, for my father is a banker in Brisbane, and I speak with an Australian accent” (*TW*, 17). Rosenthal suggests that this accent makes Louis feel a “social misfit”.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, such feelings make him seek forms of compensation; he tries to overcome his sense of being an outsider in England by being proud of his masculinity and intellectual ability: “I know the lesson by heart. I know more than they will ever know. I know my cases and my genders; I could know everything in the world if I wished” (*TW*, 10). Being very conscious of his surrounding, Louis is selected, by Miss Curry, the tutor, to be the

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<sup>31</sup> Eileen B. Sypher, “*The Waves: A Utopia of Androgyny?*” *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*, eds. Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb (New York: Whitston, 1983), 189.

<sup>32</sup> Sypher, 198.

<sup>33</sup> Hermione Lee, 165.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf*, (New York: New York U. P., 1979), 150.

'commander' having the duty to lead his friends in the jungle; as Susan narrates: "We must form into pairs, [...] and walk in order, not shuffling our feet, not lagging, with Louis going first to lead us, because Louis is alert and not a wool-gatherer" (*TW*, 12-13).

A sense of masculinity is obviously seen at school through the character of some teachers and the reaction of Louis towards them. The bulkiness, order and authoritative power of Dr. Crane, which are similar to that of military men, and which are rejected by most of the boys, draw Louis's attention and gain his admiration. Hence, Louis sits in the chapel listening to Dr. Crane's reading of the Bible, itself representing an underlying sense of authority, values and order:

Now we march, two by two [...] orderly, processional, into chapel. I like the dimness that falls as we enter the sacred building. I like the orderly progress. We file in; we seat ourselves [...] Dr. Crane mounts the pulpit and reads the lesson from a Bible spread on the back of the brass eagle. I rejoice; my heart expands in his bulk, in his authority (*TW*, 19-20)

Louis responds to all that Dr. Crane represents, moving towards a sense of security lacking in virtually all of the other characters:

Now all is laid by his authority, his crucifix, and I feel come over me the sense of the earth under me, and my roots going down and down till they warp themselves round some hardness at the centre. I recover my continuity, as he reads. I become a figure in the procession, a spoke in the huge wheel that turning, at least erects me, here and now. (*TW*, 20)

At the graduation ceremony, Louis starts thinking of his future, and he wishes to be immortalised as a war figure or a statesman, like the names engraved on the walls of his school: "These stone flags have been worn for six hundred years. On these walls are inscribed the names of men of war, of statesmen, of some unhappy poets (mine shall be among them)" (*TW*, 36). In addition to that, Louis shows a dogged masculine nature that loves the traditional views of heroism and leaderships that impose their power on the human individual: "Blessing be on all traditions, on all safeguards and circumscriptions! I am most grateful to you men in black gowns, and you, dead, for your leading, for your guardianship" (*TW*, 36).

The masculine desire to obtain power grows stronger in Louis, who does not go up to a university like his friends, but prefers to "go vaguely, to make money vaguely" (*TW*, 41). This

desire motivates him to be a businessman, a man of material and commercial power. Louis looks forward to having a dominating position in his work like that of his boss, which is a power that controls the whole world; economic power is imperial and political power:

I like to be asked to come to Mr. Burchard's private room and report on our commitments to China. I hope to inherit an arm-chair and a Turkey carpet. My shoulder is to the wheel; I roll the dark before me, spreading commerce where there was chaos in the far parts of the world. If I press on, from chaos making order, I shall find myself where Chatham stood, and Pitt, Burke and Sir Robert Peel. (*TW*, 110-111)

Bernard is rather a different sort of male figure. Tracing the description given to Bernard and his speech reveals that Bernard is a representative of Bloomsbury values. He is portrayed as being different from his friends; from early childhood, Bernard attracts his friends with his imaginative and creative mind. In the scene at Elvedon forest, where he is seen as a child with Susan, Bernard's mind help him to draw imaginative pictures; in his eyes the wood is transformed into an Eastern jungle, where he imagines "an elephant white with maggots, killed by an arrow shot dead in its eyes" (*TW*, 12). Then, he also imagines another image of "[t]he bright eyes of hopping birds—eagles, vultures—are apparent. They take us for fallen trees. They pick at a worm—that is a hooded cobra—and leave it with a festering brown scar to be mauled by lions" (*TW*, 12). At school, Bernard distances himself from the 'boasting boys', whom most of boys look at with admiration; he does not play cricket with them, a game that shows physical talents, and instead he engages himself in tracing truths or dilemmas in the world round him: "He is prevented by his incorrigible moodiness from going with them. He stops [...] to say, 'There is a fly in that web. Shall I rescue that fly; shall I let the spider eat it?'" (*TW*, 29). Compared to his friends, "Bernard is the most worldly, domestic and articulate of the voices".<sup>35</sup> Bernard is the story-teller and the one who communicates with people by his artistic ability to seek out truths. On the first day of the summer holiday, Bernard takes the train home with his friends; unlike Louis and Neville, who "both sit silent [...] and] feel the presence of other people as a separating wall" (*TW*, 42), Bernard breaks this wall of being isolated by "talk[ing] images and images" (*TW*, 54). He creates a series of stories about the people he meets:

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<sup>35</sup> Hermione Lee, 178.

But if I find myself in company with other people, words at once make smoke rings—see how phrases at once begin to wreath off my lips. It seems that a match is set to a fire; something burns [...] I fill my mind with whatever happens to be the contents of a room or a railway carriage as one fills a fountain-pen in an inkpot. (*TW*, 42-43)

Bernard interacts with his surroundings; his artistic mind helps him to weave a story about “[a]n elderly and apparently prosperous man, a traveller, now [who] gets in” (*TW*, 42), whom Bernard calls Walter J. Trumble. Bernard concentrates on telling truths even in the stories he composes: “What is my story? [...] That is the truth; that is the fact, but beyond it all is darkness and conjecture” (*TW*, 93-94). Angelica Garnett, Woolf’s niece and herself a younger member of the Bloomsbury circle, suggests that “Bernard is the most sympathetic, intelligent and human of the characters”.<sup>36</sup> His stories are an imaginative transformation of real life; he constructs a version of reality, one which unlike the actuality which he and his friends inhabit, is meaningful not arbitrary, *shaped* by his humanity. For instance, the story he constructs in the train related to Trumble is a human story that is derived from life:

He is indulgent as a husband but not faithful; a small builder who employs a few men. In local society he is important; is already a councillor, and perhaps in the time will be mayor. He wears a large ornament, like a double tooth torn up by the roots, made of coral, hanging at his watch-chain. (*TW*, 43)

Bernard’s carefully woven story recalls Woolf’s story narrated in her essay “Character in Fiction”, written in 1924, in which Woolf’s artistic mind helps her to create a story about a woman she supposedly met in the train on her way going from Richmond to Waterloo:

I was late for the train and jumped into the first carriage I came to. As I sat down I had the strange and uncomfortable feeling that I was interrupting a conversation between two people who were already sitting there [...] They were both elderly, the woman over sixty, the man well over forty [...] The elderly lady, however, whom I will call Mrs. Brown, seemed rather relieved. She was one of those clean, threadbare old ladies whose extreme tidiness [...] suggests more extreme poverty than rags and dirt [...] Then I looked at the man [...] He was a man of business I imagined, very

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<sup>36</sup> Angelica Garnett, Introduction, *The Waves* (London: Hogarth, 1990), xiv.



likely a respectable corn-chandler from the North, dressed in good blue serge with a pocket-knife and a silk handkerchief, and a stout leather bag.<sup>37</sup>

Depicting the character of Mrs. Brown, Woolf wants to emphasise the truths of feeling and inner thought rather than the supposed reality of the British Empire or the socio-economic conventions of the contemporary capitalist world; as Woolf herself says: “I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel”.<sup>38</sup> Unlike his friend Louis, Bernard goes up to a university, where his literary talent is improved: “I tend to see the thin places in my own stories. The real novelist, the perfectly simple human being, could go on, indefinitely, imagining” (*TW*, 51). In his narration, Bernard is the only one who narrates things, like an author, who tries to convey his ideas to his readers: “Bernard possesse[s] the logical sobriety of a man” (*TW*, 48). As a writer, Bernard represents Bloomsbury itself:

Thus there is not one person but fifty people whom I want to sit beside to-night. But I am the only one of you who is at home here without taking liberties. I am not gross; I am not a snob. If I lie open to the pressure of society I often succeed with the dexterity of my tongue in putting something difficult into the currency. (*TW*, 87)

Moreover, Bernard’s meeting with his friends, at Hampton Court in the restaurant, gives the reader an impression that the meeting is similar to a meeting of Bloomsbury friends and discussions about different issues: “We have proved sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments [...] We are creators” (*TW*, 95-96).

The most sensitive and romantic character among the males friends is Neville. In the novel's opening scene, all his friends describe things they have seen and hear, while Neville shows response to the beauty of the natural world: “The birds' eyes are bright in the tunnels between the leaves” (*TW*, 2), and he feels that “[s]tones are cold to [...his] feet” (*TW*, 3). Unlike Bernard, Neville does not engage himself in investigating truths by observing things round him: “I hate wandering and mixing things together” (*TW*, 9). He carefully seeks to find order in his world:

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<sup>37</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Character in Fiction”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. III: 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1988), 423.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 425.

“There is an order in this world; there are distinctions, there are differences in this world, upon whose verge I step” (*TW*, 10). Neville seems physically delicate. In a scene from early childhood, all the friends walk to the Jungle with Miss Curry, save Neville who seems “to be too delicate to go with them [... and gets] so easily tired [and...] sick” (*TW*, 13). At school, Neville's physical lack prevents him from playing crickets with Percival and the other friends, a lack that makes Percival “despise [...him] for being too weak to play” (*TW*, 29).

From his boyhood, Neville shows interest in arts and literature. The school's library is the first thing that draws his attention on his first day there: “[A]nd that a library, where I shall explore the exactitude of the Latin language, and step firmly upon the well-laid sentences, and pronounce the explicit, the sonorous hexameters of Virgil, of Lucretius” (*TW*, 18). He interestingly listens to Bernard's stories: “Bernard's stories amuse me” (*TW*, 31).

Neville is obsessed with male beauty. At school he seems so enchanted by Percival's beauty: “But now he is young. Not a thread, not a sheet of paper lies between him and the sun, between him and the rain, between him and the moon as he lies naked” (*TW*, 29). Being sensitive and passionately in love with Percival, Neville finds it difficult to reveal his passion in front of his other friends: “I cannot talk to him [Bernard] of Percival [...] To whom can I expose the urgency of my own passion? Louis is too cold” (*TW*, 31). Neville prefers to express his emotions towards Percival through poetry: “I shall send him poems and he will perhaps reply with a picture post card. But it is for that I love him” (*TW*, 37). At university, Neville's talent to write poetry improves, as he himself feels: “I am a great poet” (*TW*, 52); again in his artistic tastes and in his sexual orientation, Neville seems to share something of Bloomsbury, but he remains a more marginal, and less confident, figure than Bernard, the novelist. And the depth of his feelings for Percival makes the impact on him of Percival's death all the more profound. After the death of Percival, Neville feels painfully alone: “From this moment I am solitary. No one will know me now” (*TW*, 99). Being devoted to Percival, Neville isolates himself; he does not marry, and he does not even contact his friends, save on the occasion of the gathering at Hampton Court. The loss of Percival increases his weaknesses and makes him feel the hostility of the world: “I am ugly, I am weak—and the depravity of the world, and the flight of youth and Percival's death, and bitterness and rancour and envies innumerable” (*TW*, 119).

The delicate intimate relationships between these six friends became less strong in their maturity, as life engulfs them with its difficulties, and circumstances create distance between them. At the same time the subtle inter-play of the characters is never lost. Their friendships remain tenuous connections as the tides of life flow around them. The differences between the characters which we have outlined give a sense of the varieties and texture of human life, in a world in which all of the characters confront a post-war world which is uncertain, in which all in their different ways struggle. It is a place, again, in which none of them find their values to be securely endorsed, a world in which the one figure in whom they, however irrationally, place some faith that is arbitrarily swept aside.

### **Percival's Heroism**

Most of the events of *The Waves* occur during 1920s, a period of constant struggle in the colonies of the Empire. In India the struggle for independence reached one of its climaxes in the years after the First World War, with widespread demonstrations, and ultimately violence. Characteristically, Indian demonstrations were met by British attempts at restraint. The worst episode occurred in Amritsar in April 1919, when troops under General Dyer opened fire on a large but peaceful demonstration at the Jallianwala Bagh garden, resulting in the death (according to some estimates) of 370 Indians, with a further 1200 demonstrators being wounded.<sup>39</sup> The Government of India Act of 1919 deferred the granting of responsible government till the Act of 1935.<sup>40</sup> In 1924, during this period of constant tension, Woolf considers the problems of the British colonies in her essay “Thunder at Wembley”, which she wrote on the occasion of the British Empire Exhibition:

The wind is rising and shuffling along the avenues; the Massed Bands of Empire are assembling and marching to the Stadium. Men like pin-cushions, men like pouter pigeons, men like pillar-boxes, pass in procession. Dust swirls after them. Admirably impassive, the bands of Empire march on. Soon they will have entered the fortress; soon the gates will have changed. But let them hasten! For either the sky has misread her directions, or some appalling catastrophe is impending [...]

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<sup>39</sup> See Douglas M. Peers, “State, Power and Colonialism”, *India and the British Empire*, eds. Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2012), 27. See also *The British Raj in India: A Historical Review*, S. M. Burke and Salim Al-Din Quraishi (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1995), 205-208.

<sup>40</sup> Whitworth, 34.

Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates.<sup>41</sup>

Woolf is aware of the change that might engulf the Empire, a change that she hints at through the images of agitation in the natural world that she describes here; such a change might bring with it rebellions and insecurity to the colonies. The uneasiness in the colonies of the Empire in the post-war period, especially the instability in India, is referred to in *The Waves*. Through the character of Percival Woolf engages the concept of heroism that stimulates this young man to be involved in war, specifically the rebellious struggle in India in the post war-period.

Percival, the friend of the six main characters, is the companion of the boys both at school and university. He is the most admired and influential person among his friends. At their boarding school, all his friends are influenced by him and they spontaneously imitate him: “[H]e flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a life-time. Dalton, Jones, Edgar and Bateman flick their hands to the backs of their necks likewise. But they do not succeed” (*TW*, 21); when Percival is caught by a certain feeling, all the group responds to his feeling, as Neville describes: “He feels bored; I too feel bored. Bernard at once perceives that we are bored” (*TW*, 22). All eyes focus on Percival in admiration and how he behaves, even if he does something childish, as Neville narrates: “But now he has rolled himself over in the long grass. He is, I think, chewing a stalk between his teeth” (*TW*, 22).

Percival seems to dominate his friends; he is not only a friend to them but increasingly their leader, certainly the dominant figure. Neville describes him as a “giant” (*TW*, 52). Louis regards him as a mediaeval knight: “Look now, how everybody follows Percival [...] His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind him” (*TW*, 21-22). Even though Percival invokes Louis's jealousy, the latter confesses that he not only admires Percival but he “adore[s] his magnificence” (*TW*, 22); for him “Percival [...] inspires poetry” (*TW*, 23). Trying to encourage himself to show his essay to his teacher at school, Louis sees himself as less than Percival: “I resent the power of Percival” (*TW*, 23).

We are never taken inside Percival's consciousness, however. Thus, he remains a somewhat shadowy presence at the centre of the novel, constructed by the admiring eyes of his six friends.

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<sup>41</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Thunder at Wembley”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III: 1919-1924*, 413.

Nor, for all their feelings towards him, is he only *their* friend; he has friends beyond their circle, boys who are quite unlike them but who appeal to aspects of Percival's character which are duly recognised, aspects we realise which contribute towards the construction of his heroism. They are also aspects which reveal Woolf's ambivalence about the nature of (male) heroism. At school, Percival's friends are described by Louis as "boasting boys" (*TW*, 28), who lack rationality. Michael Whitworth describes the world of the boasting boys as being connected to 'fear and sadism', especially in the eyes of other boys like Louis:<sup>42</sup> "They make little boys sob in dark passages. They have big red ears that stand out under their caps" (*TW*, 28). Even though the 'boasting boys' show unpleasant behaviour that is connected with the boisterousness and asperity of immature young men who want to feel, and demonstrate, their manliness, they are admired by most of boys, who look at them as being "charismatic leaders".<sup>43</sup> Even Louis keeps showing his admiration for them and he even wishes to be one of them: "How majestic is their order, how beautiful is their obedience! If I could follow, if I could be with them, I would sacrifice all I know" (*TW*, 28). Neville also watches them with increasing admiration, as Louis indicates: "Yet that is what we wish to be, Neville and I. I watch them go with envy" (*TW*, 28). It seems that most of those boys belong to the upper classes: "Archie and Hugh; Parker and Dalton; Larpent and Smith; [...] the names repeat themselves; the names are the same always" (*TW*, 28). The repetition of these names indicates that a small number of families have achieved an almost hereditary hold on the school, and ultimately on national institutions.<sup>44</sup> The description given for these boys also shows "the militaristic life of the school" that makes them behave like soldiers in a military regiment rather than students in a school.<sup>45</sup> In the eyes of Louis, the boasting boys "are always forming into fours and marching in troops with badges on their caps; they salute simultaneously passing the figure of their general" (*TW*, 28). Already the sorts of values with which Percival is being associated are seen in militaristic terms.

In the prime of his youth, Percival is seen as an "ideal" person in the eyes of his friends.<sup>46</sup> He represents the friends' hope, and he contributes towards keeping them united. After his graduation from university, Percival makes up his mind to go to India to work for the colonial

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<sup>42</sup> Whitworth, 159.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>46</sup> Garnett, xiv.

government; for this occasion, the friends gather to dine with him. Waiting for Percival in a restaurant, the friends seem very eager to see him; interestingly they are caught by a sense of unreality that recalls, again, echoes of Sigmund Freud's essay of 1919, "The Uncanny" present in Woolf's novels discussed previously. This sensation, seemingly shared by several of the friends, is perhaps a measure of how much emotional investment they have in Percival, albeit they perhaps are not fully aware of it. As such, they sense it as a resonant, highly significant occasion. Neville, who has come "ten minutes before the time in order to taste every moment of anticipation; to see the door open and say, 'Is it Percival?'" (TW, 76), sees things round him as being unreal and uncertain: "Already the room, with its swing-doors, its tables heaped with fruit, with cold joints, wears the wavering, *unreal* appearance of a place where one waits expecting something to happen. Things quiver as if not yet in being" (TW, 77. My emphasis). The familiar world of the restaurant becomes unfamiliar and insecure to him; other people in the restaurant, unaware of the significance of the occasion, seem hostile strangers to Neville, who feels detached from his world: "The hostility, the indifference of other people dining here is oppressive [...] I feel the whole cruelty and indifference of the world in them" (TW, 77). Ultimately, everything round him seems uncertain: "[S]o that things have lost their normal uses—this knife-blade is only a flash of light, not a thing to cut with. The normal is abolished (TW, 77). Some of them are unsettled by the occasion; Susan, for example, usually at home with her rural family, sees the present world as being unreal: "But from one attic there was a blue view, a distant view of a field unstained by the corruption of this regimented *unreal* existence" (TW, 81. My emphasis). They feel that "without Percival there is no solidity" (TW, 79); therefore, his arrival gives them hope and comfort. Neville feels a new sense of order in his life when he sees Percival: "Now [...] my tree flowers. My heart rises. All oppression is relieved. All impediment is removed. The reign of chaos is over. He has imposed order" (TW, 79). Percival who "takes his seat by Susan, whom he loves" (TW, 80) is still associated with greatness, as Bernard indicates: "The occasion is crowned" (TW, 80). Obviously, the presence of Percival gives the friends intimacy and emotional support: "[S]itting together here we love each other and believe in our endurance" (TW, 80). They feel that they are protected by Percival— "We are all walled in here" (TW, 88)—sharing in his presence a renewed sense of harmony in their usually discordant world; Bernard comments: "We are drawn into this communion by some deep, some

common emotion. Shall we call it, conveniently, 'love'? Shall we say 'love of Percival' because Percival is going to India?" (TW, 82).

Even at this stage of life—his maturity—Percival is still seen in the eyes of his friends almost as a mediaeval knight, “conventional [and...] a hero” (TW, 80). Percival becomes an emblematic figure to his friends; they look at him as having the quality of a military leader; with him the friends feel proud and confident: “We [...] assume the sober and confident air of soldiers in the presence of their captain” (TW, 80). For the ever-anxious Rhoda, Percival is full of the courage and firmness of a warrior: “[H]e is like a stone fallen into a pond round which minnows swarm Like minnows, we who had been shooting this way, that way, all shot round him when he came” (TW, 89). Moreover, Rhoda considers Percival as a medieval knight: “Percival, riding alone on a flea-bitten mare, advances down a solitary path, has his camp pitched among desolate trees, and sits alone, looking at the enormous mountains” (TW, 89). The same image of a mediaeval knight riding his mare with which Percival is associated is also portrayed in Bernard's description of Percival: “Percival advances; Percival rides a flea-bitten mare, and wears a sun helmet” (TW, 89). Like her friends, Jinny also sees Percival as a knight who has all the features of vitality and youth: “[T]his globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty” (TW, 95). At the same time the reader registers that 'flea-bitten mare', which is less than heroic. The reference is to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, in which in Part II, Ch. xvi, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza meet a gentleman "mounted on a very handsome flea-bitten mare"; he joins them and his 'flea-bitten mare' is mentioned again in the following chapter. While the mare is not in fact the mount of Don Quixote himself—was Woolf misremembering?—the allusion to Quixote clearly suggests that Woolf is hinting at the impossibility of heroism in an unheroic, post-chivalric world, as is the case of Cervantes' hero; the reference is meant as a qualification, even a subversion, of Percival's heroism.<sup>47</sup> Given that the image is ostensibly created by two of the characters, perhaps it suggests something of their own underlying (but not consciously acknowledged) sense of the vulnerability and fragility of the hero they have created. While Percival might be as well-meaning as Don Quixote, the age of knightly heroism is gone—it had died on the Western Front, if not before—and, at some level, they are aware of it, however much they need it.

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<sup>47</sup> Cervantes, Miguel De. *Don Quixote*. [www.on-line-literature.com/cervantes/don\\_quixote/75](http://www.on-line-literature.com/cervantes/don_quixote/75).

However, while horse-riding in colonial India, we are bleakly told, “Percival fell; was killed” (*TW*, 99). Being informed of the death of Percival, the friends are overwhelmed by sorrow and grief; they feel the loss of hope and the possibility of security. Neville sees darkness enveloping the whole world: “The lights of the world have gone out” (*TW*, 98). He feels that Percival's death implicates others, besides himself, in a new sense of vulnerability: “Percival fell; was killed; is buried; and I watch people passing; holding tight to the rails of omnibuses; determined to save their lives” (*TW*, 99). The death of Percival makes Neville feel detached from all his world: “My past is cut from him” (*TW*, 99). Bernard also has the same feeling of being detached from his world: “I have no part, since he [Percival] sees it [the world] no longer” (*TW*, 100). Wandering on Oxford Street, Rhoda, whose anxiety is increased by Percival's death, cannot stop herself thinking of him and feel the need of protection: “Look at the street now that Percival is dead [...] I am alone in a hostile world” (*TW*, 104). The friends' feelings are coloured once more by a sense of unreality. Neville sees the familiar places to him as being unfamiliar and unreal: “Barns and summer days in the country, rooms where we sat—all now lie in the unreal world which is gone” (*TW*, 99). Near the end of the novel, Bernard sums up his life with his friends and the whole series of events that are presented in this novel, and when he comes to narrate things related to the second meeting of the friends at Hampton Court, in which they acutely feel the dead Percival's absence, he sees that occasion as also being unreal: “We became six people at a table in Hampton Court. We rose and walked together down the avenue. In the thin, the unreal twilight, fitfully like the echo of voices laughing down some alley, geniality returned to me and flesh” (*TW*, 186).

The death of Percival, this young man, represents the loss of other young men, who had shown enthusiasm and youthful potential, one in particular. Reading *The Waves*, Vanessa Bell found that her sister has succeeded in constructing a “lullaby capable of singing [...their brother, Thoby] to rest”.<sup>48</sup> Gillian Beer also agrees that *The Waves* sounds “elegiac” tones that mourn the loss of Thoby, and his generation.<sup>49</sup> However, and more directly relevant to the present discussion, through the death of Percival, who “[is] twenty-five and should have lived to be eighty” (*TW*, 101), Woolf does not *only* recall the loss of Thoby, but also a whole young generation who died in the prime of life. Though Percival does not die in battle, in a sense his

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<sup>48</sup> See Angelica Garnett, Introduction, viii.

<sup>49</sup> Gillian Beer, ed., Introduction, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1992), xxix.



arbitrary, accidental death is even more meaningless, a measure of life's indifference—Percival is portrayed as another of those lost young men like Septimus Smith, Jacob Flanders, Andrew Ramsay and millions of young men who died in (as Woolf sees it) the arbitrary, casual violence of the First World War. The death of Percival is explicitly seen by Bernard as being a loss of the future: “[Y]ou have lost something that would have been very valuable to you. You have lost a leader whom you would have followed; and one of you has lost happiness and children” (*TW*, 100). Bernard believes that Percival should be saluted as a soldier, who sacrifices his life: “You would have had to form up and follow behind him” (*TW*, 101). In fact Bernard in his grief explicitly extends his awareness and sympathy to all others who have experienced such loss; in 1931 the reference would still not have needed to be spelt out: “How shall I break up this numbness which discredits my sympathetic heart? There are others suffering—multitudes of people suffering” (*TW*, 103). Even Louis connects Percival’s death with the death of young men in the war: “Percival has died (he died in Egypt; he died in Greece; all deaths are one death)” (*TW*, 112). Again Woolf here surely hints at the death of young men who died in military service in the war, like Rupert Brooke who died in Greece, or those who died young like her brother Thoby, who contracted typhoid on a holiday in Greece and died shortly after he was brought back to England. Like her friends, Jinny also looks at Percival's death as a loss of young men crushed in the wheels of history and most recently in the war: “Millions descend those stairs in a terrible descent. Great wheels churn inexorably urging them downwards. Millions have died. Percival died” (*TW*, 128). Percival's death shows the futility of the idealised nature of human heroism. Indeed Percival is a victim of a notion of heroism that is inherited from an age which has passed. Percival, who is compared by his friends to “a lily” (*TW*, 177) is innocent, and naive.<sup>50</sup> He belongs to a generation that is deceived by things they learned from boyhood at school, or their society, like a sense of militarism, heroism and sacrifice. And when he dies his friends are left with an absence which echoes that which faced the relatives of those who died on the Western Front and were buried there, an absence which does not allow for the closure of a funeral amongst those who loved them but remains an aching memory, as Bernard's words reflect: “We have no ceremonies, only private dirges and no conclusions, only violent sensations, each separate” (*TW*, 103).

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<sup>50</sup> The Greek myth connects lily with Hera, the Greek goddess of purity and innocence. In Christian art the lily is also a symbol of chastity, innocence and purity. See Ivor H. Evans, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Fourteenth edition (London: Cassell, 1989), 663.

## Woolf's Percival and Strachey's Gordon

Virginia Woolf's presentation of Percival, especially given the undertow derived from the allusion to *Don Quixote*, might be seen as a response to Lytton Strachey's portrayal of that archetypal imperial hero of General Gordon, in *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918. Reading the first draft essay of *Eminent Victorians*, Virginia Woolf expresses her admiration in a letter to Lytton Strachey written in 1915, encouraging him to write a complete series: "I have seldom enjoyed myself more than I did last night, reading Manning [...] It is far the best thing you have ever written, I believe [...] I command you to complete a whole series: you can't think how I enjoy your writing".<sup>51</sup> After reading the section on "The End of General Gordon", Woolf sent Strachey another letter describing it to be 'masterly and amazing': "Gordon, as I knew [...] I thought him masterly—indeed, it's amazing how from all these complications you contrive to reel off such a straight and dashing story" (*LII*, 205). There is no doubt that part of Strachey's approach in his studies of Victorian heroes was rooted in an impulse to subvert the whole idealising value system by which such heroes were constructed, the ideals on which the propaganda which drew so many young men to the Western Front had been based. Strachey sees these eminent public figures of the pre-war generation not with reverence but sees them directly as human beings—albeit exceptional human beings—with flaws. When he was engaged in writing the last part of his book—"The End of General Gordon"—on 28 December 1917, Strachey wrote a letter to Virginia Woolf commenting on the character of this General:

My only criticism, which I ought to hesitate to give until a second reading, is that I'm not sure whether the character of Gordon altogether "convinces". I felt a little difficulty in bridging the gulfs, but I rather think this is inevitable from the method, which flashes light and dark this side and that—and then the crowd of facts to be found room for—and so perhaps one can't get that shifting and muddling which produces atmosphere.<sup>52</sup>

The 'light and dark' and the various aspects of Gordon's character, which Strachey here refers to, indeed shows his scepticism towards heroism, especially military heroism. The success of Strachey's book shows how he caught the post-war mood and attitudes that were against such

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<sup>51</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey: Letters*, eds. Leonard Woolf and James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1956), 52.

<sup>52</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey: Letters*, 68.

artificial values. Telling truth is also Woolf's aim; Woolf herself focuses on this matter in her essay "Character in Fiction", written in 1924, in which she says: "We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition".<sup>53</sup> Significantly, in the same essay, Woolf praises Strachey's achievements, especially *Eminent Victorians*, that show his negative attitudes towards the First World War; she describes it as telling truths or 'facts' that stand against the prevailing public attitudes during the war itself:

[I]n Mr. Strachey's books, *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*, the effort and strain of writing against the grain and current of the times is visible too. It is much less visible, of course, for not only is he dealing with facts, which are stubborn things, but he has fabricated, chiefly from eighteenth-century material, a very discreet code of manners of his own.<sup>54</sup>

This shows that Woolf and Strachey were really engaged with telling facts related to conformity to social codes, codes which led ultimately to the war and revealing it as an evil that led to the death of millions of young men. Accordingly, we might argue that Woolf was stimulated to present the character of Percival in some ways like Strachey's flawed heroes, especially General Gordon. If Strachey mocks at the heroism of the nineteenth century, Woolf criticises heroic action through Percival, whose very name echoes the heroic Arthurian mythical figure.

In describing the outlook of General Gordon, Strachey delineates him as an ordinary man, who is not an icon, and does not have the features of a hero:

His unassuming figure, short and slight, with its half-gliding, half-tripping motion, gave him a boyish aspect, which contrasted, oddly, but not unpleasantly, with the touch of grey on his hair and whiskers [...] the large blue eyes, with their look of almost childish sincerity.<sup>55</sup>

Strachey's portrayal of the youthful Gordon reveals that he had shown no sign of heroic behaviour. Rather, in his occasional indiscipline there is a mixture of immaturity and rashness that is not appropriate for a young officer, as Strachey puts it:

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<sup>53</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Character in Fiction", 435.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 435.

<sup>55</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), 223. Hereafter references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *EV*.

As a boy, Charlie was remarkable for his high spirits, pluck, and love of mischief. Destined for the Artillery, he was sent to the Academy at Woolwich, where some other characteristics made their appearance. On one occasion, when the cadets had been forbidden to leave the dining-room and the senior corporal stood with outstretched arms in the door-way to prevent their exit, Charlie Gordon put his head down, and, butting the officer in the pit of the stomach, projected him down a flight of stairs and through a glass door at the bottom. For this act of insubordination he was nearly dismissed; while the captain of his company predicted that he would never make an officer. (*EV*, 224-225)

Lytton Strachey's presentation of General Gordon depicts him as, beneath the public image, an ultimately unheroic figure. Strachey presents Gordon to be easily influenced by others, especially his sister, rather than having influence on them. Gordon's personality is portrayed as a volatile one that shows the hollowness of this heroic figure: "He was sent to Pembroke, to work at the erection of fortifications [...] Under the influence of his sister Augusta and of a 'very religious captain of the name of Drew', he began to reflect upon his sins, look up texts, and hope for salvation. Though he had never been confirmed—he never *was* [*sic*] confirmed" (*EV*, 225). Strachey further undermines Gordon's heroism by associating him with physical power and violence, even bullying: "[W]hen [Gordon] was eighteen, it came to the knowledge of the authorities that bullying was rife at the Academy. The new-comers were questioned, and one of them said that Charlie Gordon had hit him over the head with a clothes-brush" (*EV*, 225). The power of Gordon to be involved in a controversy is increasingly satirised by Strachey, who presents him as being vain and supercilious. In 1880s, "[Gordon] accepted the Private Secretaryship to Lord Ripon, the new Viceroy of India, and, three days after his arrival at Bombay, he resigned" (*EV*, 244); Strachey depicts Gordon's sense of his own heroic self to be the reason behind his resignation: "He confessed to Lord William that the world was not big enough for him, that there was 'no king or country big enough'; and then he added, hitting him on the shoulder, 'Yes, that is flesh, that is what I hate, and what makes me wish to die'" (*EV*, 245).

Dealing with the spiritual or religious 'world' of Gordon, Strachey mocks at this figurative hero. Gordon, who has been seen as a religious man by the public, is shown as being accompanied by "an open Bible and an open bottle of brandy" (*EV*, 240), behaviour which is, Strachey suggests

less than unambiguously virtuous. Strachey also paints Gordon as a man, who disdains social interaction and civility: “[H]is soul revolted against dinner-parties and stiff shirts; and the presence of ladies—especially of fashionable ladies—filled him with uneasiness” (*EV*, 233). Michael Holroyd suggests that Strachey here presents Gordon as “a wild man, contemptuous not just of sophisticated parties but of all civilisation”.<sup>56</sup> By doing so, Strachey concentrates on presenting Gordon as being not gentle; he knows nothing, just his ‘masculine world’ which is of power and action.

In 1884, Gordon was made Governor-General of Sudan, one of the African colonial countries, where he faced his death in terms that came to epitomise Victorian heroism. It is this iconic image of calm heroic behaviour that is recorded in the “Last Stand” painting by William Joy, which Strachey responded to. Accordingly, Strachey mocks at the supposed greatness and heroism of Gordon that the portrayal itself reflects; Strachey suggests that Gordon's actions, even at the end, were very much concerned with reputation: “More than one observer declared that ambition was, in reality, the essential motive in his life—ambition, neither for wealth nor titles, but for fame and influence” (*EV*, 237). The death of Gordon is narrated in a way that presents this military leader as depending on concrete military power only. Gordon is besieged in Khartoum by his enemy, stayed there awaiting the help of the military troops that were to be sent from Britain:

There were moments when terrible misgivings assailed him. He pieced together his scraps of intelligence with feverish exactitude; he calculated times, distances, marches; ‘if,’ he wrote on October 24<sup>th</sup>, ‘they do not come before 30<sup>th</sup> November, the game is up, and Rule Britannia.’ Curious premonitions came into his mind. (*EV*, 303)

Finding no other way to escape the danger of his enemy, Gordon waited anxiously for the arrival of the expedition; Gordon's unheroic impatience is dully recorded by Strachey, who notes the reaction of men round him to his bad temper: “His temper, indeed, was growing more and more uncertain, as he himself was well aware. He observed with horror that men trembled when they came into his presence—that their hands shook so that they could not hold a match to a cigarette” (*EV*, 305). Strachey even challenges the supposedly heroic endurance of Gordon under

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography, Volume II: The Years of Achievements (1910-1932)* (London: Heinemann, 1968), 307.

siege, pointing out the fact that it was others who were suffering: “The town was now closely surrounded, and every chance of obtaining fresh supplies was cut off. The famine became terrible [...] Hundreds died of hunger daily: their corpses filled the streets; and that the survivors had not the strength to bury the dead” (*EV*, 314). Strachey here shows the egotism of Gordon whose ‘ambitious’ nature leads him to gain triumph without thinking of the results. His refusal to surrender to his enemy, or at least to think of compromise or negotiation with them, causes a human tragic disaster, a disaster that reflects the merciless heart of Gordon, who ignores the suffering of the whole city: “Go, tell all the people in Khartoum that Gordon fears nothing, for God has created him without fear” (*EV*, 313). Through Gordon's words here, Strachey stresses the absence of humanity in Gordon's narrow religious faith; Gordon does not listen to the voice of reason and he insists on being a hero who fears nothing and struggles with death itself. His immortality and glory have been achieved by ignoring the misery and suffering of the colonised people and even of his soldiers; this is the message Strachey conveys to his reader.

Like Strachey, Woolf ultimately and subtly satirises Percival rather than glorifying him. Although he is admired by his friends, Percival is neither shown as being handsome nor especially heroic-looking: “He breathes through his straight nose rather heavily. His blue and oddly inexpressive eyes are fixed with pagan indifference” (*TW*, 20). Percival “is heavy and walks clumsily down the field, through the long grass” (*TW*, 21). Even in female eyes, the appearance of Percival does not make him look as a hero; he is described by Jinny as being untidy: “Here is Percival [...] He has not dressed” (*TW*, 79). Even though Percival is regarded as a hero by his friends, his actions still at times seem ordinary, not like that of a hero. At school, Percival shows authority towards ‘little boys’, who are younger than him: “He should have a birch and beat little boys for misdemeanours” (*TW*, 21). Percival’s dominating and influential character is increasingly exaggerated to the extent that he is portrayed as being capable of childish behaviour rather than that of a hero. None of his friends has an opinion that differs from that of him; they all surrender to him, as Neville narrates: “[Bernard...] said ‘Look!’ but Percival says ‘No.’ For he is always the first to detect insincerity; and is brutal in the extreme” (*TW*, 21-22). Rather like Strachey's portrayal of Gordon, Woolf delineates Percival's heroism through his physical power only. Compared to his friends, Percival looks a powerfully-built young man, since he is one of the “cricketers” (*TW*, 28). Such friends look at Percival as superior to them; Neville is conscious of his lack of the athleticism which Percival possesses; he “cannot stand all

day in the sun with [...his] eyes on the ball; [...he] cannot feel the flight of the ball” (*TW*, 29), and he suffers “[a] ‘wound’ [that] signifies the lack of the normal proportion of masculinity”.<sup>57</sup> This ultimately makes him feel weak and that Percival is stronger and thus better than him: “[Y]et he is always kind to my weakness” (*TW*, 29). In fact the portrayal of Percival in the eyes of such friends makes one feel the falsity of his heroism, since it shows that Percival is “interested only in the contest, the battle to be fought”.<sup>58</sup> Percival’s powerful body is shown even in the cricket match; the description given to him by Neville, who is not a cricketer, depicts the figure of a proud knight, preparing himself to start a duel or a battle. His youthful vanity makes him think of nothing but gaining victory: “He will throw off his coat and stand with his legs apart, with his hands ready, watching the wicket. And he will pray, ‘Lord let us win’; he will think of one thing only, that they should win” (*TW*, 29). Here, the heroic sportsmanship is very clear in Percival’s behaviour. Percival’s behaviour is that of a young man, who depends on his vitality and physical power rather than responding to reason.

Ultimately, Percival lacks intelligence and wisdom. Being the friend of the ‘boasting boys,’ Percival is, undoubtedly influenced by the behaviour of such boys; he has the spirit of such boys which is that of rashness and impulsiveness, since these boys are described as “volunteers” (*TW*, 28). One can say that Percival’s sense of militarism has grown with him from school life. Judith Lee describes Percival as “an individual character who lives in completely unconscious conformity with his culture and who does not engage in imaginative activity”.<sup>59</sup> This means that Percival lacks the wisdom of a true hero; he is controlled by convention and the rush of young men, that makes him quite blind to what is actually going on round him; as Neville, his friend describes: “He sees nothing; he hears nothing” (*TW*, 21). At university, Percival is described by Neville as a powerful young man, easily deceived by his friends’ tricks and quick to masculine horse play:

[young men] are listening to gramophone; [...] That is Percival, lounging on the cushions, monolithic, in giant repose. No, it is only one of his satellites, imitating his monolithic, his giant

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<sup>57</sup> Tracey Sherard, “Percival in the Forest of Gender: Wagner, Homosexuality, and *The Waves*”, *Virginia Woolf: Turning and the Centuries: Selected Paper from the Ninth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds. Ann Ardis & Bonnie Kime Scott (New York: Pace U. P., 2000), 65.

<sup>58</sup> Judith Lee, “This Hideous Shaping and Moulding: War and *The Waves*”, *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, ed. Mark Hussey (Syracuse: Syracuse U. P., 1991), 185.

<sup>59</sup> Judith Lee, 184.

repose. He alone is unconscious of their tricks, and when he catches them at it he buffets them good-humouredly with a blow of his paw. (*TW*, 52)

Ultimately we only see Percival from the outside, through the eyes of the six friends and, moreover, we see little or nothing of their actual intercourse with Percival, nothing of the intimate details of how they interact. Even at the dinner party in the eve of Percival's leaving for India, Percival is seen as simply "sitting silent" (*TW*, 89).

Virginia Woolf's heroic young man dies, but it is not even allowed to him to have the heroic end that Gordon achieved. In his decision to travel to India, Percival seems to drift into the tide of manliness and heroism, since he follows the same career path as others of his caste and temperament: "Percival, Tony, Archie, or another, will go to India" (*TW*, 58). Woolf again here shows the lack of careful thought of Percival, whose heroism is not associated with wisdom and reason, especially in dealing with the colonised; Bernard's prediction as Percival's capacity for government is clearly far-fetched:

By applying the standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to him, the bullock-cart is righted in less than five minutes. The Oriental problem is solved. He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were—what indeed he is—a God. (*TW*, 89)

Here, the response of Bernard, "the wittiest"<sup>60</sup> friend, is complex, showing clearly an awareness of Percival's shortcomings; it is even slightly mocking. The vision of Percival's undeserved self-confidence—the 'violent language', the voice of imperial, ruling and authority—is the outcome of his upbringing, his conditioning by his imperialistic environment. Ultimately, this 'violent language' which is 'natural' to Percival and may be even to his friends, seems unnatural and strange to the colonised. In dealing with the violent linguistic register of the coloniser, Justin Edwards argues that "the mastery of the gun is combined with the mastery of discourse. That is, the manipulation of language and thought becomes a form of control that empowers the coloniser and subjugates the native".<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, with Percival's violent language there might be no security and no solution to the 'Oriental problem' in the colonial area in which he serves. By 'Applying the standard of the West' in an Oriental area, in which its culture is definitely

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<sup>60</sup> Hermione Lee, 169.

<sup>61</sup> Justin D. Edwards, *Postcolonial Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 65.



different, Percival in fact demonstrates that his heroism is artificial and inauthentic; he shows that he still carries some features of his 'boasting friends' and he still has the military sense he learned at school. It is Percival's sense of heroism that motivates him to serve in a role that needs him to mount a horse, like a knight, but ultimately it is this role which causes his death: "He is dead [...] He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown" (*TW*, 98). The meaninglessness of Percival's death shows the vulnerability of human heroic values; Percival dies in a very simple and unheroic way, a way that shocks Bernard, who bitterly tries to adjust his response to his death: "I should be able to place him in trifling and ridiculous situations, so that he may not feel himself absurd, perched on a great horse. I must be able to say, 'Percival, a ridiculous name'" (*TW*, 101). It seems that Percival is not a skilful knight; he has failed to check the saddle of his horse before riding it. His death reveals the carelessness and impetuosity of this young man.

There is no doubt that both Strachey and Woolf are quite aware of the hollowness of military heroism and its disastrous result on the human individual, and even on the future of the generations. Both of them convey a message which shows that essentially medieval heroism as re-enacted by the Victorians, and the impulse to impose power on others, is disastrously inappropriate in a world that no longer shares those earlier ages' spiritual beliefs.<sup>62</sup>

It becomes obvious that *The Waves* presents the suffering of human individuals and the growing human consciousness of what existence is really like. Bernard's consciousness of the passing of time and the pressure of life that causes his vulnerability and suffering is increased near the end of the novel: "How swift life runs from January to December! We are all swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no shade; we make no comparisons; think scarcely ever of I or of you" (*TW*, 143). In the final section of the novel, Woolf gives the role to Bernard, the novelist, to sum up the whole human situation in the post-war period and to comment on life, with no intervention from his friends: "This is a very important morning in the history of The Waves, because I think I have turned the corner & see the last lap straight ahead. I think I have got Bernard into the final stride. He will go straight on now, & then stand at the door; & then there will be a last picture of the waves" (*DIII*, 301). Bernard, who is now "an elderly man, a heavy man with grey hair" (*TW*, 191), expresses his outlook on life, an outlook that comes from

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<sup>62</sup> For a detailed discussion of Victorian notions of chivalry, see Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven and London: Yale U. P., 1981).

his own experience, which is that of an exhausted and hopeless person, a person who has already lost two of his dearest friends: the deaths of Percival and Rhoda still disturb Bernard's daily life and his world of dreams: "It is strange how the dead leap out on us at street corners, or in dreams" (*TW*, 184). He increasingly feels the pressures and ultimately life's emptiness: "Now there is nothing. No fin breaks the waste of this immeasurable sea. Life has destroyed me. No echo comes when I speak, no varied words. This is more truly death than the death of friends" (*TW*, 190). It is life that destroys the human individual and disturbs his/her peace, a fact that Bernard is aware of: "Lord, how unutterably disgusting life is! [...] That knife is already congealing with grease. Disorder, sordidity and corruption surrounded us" (*TW*, 196). Woolf prefers to end *The Waves* with Bernard's words; the words of a novelist that carry Bloomsbury's opinion against the artificial values that caused death and the suffering of human individuals like Bernard and his friends: "Death is the enemy [...] Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!" (*TW*, 199).

## Chapter Three: Virginia Woolf's Response to the Political Tensions of the 1930s

**“I have never dreamt so often of war. And what[']s to be done? It[']s rather like sitting in a sick room, quite helpless”.**<sup>1</sup>

### I. General Historical Outlook

In the pages of British history, the Thirties has a bad name; this gloomy period has ever been called the ‘devil decade’,<sup>2</sup> since it was not only shadowed by dark memories of the slaughter of the First World War, and the large-scale loss of life immediately afterwards from the influenza epidemic, but the threat of another war grew more unavoidable as international tensions grew.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the British, like other Europeans, had been struck by problems of economic depression and unemployment. The sad image of unemployed people in Britain could be seen almost anywhere in London and in the streets of any of the larger towns; nor could anyone long miss the seedy beggars selling matches or shoelaces, or the workers of Wales and the North of England marching to London to draw attention to their plight. An estimate of the condition of industrial Britain in the early Thirties can be obviously seen through the numbers of unemployed, who were classified into three categories: those who were out of work for a few weeks or month at a time, or drawing partial unemployment relief; the young men who had never had work; and the long-term unemployed, who had been out of job for more than a year, especially older men. There were 300,000 long-term unemployed in Britain in January 1932, 480,000 in July 1933, and 337,000 or 23.9 per cent of those receiving unemployment pay in July 1936. The number was greatest among men aged 60 to 64. 57 per 1000 workers in 1936 were long-term unemployed in northern England, 123 per 1000 in Wales. Among these long-term unemployed in Britain, 52,900 had been out of work for over five years in 1936 and 205,000 for two years or longer.<sup>4</sup> The picture that might be drawn of Britain in 1933, in the depth of the Depression, was darker and more gloomy than that of 1936 or 1937, as industrial activity

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *‘Leave the Letters till We’re Dead’: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1936-1941*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1980), 33. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *LVI*.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Loch Mowat, *Britain between the Wars 1918-1940* (London: Methuen, 1966), 480.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Pugh, *‘We Danced All Night’: A Social History of Britain between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009), 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> See Mowat, 480-485.

gradually increased, ironically, as the prelude to another war. Nor were the poor and unemployed insulated by the Welfare State, which did not come about until after 1945. Unemployment benefit was inadequate, and after 1931 as the cost to the Government of unemployment payment increased even this was reduced. Wives and mothers were not provided for by health insurance at all, except at the time of child-bearing. Children between one and five were seldom treated by school medical and dental services. Of the adult population, only wage-earners were included in national health insurance, and it was not until 1938 that employable youths of 14-16 were included. Many families were in the Thirties ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-cared-for.<sup>5</sup> One result of unemployment and poverty was malnutrition, due to the limited diet of the families of the unemployed, and with that came illness. The poorer children suffered from extreme malnutrition that caused illnesses like pneumonia, bronchitis and rickets. Due to the dietary standard that was different from one class to another, there was also difference in the average of mortality for each class. In the poor areas, death rates were higher, especially regions that were affected by unemployment such as Wales, Scotland and the north of England. As a result, infant mortality was higher in these regions than in the other ones.<sup>6</sup> Generally, the reality of Britain can be summoned as “a hungry Britain, badly fed, badly clothed and housed”.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to all this economic and social hardship, the tension and strain of the political world outside Britain gradually made the life of the individual worse; there was acute consciousness among people of the political turmoil in Europe during that time, covered fully by the newspapers and the newsreels shown in the cinemas attended by millions every week.<sup>8</sup> Richard Overy points out that the mid-1930s seem to have represented a watershed in British perceptions of the inevitability of another world war, adding to the anxieties about the economy, the demographic future or the nature of modern man, since everything was seemingly becoming reduced to an unavoidable choice between death and survival.<sup>9</sup> The European political world showed no settlement; tension and stress were the prevailing features of the whole atmosphere. The dictators’ desire for power had been clearly shown through their choices of military risk. In

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<sup>5</sup> See *Ibid*, 490-503.

<sup>6</sup> See Jon Stevenson and Christ Cook, *Britain in the Depression: Society and Politics, 1929-1939* (London: Longman, 1994), 48-50.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Keith Laybourn, *Britain on the Breadline: A Social and Political History of Britain 1918-1939* (London: Sutton, 1990), 41.

<sup>8</sup> Mowat, 480.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* (London: Penguin, 2009), 316.

Germany, Hitler came to power in 1933; for Hitler the only way of solving Germany's own socio-economic problems and to restore national pride was rearmament and military self-assertion. In Italy, after Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia in 1935, the political problems were equally complicated and contributed to the sense of the inevitability of another world war.<sup>10</sup> The invasion of Abyssinia thereby created an atmosphere in which Hitler could seize the opportunity to march his troops back into the Rhineland in March 1936, violating the terms of the Versailles Treaty which the defeated Germany had accepted in 1918. This gave Hitler the confidence that he could get away with demanding further territories.<sup>11</sup> With the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 things became ever more threatening, since the war further polarized the political factions in Europe. In the eyes of some political figures the possibility of peace was hopeless; war was the only option that they could choose. Mussolini portrayed a very masculine vision of life, so different to the values of Bloomsbury: "[W]ar is to man as maternity is to woman. I do not believe in perpetual peace".<sup>12</sup> The idea of the war invokes fear and anxieties about the economy, the demographic future or the nature of modern man.<sup>13</sup> Generally, in Europe there was a prevailing feeling of the certainty of the next great conflict, a crisis which was only temporarily assuaged by the Munich Agreement in 1938.<sup>14</sup>

## II. Virginia Woolf's Outlook on the Early Thirties

As a writer who had always engaged in the social mores of the world around her, Virginia Woolf could not be otherwise than increasingly alarmed by the growth of the social and international tension as the decade unrolled. Moreover, her mood of anxiety and gloom was exacerbated by events in her private life. The early Thirties witnessed the loss of two of Woolf's old friends, Lytton Strachey, one of the pioneers of Bloomsbury, died in January 1932; his death is described by Woolf as "like having the globe of the future perpetually smashed—without Lytton".<sup>15</sup> Two years later, Roger Fry died, in September 1934; as her nephew observed, "[his] death was a more

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<sup>10</sup> Mowat, 535.

<sup>11</sup> Pugh, 441.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Mowat, 535.

<sup>13</sup> Overy, 316.

<sup>14</sup> Pugh, 441.

<sup>15</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. IV: 1931-1935*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1982), 64. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated, as *DIV*.

intimate and a more desolating event than the death of Lytton [Strachey]. Lytton [Strachey] was her past, Roger her present”.<sup>16</sup> With Roger Fry’s death, Woolf felt the emptiness and darkness of life: “I think the poverty of life now is what comes to me, a thin blackish veil over everything” (*DIV*, 242). Accordingly, a sense of gradual destruction of life dominates Woolf’s feelings during this period; as Leonard Woolf puts it: “This erosion of life by death began for Virginia [Woolf] and me in the early 1930s and gathered momentum as we went downhill to war and her own death”.<sup>17</sup>

This growing sense of personal gloom as public events became ever more disheartening becomes increasingly evident in her diaries and letters. Having newly assumed power, in 1934, Hitler carried out a series of political murders, climaxing in the Night of the Long Knives (30 June-2 July), in order to remove political rivals; it was a period of brutality, in which at least 85 people were killed among them a number of leading military leaders and political figures, such as Gregor Strasser, Kurt Von Schleicher and Ernst Röhm.<sup>18</sup> In her diary on 2 July 1934, Woolf painfully commented on Hitler’s violent action against these military men and “how [mercilessly] Hitler flew to Munich & killed this that & the other man & woman in Germany yesterday” (*DIV*, 223). Woolf described this action as being “one of the few public acts [...] that makes one miserable” (*DIV*, 223). The brutal action affected Woolf, who represented men like Hitler as being ‘baboons’ and far from being ‘leaders’: “[B]ut look at the masks these men wear—the brutal faces of baboons, licking sweet paper. And for the first time I read articles with rage, to find him called a real leader” (*DIV*, 224). Quentin Bell points out that particularly after this event Virginia Woolf “became imaginatively aware of what was happening in Germany”.<sup>19</sup> Leonard Woolf’s opinion was exactly like that of his wife, since he saw the European world in the Thirties, which was controlled by the tyranny of dictators, as being “more barbarous and degraded than that of 1914 or 1919”.<sup>20</sup> Virginia Woolf’s reaction to events in Germany, especially the violent, dominating power of what she saw as the masculine world, represented by Hitler, makes her feel the human suffering and pain not only abroad but even in England; she

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<sup>16</sup> Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf A Biography, Vol. Two Mrs Woolf 1912-1941* (London: Hogarth, 1972), 180.

<sup>17</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919-1939* (London: Hogarth, 1967), 250.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Kitchen, *Nazi Germany: A Critical Introduction* (London: Tempus, 2004), 42.

<sup>19</sup> Quentin Bell, 178.

<sup>20</sup> Leonard Woolf, *The Journey of the Arrival Matters: An Autobiography of the years 1939-1969* (London: Hogarth, 1969), 10.

writes in her November diary 1934: “Human misery is certainly very great” (*DIV*, 264), a ‘misery’ that evokes the questions that she sees as needing to be answered in her essay “Why?”; it is the situation in her society that provokes all her questions:

[L]ike so many people nowadays I am pestered with questions. I find it impossible to walk down the street without stopping, it may be in the middle of the road, to ask Why? Churches, public houses, parliaments, shops, loud-speakers, motor cars, the drone of an aeroplane in the clouds, and men and women, all inspire questions.<sup>21</sup>

Part of the question that makes her annoyed is ‘the atmosphere of power’ that dominates her society; the rich and the powerful, she feels, have the capacity to sweep aside the questions and anxieties which beset ordinary people:

[Questions] shrivel up in an atmosphere of power, prosperity, and timeworn stone. They [questions] die by the dozen on the threshold of great newspaper offices. They slink away to less favoured, less flourishing quarters where people are poor and therefore have nothing to give, where they have no power and therefore have nothing to lose.<sup>22</sup>

Woolf’s imaginative response to the world around her seems to have become destabilized and insecure. The poverty of ordinary people and their weaknesses contradicts the ‘atmosphere of power [and] prosperity’ that dominates their lives.

Not uncharacteristically, Virginia Woolf and her husband, Leonard Woolf decided to go to Europe to see events for themselves. Travelling by car, on May 1935 they crossed from Harwich to the Hook of Holland; they spent a week in Holland and three days in Germany before passing on to Italy. Travelling through areas which were becoming increasingly violent and anti-Semitic, Woolf’s Jewish husband had been advised, before travelling, by Ralph Wigram, the British government official in the Foreign Office, “not to get mixed up in any Nazi procession or public ceremony”.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Wigram gave Leonard Woolf a letter to Prince Bismarck, Counsellor at the German Embassy, whom Leonard Woolf met before travelling to Germany. The latter gave Woolf’s husband “a most impressive document in which Prince Bismarck called upon all

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<sup>21</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Why?”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941 and Additional Essays 1906-1924*, ed. Stuart N. Clarke (London: Hogarth, 2011), 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way*, 186.

German officials to show to the distinguished Englishman, Leonard Woolf, and his distinguished wife, Virginia Woolf, every courtesy and render them any assistance which they might require”.<sup>24</sup> On their journey, however, they were chased, in the centre of Bonn, by a crowd of people who were expecting the arrival of Herman Goering, the German military leader and leading member of the Nazi party.<sup>25</sup> Finding themselves unexpectedly in the middle of the Nazi gathering there, Woolf and her husband “were faced by an inexplicable and disturbing sight. On each side of it the main road was lined with uniformed Nazis and at intervals with rows of schoolchildren carrying flags”.<sup>26</sup> Virginia Woolf herself notes this dangerous experience in her diary:

We were chased across the river [Rhine] by Hitler (or Goering) [,] had to pass through ranks of children with red flags [...] People gathering in the sunshine—rather forced like school sports. Banners stretched across the street ‘The Jew is our enemy’ [...] So we whizzed along until we got out of range of the docile hysterical [*sic*] crowd. (*DIV*, 311)

The ‘hysterical crowd’ unsurprisingly makes Woolf feel tense and nervous: “Our obsequiousness gradually turning to anger. Nerves rather frayed” (*DIV*, 311). The episode also made Woolf aware of the threat they faced in being there, as she wrote to Stephen Spender: “There is also a great deal to say about Germany [...] We almost met Hitler face to face”.<sup>27</sup> After this, Woolf and her husband passed without incident through a number of German villages. They enjoyed the amazing views of “[g]reat snow hills, with black rifts in them” (*DIV*, 312), and gradually “[t]he Hitler feeling relaxed” (*DIV*, 312). Commenting on the same story of their visit to Germany in his autobiography of the Thirties, Woolf’s husband himself describes their experience as they left Holland and entered Germany as “pass[ing] in a few yards from civilisation to savagery”.<sup>28</sup> The stressful atmosphere of the Thirties was increased by the impending threat of the Spanish Civil War which once more showed that war almost inevitable; it was the inescapable fact that occupied people’s mind and Woolf was one of them: “I have never dreamt so often of war. And what[’]s to be done? It[’]s rather like sitting in a sick room, quite helpless” (*LVI*, 33). For Woolf,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 186.

<sup>25</sup> See, Ibid, 188-193.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Sickle Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. V: 1932-1935*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1979), 392. Hereafter, references will be included in the text abbreviated as *LV*.

<sup>28</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way*, 189.



living the atmosphere of war means being quite isolated and ‘helpless’, an atmosphere she tried her best to resist by being engaged in her writings.

### III. Woolf and the Spanish Civil War

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, involved several European powers. Political powers found Spain to be a good stage on which to extend and rehearse their struggle.<sup>29</sup> A heightened awareness of foreign intervention in the conflict complicated the situation in Spain; the German and the Italian support to the Right made things far worse.<sup>30</sup> The complexity of the political struggle in Spain is portrayed in W. H. Auden’s “Spain”, written in 1937:

‘What’s your proposal? To build the Just City? I will.  
I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic  
Death? Very well, I accept, for  
I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain’.<sup>31</sup>

Spain became the political ‘choice’ for the right-wing powers to make their decisions that brought destruction and ‘death’ not only to Spain, but potentially to the whole Europe. Keith Laybourn points out that “Spain was seen as an experimental laboratory for the arms, equipment and strategy of the fascist powers”.<sup>32</sup> Being afraid of the dangerous rise of Nazism and Fascism, a large number of British volunteers made their individual choices and joined what were called International Brigades to support the Republicans (the Left). Among these volunteers were a number of literary figures; while some of them like W. H. Auden, already a famous figure, and Julian Bell, Virginia Woolf’s nephew, did not belong to any political party, but travelled to Spain

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<sup>29</sup> Spanish Civil War (17 July 1936-1 April 1939) occurred between the Nationalists (The Right) led by General Francisco Franco, who moved against the Republics (The Left), who won the election five months before the struggle. The Nationalists were supported by Italy and Germany, while the Republicans were aided by the Soviet Union. Britain and France adopted a policy of non-intervention. See A. W. Palmer, *A Dictionary of Modern History: 1789-1945* (London: Penguin, 1964), 305-306.

<sup>30</sup> Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1991), 77.

<sup>31</sup> W. H. Auden, “Spain”, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1979), 53.

<sup>32</sup> Laybourn, 199.

out of their liberal humanitarian concern for the suffering which civilians were experiencing, others, such as John Cornford, Stephen Spender and (briefly) Christopher Caudwell were members of the Communist Party. While George Orwell, formally a member of the I. L. P., joined POUM, an anarchist group. James K. Hopkins points out that, given unemployment in the United Kingdom, which reached its highest rates in the interwar years, the Spanish struggle also encouraged working-class men and unemployed miners to join the action there; they believed that their England suffered from the evident economic oppression of capitalism and the threat of political oppression by Fascism.<sup>33</sup> Even though they were motivated by their aims of fighting to put down the Fascist uprising, some of the volunteers did not think that the struggle would last for a long time; John Cornford, for example, wrote: “[T]he idea suddenly occurred to me to go to Spain for a few days. I expected at the time the fighting would be over very soon”.<sup>34</sup> These volunteers went to Spain either as combatants, fighting at the Front, or as non-combatants, providing medical aid, motivated by their moral sense. For some, like Auden and Spender, their lives in Spain were brief, but deeply affecting; others, like John Cornford, Christopher Caudwell and Julian Bell lost their lives in the Spanish struggle.

Although her state of health was not good in the early months of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, Woolf gave much attention to what was going in the political world.<sup>35</sup> Woolf’s diaries and letters written before her illness in 1936 and after her recovery show that she was extremely involved in discussing the political tension and crises created by the Nazi and Fascists dictators, and the violent Spanish struggle. Being directly in touch with young anti-fascist poets and novelists, like Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, Christopher Isherwood, John Lehman and Julian Bell, her nephew—young men who are described by Quentin Bell as “calling for a literature that would lead to effective political action” —Woolf became particularly close to what was going on in the political world.<sup>36</sup> Hence, the ‘public world’ becomes part of Woolf’s private one; political affairs are among the priorities of her conversations with her husband and

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<sup>33</sup> James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (California: Stanford U. P., 1998), 2-3.

<sup>34</sup> John Cornford, quoted in Peter Stansky & William Abrahams, *Journey to the Frontier: Julian Bell & John Cornford: their Lives and the 1930s* (London: Constable, 1966), 313.

<sup>35</sup> Virginia Woolf was in fact quite ill; she was close to a complete breakdown similar to that of 1913. Due to her illness, there is a gap in her diary from 9 April to 11 June and from 23 June to 30 October 1936. See Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way*, 153.

<sup>36</sup> Quentin Bell, 186.

her guests, especially after Leonard became involved in practical political life, such as being the joint editor of *Political Quarterly* and a secretary of the Labour Party Advisory Committee on International and Imperial Affairs.<sup>37</sup> The influence of her husband's work and her relation with these young writers can be seen in Woolf's diary in April 1935:

In the public world, there are emphatic scares. L[eonard] brings home a bunch after every C[ommi]ttee meeting. It[']s odd how seldom I report them. One of these days they may come true. For instance, [Ernst] Toller, says we are on the brink of war.<sup>38</sup> Wants the allies to declare war on Hitler. Belgium keeps its aeroplanes at active service level, all ready to rise into the air [...] There are incessant conversations—Mussolini, Hitler, Macdonald. All these people incessantly arriving at Croydon, arriving at Berlin, Moscow, Rome; & flying off again—while [Stephen] Spender & I think how to improve the world. (*DIV*, 303)

Discussing seriously the gloomy political atmosphere that was prevailing in the Thirties, Woolf gave importance to what others said and she listened carefully to the opinions of her visitors, especially the young generation, for whom “she was both an inspiration and a challenge”.<sup>39</sup> Woolf seems to be amazed by the opinions of those young men, who were full of enthusiasm for the things they believed in; she describes Stephen Spender, for example, as being a “handsome poetic boy to look at—& very ardent” (*DIV*, 195). At the same time, Woolf was not blind to the youthfulness of their idealism and ardency that led them to stand against Fascism in Spain.

Reading newspapers, especially what was written in *The Times*, about the session of the Conference at Geneva which focused on trying to find a conciliatory means to avoid any attack on Abyssinia which might be made by Italy,<sup>40</sup> Woolf notes in her diary on 4 September 1935, what is written about Mussolini's intention to attack Abyssinia: “The most critical day since Aug[ust] 4<sup>th</sup> 1914. So the papers say. In London yesterday. Writing chalked up all over the walls [...] fascist propaganda. L[eonard] said. Mosley again active” (*DIV*, 337). Being occupied with the atmosphere of the war and what was written about it, especially in *The New Statesman*, Woolf admired Clive Bell's writing, noting in September 1935: “Clive is writing a letter to the

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<sup>37</sup> See, Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way*, 206.

<sup>38</sup> Ernst Toller (1893-1939) was a German playwright, socialist and former pacifist; he was deprived of his citizenship and exiled when Hitler came to power. See Anne Olivier Bell, footnote, 16, Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Woolf, Vol. IV: 1931-1935*, 303.

<sup>39</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 612.

<sup>40</sup> Anne Olivier Bell, ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV: 1931-1935*, 337.

N. S. against war. War's so awful it can[']t be right anyhow—an argument for which I like him: his genuine humanity [...] Says M[ussoli]ni is mad—the Italians say so; but all the young are frothed up” (*DIV*, 343). It seems that what was written against war drew Woolf's attention and gained her admiration, since she believes that not just journalism but art itself must convey truth, a belief she illuminates in her essay “Craftsmanship”, written in 1937: “Think what it would mean if you could teach, if you could learn, the art of writing. Why every book, every newspaper would tell the truth, would create beauty”.<sup>41</sup> For Woolf art is inescapably connected with truth, since telling truth is one of the values of Bloomsbury.

Leonard Woolf's membership of the Labour Party did not only enable Virginia Woolf to be close to the political stage, but it even gave her the chance to attend some of the annual conferences of the Party itself, as she herself documented in her diary on 2 October 1935: “Yesterday we went to the L[abour] P[arty] meeting at Brighton, [...] It was very dramatic: Bevin's attack on Lansbury. Tears came to my eyes as L[ansbury] spoke. And yet he was posing I felt” (*DIV*, 345). Woolf was shocked by the violent arguments that occurred in this meeting, which led to the resignation of George Lansbury as Leader of the Party, though we notice that this does not prevent her being sceptical about Lansbury's actual performance.<sup>42</sup> At the same time Woolf seemed to be affected by the deeply-held pacifist opinions of this man, who was willing to be rejected by the Labour Party rather than supporting the war that was looming during that time. On the other hand, the development of the public world—‘politics’, represented by Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia—increased Woolf's stress and anxiety; she wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell in October 1935: “I wish public affairs wouldn't jerk their ugly heads up. When even I can[']t sleep at night for thinking of politics, things must be in the fine mess. All our friends and neighbours talk politics, politics” (*LV*, 428).

One month before her illness, Woolf was caught up in the tension of the political world of March 1936;<sup>43</sup> she wrote to Julian Bell: “As you can imagine, we are all under the shadow of Hitler at the moment” (*LVI*, 19). Having recovered from her illness, Woolf's first comment is on the

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<sup>41</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Craftsmanship”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941*, 95.

<sup>42</sup> During the debate of the second day of the Labour Conference at Brighton, there was a proposal to enforce sanctions against Italy in its struggle to invade Abyssinia; George Lansbury (1859-1940), the leader of the Labour Party since 1931 and idealist socialist and pacifist, resigned after being attacked by Ernest Bevin. See *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV: 1931-1935*, footnote 1, 345.

<sup>43</sup> On 7 March Hitler violated the terms of the Treaty of Versailles by sending his troops into the Rhineland. See Pugh, 441.

Spanish situation; she notes in her diary in November 1936, the heavy bombardment of Madrid and the siege by General Franco's forces: "Madrid not fallen. Chaos. Slaughter. War surrounding our island".<sup>44</sup> That last sentence reveals her acute sense of the threat represented by Franco, by Mussolini and above all by Hitler, casting an increasingly deathly shadow over the whole of Europe, including Britain. Receiving "a packet of photographs from Spain all of dead children, killed by bombs" (*LVI*, 85), Woolf was increasingly affected emotionally by the crimes of the dictators that were committed against civilians; such murders led her later to write *Three Guineas*, in which she argues how war might be stopped.

### **Julian Bell's Death**

The horror of the Spanish Civil War that brought about the death of millions and ended with the ruinous defeat of the Republic,<sup>45</sup> also caused Virginia Woolf deep private sorrow: the death of her nephew, Julian Bell, who had joined the struggle despite his belief in Bloomsbury's attitudes against war. Woolf's diary entries written during 1937, a few months before Julian Bell's departure to Spain, shows Woolf's consciousness of the real aim that led this young man to be involved in the war. As a young man Julian was full of enthusiasm and a manliness that he wanted to prove. Woolf herself notes on 14 March 1937: "Julian grown a man—I mean vigorous, controlled, as I guess embittered, something to me tragic in the sadness now, his mouth & face much tenser; as if he had been thinking in solitude. [Va]Nessa said he hasn't altogether given up the idea of Spain" (*DV*, 68). Woolf realises here the dogged determination of her nephew, the determination of youth that made him insist on the idea of going to Spain. Even though he had the intellect of a writer, yet Julian Bell "had a kind of clumsiness, of Cambridge awkwardness" (*DV*, 108) that might create a kind of rush in making decisions. Commenting on Julian Bell's mood, before going to Spain, at the end in March 1937, Woolf writes in her diary: "Julian, he says, very depressed" (*DV*, 73). His depression seemed to continue, as Woolf notes in her April entry diary: "Talk of what to do for Julian, who strikes everyone as depressed" (*DV*, 77). After this strain came his decision to go to Spain, an idea that occupied his mind from it

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<sup>44</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. V: 1936-1941*, Anne Olivier Bell, ed. (London: Hogarth, 1984), 32. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *DV*.

<sup>45</sup> Buchanan, 1.

seems, the beginning of March. The anxiety and depression that Julian Bell suffered from, before leaving for Spain, seem likely to be the outcome of an internal struggle he had. As well as not being certain as to what career to embark on at this point in his life, he was torn between, on the one hand, his belief that it was part of his duty to be there in Spain to resist the tyranny and aggression of Fascists and, on the other, Bloomsbury's rejection of militarism and fighting. Despite the Bloomsbury atmosphere in which he lived, Julian Bell seemed not fully to accept its 'habit of education', as Woolf puts it:

Julian was bitter at dinner against the B[loomsbur]y habit of education. He had been taught no job; only a vague literary smattering. But I wanted you to go to the Bar, I said. Yes, but you didn't insist upon it to my mother, he remarked, rather forcibly. He now finds himself at 29 without any special training. But then he objected, as I thought, to all professions. (*DV*, 86)

Julian Bell was evidently frustrated by his lack of having a specific profession and role in life, especially since he was 29, and this increased his depression and internal struggle. More than that the role of Julian Bell's mother in his life seems to be clear; Julian Bell did not want to hurt his mother by doing things against her will: "Julian had some queer power over her [Vanessa]—the lover as well as the son" (*DV*, 108). Being full of vitality 'at 29 without any special training', Julian Bell longed for a life of independence.

Julian Bell also seemed to be influenced by his friends and acquaintances, young writers like Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, Christopher Isherwood and John Lehman. Julian Bell and his friends believed that it was part of their duties to resist aggression, represented by Fascism. Listening to a political debate between young writers and Kingsley Martin, the editor of the *New Statesman & Nation*, Woolf herself came to understand their beliefs and the obstinate nature of her nephew, as she writes on 15 April 1937:

A long close political argument. Julian, KM, Stephen—all calling each other by Xtian names. What is our duty? What is the responsible man like KM to do? Can[']t be pacifist; the irresponsible can [...] Julian peppery & pithy—making his strange faces, suddenly hooting with laughter—uncouth rather, yet honest, yet undisciplined, yet keeping something up his sleeves. Obstinate set on going to Spain—won[']t argue; tight; hard fisted—has amusing phrases. (*DV*, 79-80)

The sense of awareness that these young educated men have, makes them unable to ignore the crisis in Spain, which becomes part of their life. Undoubtedly this generation are quite different from the twenties generation that had experienced the First World War and wanted to avoid further conflict. Julian Bell's generation adopt practical resistance rather than compromise or pacifism; as Stephen Spender puts it: "The 1920s were a generation to themselves. We were the 1930s".<sup>46</sup> These intellectual men, some of whom belonged to the Communist Party, consciously believed that if they will not move against the Fascists' violence and aggression in Spain, the next stage might be another European country, or even war in Britain itself, as Stephen Spender told Woolf in February 1937, in one of his visits to her:

Stephen Spender came to tea & dinner the other day [...] rather a beautiful if too conventionally poetic young man: sunk cheeks, large blue eyes, skin always burning; great enthusiasm, [...] I like him: told him not to fight. He said it was the easiest thing to do [...] he argued that we cannot let the Fascist overturn Spain: then it'll be France, then us. We must fight. (*DV*, 56-57)

Believing that fighting is the only choice for them—"We must fight"—the young writers, among them Julian Bell, joined the Spanish struggle. Realising the futility of being involved in war, Woolf was afraid of Julian Bell's decision to go there, even in a non-combatant role; she wrote to Stephen Spender in April: "Julian is thinking of going to drive a lorry. I wish you could talk to him before he goes" (*LVI*, 116). Nigel Nicolson points out that "Julian Bell never joined the Communist Party,"<sup>47</sup> but he was in touch with the Party's members, who seem to be having an influence on him, as Woolf indicates in the same letter sent to Spender in April: "[Julian] is all over the place, interviewing Labour party, communists and so on" (*LVI*, 116). Enlisting for Spain, Julian Bell started his first step "learning the mechanics of lorries" (*DV*, 86) to enable himself to drive an ambulance; this step provokes the anxiety of his family: "We had too the anxiety about Julian" (*DV*, 54). Nicolson suggests that knowing what pain his decision would cause his mother, Julian Bell agreed not to go as a combatant in the International Brigade, but as an ambulance driver for Spanish Medical Aid.<sup>48</sup> This suggests that if it were not for the anxieties of his mother, and possibly the residual pacifist attitudes of Bloomsbury, Julian Bell might have joined the Spanish struggle as a soldier. However, drifting into the tide of war, whether as a

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<sup>46</sup> Stephen Spender, quoted in Hopkins, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Nigel Nicolson, ed., footnote, 2, *LVI*, 116.

<sup>48</sup> See *Ibid*, 116.

combatant or a non-combatant, anyway means being involved in fighting and facing danger, a fact Woolf herself knows, as she puts it in her entry diary in June: “And on the top, Julian gone to Spain on Monday: & on Tuesday, news that Wogan was wounded, a man with him killed. So a strain: which I cannot now go into: & it must last—how long? A year? Who knows? Anything to keep talking, inventing, distracting” (*DV*, 93). Definitely, the news from Spain about Wogan Philipps’s injury,<sup>49</sup> makes Woolf very worried about her nephew, an anxiety documented in her diary a few days after his departure to Spain: “No news of Julian” (*DV*, 94). Julian Bell’s decision can be regarded as the outcome of his sense of heroism mingled with a sense of ‘conviction’ and awareness of the real threat that hovered over the whole world; this is why he was “longing to be in the thick of things” (*LVI*, 151). Enthused by his idealism and sense of manliness, Julian Bell “could never force himself to think to the bottom of his idea” (*DV*, 110-111), the idea of going to Spain. Hermione Lee describes this young generation of writers, among them Julian Bell, as being “boys excited by ideas of heroism, action and leadership”.<sup>50</sup> But it seems that these young men *were* guided by their beliefs and determination to resist the aggression of Fascism and the inhumanity they saw it as representing. In his poem “Arms and the Man”, in *New Signatures*, published by the Hogarth Press in 1932, Julian Bell himself reveals his intention to strike against Fascism and its politics that threaten the lives of others:

Strike then, and swiftly; if the end must come  
May war, like charity, begin at home:  
Do what we can, and use what power we have,  
Confront the ruin, if we cannot save;  
Nor leave the politics to their trade,  
To spread the idiot tangle they have made.<sup>51</sup>

Julian Bell believes that standing against Fascism is part of ‘charity’ and honourable action that can be achieved either by civilian work or action itself. Julian Bell’s “Introduction” to *We Did Not Fight: 1914-18 Experiences of War Resisters*, published in 1935 develops what was

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<sup>49</sup> Wogan Philipps was the member of the Communist Party and the husband of Rosamond Lehmann; he went to Spain as a member of the Spanish Medical Service, working as an ambulance driver and was wounded there. See Anne Olivier Bell, footnote 7, *The Dairy of Virginia Woolf, Vol. V*, 93.

<sup>50</sup> Lee, 611.

<sup>51</sup> Julian Bell, “Arms and the Man”, *New Signatures: Poems by Several Hands*, ed. Michael Roberts (London: Hogarth, 1932), 47.



experienced in his *New Signatures* poem; he ultimately believes in using ‘force’ to resist war: “I believe that the war-resistance movements of my generation will in the end succeed in putting down war—by force if necessary”.<sup>52</sup> Stephen Spender’s poem “Oh Young Men”, published in *New Signatures*, also shows the enthusiastic and revolutionary spirits of these young men:

Oh young men, oh young comrades,  
It is too late now to stay in those houses  
Your fathers built [...]  
Oh, comrades, step beautifully from the solid wall,  
Advance to rebuild, and sleep with friend on hill,  
Advance to rebel and remember what you have,  
No ghost ever had immured in his hall.<sup>53</sup>

The energetic passions that these young men have made them reject compromise and adopt resistance. Richard Overy points out that the most prevailing view among Europeans, during the Thirties, was that the waging of another war would be the end of civilization.<sup>54</sup> Thus, most of those young writers who participated in the Spanish Civil War, Julian Bell among them, were dominated by their sense of saving civilisation, by putting an end to the power of fascists.

On 18 July 1937, Woolf was, inevitably, deeply distressed by the news of her nephew’s death; driving his ambulance to do his humanitarian work in Spain, Julian Bell was killed there. Woolf externalizes her grief in a diary entry, written on 6 August, in which she sees the violence of the war as having deprived her of happiness:

It’s odd that I can hardly bring myself, with all my verbosity—the expression mania which is inborn in me—to say anything about Julian’s death [...] Here there was no relief. An incredible suffering—to watch it— an accident, & someone bleeding. (*DV*, 104)

After Julian’s death, Woolf reveals the anxiety in which she had lived since the time of his departure, in a letter sent to Maynard Keynes, in July 1937: “The strain ever since he went [to Spain] has been so great” (*LVI*, 149). For Woolf, the loss of Julian Bell reminds her afresh of the

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<sup>52</sup> Julian Bell, ed., “Introduction”, *We Did Not Fight: 1914-18 Experiences of War Resisters* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1935), xix.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Spender, “Oh Young Men”, *New Signatures*, 86.

<sup>54</sup> Overy, 315.

gap that has remained in her life from that earlier loss of a member of the younger generation: “We always think of [...] Thoby [...], and now there is Julian too” (*LVI*, 148). The death of her nephew rekindles Woolf’s sorrow at Thoby’s death, since both of them died young: “With Thoby though I felt we were the same age. With Julian it is the old woman, saying that she won[’]t see the young again. It is an unnatural death, his [...] Perhaps because he was killed, violently” (*DV*, 113). Julian Bell’s death created a kind of emptiness in Woolf’s life; the melancholic atmosphere that enveloped her life made her feel she was “in the worst of the time” (*DV*, 106). For her “the future without Julian is cut off [,] lopped: deformed” (*DV*, 113). Woolf feels life to be meaningless; as she herself puts it: “one lived; but without much of a future” (*DV*, 105). In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf again expresses the despair caused by Julian’s death, which had been painfully anticipated by his family:

It has been an incredible nightmare. We had both been certain he would be killed [...] I’m not clear enough in the head to feel anything but varieties of dull anger and despair [...] why must he get set on going to Spain? [...] And his feeling were so mixed. I mean, interest in war, and conviction, [...] He was the first of Nessa[’s] babies, and I can’t describe how close and real and always alive our relation was. (*LVI*, 150)

The only slight solace for Woolf seems to have been that Julian Bell had been killed in Spain doing his humanitarian work, rather than in Flanders; he had sacrificed his life for the sake of humanity rather than supporting the mindlessness of that earlier war, as she writes to Judith Stephen, in 1939, “What would he [Julian] have done, I wonder? He had such an immense store of life in him, and God knows why he went and threw it away. But I daresay it was better in Spain than in Flanders” (*LVI*, 372). Even though he was controlled by his sense of manliness, in the eyes of Woolf, Julian had died for a purpose and values she could understand and sympathise, not in the futility of the First World War.

### **Virginia Woolf’s Contributions against War**

In her fictional and non-fictional works, Woolf expresses her ideas about the dictatorships that brought about the catastrophic events of the Thirties, including the Spanish Civil War. Believing in art that tells truths—“words are the only things that tell the truth and nothing but the

truth”<sup>55</sup>—Woolf devotes all her efforts to tackle truths, the darkness of the Thirties, in her works. Being “involved in the usual uproar of politics, [and] society” (*LVI*, 9) of the day in 1936, Woolf contributed her essay “Why Art To-Day Follows Politics” to the (Communist) *Daily Worker*, an essay she refers to in her letter to Julian Bell in November 1936: “I have seen the young poets [...], and been induced to subscribe to the young poets['] paper, The Left [R]eview. That shows you that politics are still raging faster and fiercer, I’ve even had to write an article for the *Daily Worker* on the Artist and politics [*sic*]” (*LVI*, 83). This essay was published in the *Daily Worker* a month later, on 14 December;<sup>56</sup> James K. Hopkins suggests that newspapers, among them the *Daily Worker*, had contributed to making the British working-class volunteers be conscious of the danger of Fascism; they received part of their informal education from the reports of these newspapers.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Woolf’s essay was published in the newspaper most read by the volunteers—the *Daily Worker*—presumably helped in arousing their spirits and sense of awareness of the real threat of war dictators. In “Why Art To-Day Follows Politics”, Woolf stresses Bloomsbury’s beliefs in the value of art, and the freedom of the individual to think and feel for him/herself: “the value of [...the artist’s] work depend[s] upon freedom of mind, security of person, and immunity from practical affairs”.<sup>58</sup> Thus, any violation of the artist’s freedom or immunity might affect his art: “[T]o mix art with politics he [the artist] held was to adulterate it [his art..., since] he depends upon society”,<sup>59</sup> which is his patron. Woolf here focuses on the role of the artist in truth-telling; she indicates that the artist has to devote his work to convey truths rather than following the political propaganda of his age. More than that, Woolf tackles the role of dictators in violating the security of humans, represented by the artists who were under a ‘dictatorial patron’: “[I]f the patron is neither poor nor indifferent, but dictatorial—if he will only buy pictures that flatter his vanity or serve his politics—then again the artist is impeded and his work becomes worthless”.<sup>60</sup> Woolf shows that “the artist is affected as powerfully as other citizens when society is in chaos,”<sup>61</sup> since he is dominated by the ‘voices’ of dictators that force him to devote his art to serve them: “You shall only practise your art, it says, at our bidding.

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<sup>55</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Craftsmanship”, 91.

<sup>56</sup> See Nigel Nicolson, ed., footnote 2, *LVI*, 83.

<sup>57</sup> Hopkins, 78.

<sup>58</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Why Art To-Day Follows Politics”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941*, 76.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

Paint us pictures, crave us statues that glorify our gospels. Celebrate Fascism; celebrate Communism".<sup>62</sup> Accordingly she looks at such kinds of art, at the service of politics and dictators, as 'worthless'.

Receiving 'a packet of propaganda from Spain' that delineated images of death, including that of civilians and innocent children in Spain, affected Woolf deeply, as she told Julian Bell in her letter of November 1936: "This morning I got a packet of photographs from Spain all of dead children, killed by bombs" (*LVI*, 85). Woolf was profoundly affected by the horror of such murders in Spain and the violence against civilians. Two months later, in January 1937, the idea of *Three Guineas*, in which she tackled these photographs, occupied her mind: "3 Guineas this morning, & can[']t stop thinking it. My plan is to write it out now" (*DV*, 52). Supporting the refugees of Spain, Woolf used to attend meetings that discussed the miserable human situation there and raised funds to help refugees. In her letter to Janet Case on 26 June 1937, Woolf makes a reference to one of these meetings, in which the Duchess of Atholl,<sup>63</sup> was among the speakers:

We sat for 3 hours behind the Duchess [of Atholl] and talked about Spain— I mean we listened; and they talked, but into megaphones, or microphones, so that not a word came singly but in a kind of double division to us behind. However, by hook or crook, really by means of a fat emotional woman in black velvet called Isabel Brown they collected £1500 for the Basque children. (*LVI*, 139)

In this meeting money had been collected for the refugee children from Spain and the Basque Country, who fled to England, escaping the tyranny of war and dictatorship.<sup>64</sup> Even though Quentin Bell suggests that "[Woolf's] critics were on the Right rather than the Left",<sup>65</sup> Woolf herself proves that she was against violence whether it is done *by* the Left or the Right. In one of her diaries in April 1937, Woolf refers to listening to a political argument by young writers, who were supporters of the Left: "I sat there splitting off my own position from theirs, testing what they said, [and] convincing myself of my own integrity & justice" (*DV*, 79). Woolf's diary here shows that she was neither unreservedly with the Left nor with the Right, since she was against

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>63</sup> Duchess of Atholl (1874-1960) was a Conservative Member of Parliament for Kinross and West Perth, 1923-38, and was one of the opponents of General Franco. See Nigel Nicolson, ed., footnote 1, *LVI*, 139.

<sup>64</sup> See *Ibid*, 139.

<sup>65</sup> Quentin Bell, 186.

fighting and war itself, and conscious again of the danger of writing being over-influenced by politics not truth.

The rise of Fascism and the tyranny of war-mongering dictators that fed the war in Spain are also themes engaged in *The Years* (1937) and *Three Guineas* (1938). In *The Years* Woolf deals with “discussing dictators; Napoleon; the psychology of great men”,<sup>66</sup> while in *Three Guineas*, she also concentrates on war and its sources, represented by “Tyrant or Dictator [, a]nd behind him lie ruined houses and dead bodies—men, women and children”.<sup>67</sup> The human misery of the Spanish Civil War and the impending outbreak of another world war are directly portrayed in these two books. In *The Years*, especially the “Present Day” section, for instance, Woolf portrays the atmosphere of the threat of war evoked by newspaper placards that insist on the prevailing images of ‘death’ and ‘brutality’, the crises of the Thirties. Such images reflect the absence of humanity, liberty, life and foretell ‘the fall of civilisation’: “On every placard at every street corner was Death; or worse—tyranny; brutality; torture; the fall of civilisation; the end of freedom” (*TY*, 339). In *Three Guineas*, which is written in an atmosphere of sorrow caused by the death of Julian, who “[has] become a ghost” (*DV*, 164) she cannot forget; Woolf asserts that “war is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped” (*TG*, 21). Woolf again refers to the painful photographs of the Spanish Civil War—photographs that show the brutality of war dictators:

Here then on the table before us are photographs. The Spanish Government sends them with patient pertinacity about twice a week. They are not pleasant photographs to look upon. They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning’s collection contains the photograph of what might be a man’s body, or a woman’s; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children. (*TG*, 20)

Woolf again sees even the horror of Spanish Civil War, portrayed by ‘dead bodies’ and ‘mutilated’ people, as the outcome of the patriarchal decision to wage war. The dictatorial voices, that are argued with in “Why Art To-Day Follows Politics”, are also dealt with in *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, since Woolf looks at the dictatorial nature that brings ruin in Spain as

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<sup>66</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (London: Hogarth, 1990), 270. Hereafter, references will be included in the text abbreviated, as *TY*.

<sup>67</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth, 1938), 258. Hereafter references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *TG*.

being essentially masculine; it is the same nature as that of Antigone's Creon, who imposed his power in a way that brought destruction and death to his people: "Pictures and voices are the same today as they were 2,000 years ago" (*TG*, 257). Discussing how to prevent war, in her essay "Woman Must Weep" in 1938, upon which part of the debate of *Three Guineas* is based, Woolf again illuminates her view that war is the product of *patriarchal* power, a view that she discusses in her early novels and essays, especially those which deal with war issues: "[T]o fight has always been the man's habit, not the woman's [...] the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you not by us".<sup>68</sup> What is argued in *The Years* and developed in *Three Guineas* about 'the psychology of great men'—dictators—is also discussed in "Woman Must Weep"; Woolf makes it clear that war psychologically feeds dictators, since it achieves their aims of having glory, position and power: "Here, then, are three reasons which lead your sex to fight: war is a profession; a source of happiness and excitement; and it is also an outlet for manly qualities, without which men would deteriorate".<sup>69</sup> Believing in the "positive quality [of words and] their power to tell the truth",<sup>70</sup> Woolf again emphasises the role of *women's* writing in preventing war, although this role is also besieged by patriarchal power:

[B]oth the Army and the Navy are closed to our sex. Nor, again, are we allowed to be members of the Stock Exchange. Thus we cannot use either the pressure of force or the pressure of money. We cannot preach sermons or negotiate treaties. Then, again, although it is true that we can write articles or send letters to the press, the control of the press—the decision what to print and what not to print—is entirely in the hands of your sex.<sup>71</sup>

Woolf makes it clear that war cannot be prevented without getting rid of the restrictions of patriarchal power that prevent woman from expressing her opinions and practising her liberty.

Obviously, Woolf is increasingly affected by the danger of the Thirties, represented by the rise of Hitler and Mussolini, the Spanish Civil War and the approaching of another cataclysm. Woolf showed her response to the increasingly dreadful events of this period through the rich body of ideas and discussion that she conveyed in her fictional and non-fictional works. The Thirties, with its threat and horrible events sign the beginning of Virginia Woolf's constant depression

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<sup>68</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Women Must Weep", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941*, 134.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>70</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Craftsmanship", 93.

<sup>71</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Women Must Weep", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941*, 137-138.

and anxiety that are later increased and intensified by the Second World War that led to her tragic end.

#### **IV. Virginia Woolf's *The Years***

Woolf has constructed her novel *The Years*, or 'The Pargiters' (*DIV*, 139) as Woolf first intended to call, in eleven chronological sections that cover the years 1880 till the 'Present Day' (that is, the mid-1930s), the novel being published in 1937. Significantly, though, the chronological sections are not evenly spaced: after two sections on the events of 1880 and 1891, the following nine sections cover a comparably shorter period, from 1907 to 1918, with three of the four War years (1914, 1917 and 1918) being allocated separate sections, before the long section on the 'Present Day', which constitutes some fifty percent of the novel. This very pattern indicates from the outset something of Woolf's concerns in her novel: a consideration of how the present generation that had lived, through the tension and dangers of the First World War were now facing the possibility of a new world calamity, with the knowledge of the horrors that would entail. The tension builds through the years, a growing sense of anxiety and vulnerability as the threat of Fascism and Nazism (seen by Woolf as a manifestation of the forces and brutality she associates with 'masculinity') grows more intense. It is a state of anxiety that culminates again in a sense of the world as unstable and 'unreal'. The novel presents the daily life of the Pargiters, a middle-class family; the events focus on Abel Pargiter and his daughters: Eleanor, Milly, Delia, Rose, and his sons: Edward, Morris and Martin, and their relationship with Sir Digby, Abel's brother and his daughters Maggie and Sara.

#### **Time and Process**

The title of *The Years* immediately points to the theme of time, and Virginia Woolf stresses the role of time in the lives of humans. The organisation of the book in dated parts shows the process of the lives through the years of the interrelated families, their daily lives in the years of British Imperial power, the challenge to that Imperial world in the First World War and its aftermath and then the Thirties in the 'Present Day' section. In other words, *The Years* is ultimately about the

bigger themes which we have seen engaged in earlier novels: the rhythm and the processes of human life in time. But written in the 1930s as the disasters of the earlier war seem about to be repeated, the sense of time, the vulnerability of human individuals, their lives and achievements, seemed again to be acute.

Woolf opens the events in the late Victorian period, in which public events are interrelated with the private lives of individuals. In '1891', the threat to the British Empire is delineated through images of natural process and mortality that are registered in most of the scenes. For instance, in Devonshire, where Milly Pargiter is breakfasting with her husband, time has its effect on the pear tree: "There hung the yellow pears on the orchard wall, lifting the leaves over them, they were so swollen. But the wasps had got at them—the skin was broken" (*TY*, 77). In London streets, too, the processes of the natural world show the end of the year, the autumn season that signals the end of summer's fertility:

But in London the streets narrowed the clouds; mist hung thick in the East End by the river; [...] The wind blew the smoke—for in every back garden in the angle of the ivy-grown wall that still sheltered a few last geraniums, leaves were heaped up; keen fanged flames were eating them [...] For it was October, the birth of the year. (*TY*, 77-78)

The references to the 'birth' rather than, as we might expect, the death of the year is striking. Even as Woolf emphasises the supposed decay of the natural world, the dead leaves, decaying fruit, she seems to remind the reader that this period is a necessary clearing away, part of an inexorable process, which will lead to natural rebirth in the spring. However, even with that reminder, the main emphasis, which shades the whole section in autumnal tones is on change and mortality; the dead and the smoke of those burning leaves seem to drift through the whole section. Visiting his brother, Digby, at his house, "[a] cloud of smoke blow[s] straight at [... Abel Pargiter]; it ma[kes] his eyes water," (*TY*, 102); the smoke fills the whole drawing room of Digby's family: "But why was the room so full of smoke? A gust blew in [...], and the smoke was blowing in from the garden [...] There was a bonfire" (*TY*, 101).

Against this rather uncomfortable sense of process and change, a reminder of potential instability in the political world, the continued tensions in Ireland, is brought to mind with the passing of



Charles Stewart Parnell,<sup>72</sup> the political figure, whose death fills most of the newspapers, and is proclaimed on a placard that draws Eleanor's attention: "Then the placard blew straight, and she read another word: 'Parnell.' 'Dead'...she repeated. 'Parnell.' She was dazed for a moment. How could he be dead—Parnell? She bought a paper they said so... 'Parnell is dead!' She said aloud" (*TY*, 97). The degree to which Eleanor is disconcerted by the news of Parnell's death is interesting. Woolf is unlikely to have remembered the actual death, certainly not to have understood its significance, since she had been only ten years of age at that time. In fact Woolf was reading a biography of Parnell in January 1933, during the period she was composing *The Years*, as she notes in her diary: "I am reading Parnell. Yes; but this scene making increases the rate of my heart with uncomfortable rapidity" (*DIV*, 143). Woolf's reaction is interesting; she seems to transfer something of her agitation at the tragedy of Parnell's private life to Eleanor, and the result is not only to portray Eleanor's shock and, we assume, her recollection of the instability in Ireland but also to remind the reader in the 1930s of the even more profound instability and violence in Ireland which were to come later in the period covered by the novel, including, of course, the Civil War. Such political issues, related to Ireland and Africa—the Second Boer War—are the dominant conversation of Abel Pargiter and his brother Digby: "Seen the news? [...] He likes talking politics with his brother, through" (*TY*, 108), and also things "[a]bout this African business" (*TY*, 108). The *uneasiness* of the period is shown clearly through characters' engagement in discussion of the political atmosphere.

The fact of Britain still being the possessor of an Empire which encircled the globe in these years before the First World War is registered repeatedly in the lives of the characters; it is a part of the texture of many of their lives. Abel Pargiter's mutilated "hand that had lost two fingers" (*TY*, 5), is caused by his involvement in the Indian Mutiny. Martin returns home in '1907' "after India, after Africa" (*TY*, 112). In the same section, '1907', Sir Digby and his wife refer to the British government's decision to give Dominion Status to some of its colonies, like New Zealand and Newfoundland: "...of course it's put the Government in a fix" (*TY*, 113). One may speculate that the 1930s reader, some quarter of a century later, might have had a somewhat sharper awareness of such references than the twenty-first century reader, for by the 1930s India itself, the jewel in

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<sup>72</sup> Charles Stewart Parnell was one of the most important figure of 19<sup>th</sup> century in Britain and Ireland. Parnell was an Irish landlord, nationalist political leader, land reform agitator, and the founder leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Woolf here refers to his death in October 1891.

the Imperial crown, was in a state of turmoil (as we have already noted, the controversy following the Amritsar Massacre of 1919 had caused considerable and continued unease about the violence of British rule in India in many quarters.)<sup>73</sup> In ‘Present Day’, Eleanor visits India and her nephew, North, returns from Africa. But the whole Imperial enterprise looked rather less secure than it had in Victoria’s reign.

Woolf portrays the change from the Edwardian period to the Georgian one in ‘1910’. In fact this section should remind us of Virginia Woolf’s comment in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, in 1924:

[I]n or about December, 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite [...] But a change that was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910.<sup>74</sup>

While she is manifestly talking about a gradual shift in values that has implications for the individual consciousness, it is an attitude to change that is much to our purpose. She might perhaps have had in mind the contribution to the cultural shifts we term ‘Modernism’ made by the Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1910. But that year also marked the death of King Edward VII. Thus the section opens optimistically with a sense of new life and energy both in the natural world and the social one:

In London, however, the stricture and pressure of the season were already felt, especially in the West End, where flags flew; canes tapped; dresses flowed; and houses freshly painted had awnings spread and swinging baskets of red geraniums. The Parks too—St. James’s, the Green Park, Hyde Park—were making ready. Already in the morning before there was a chance of a procession [...] as if waiting for something to happen. (*TY*, 139)

But the social season is shadowed by the illness of the king. At the Royal Opera House, Kitty Lasswade, Edward Pargiter and some important characters talk about the king’s illness: “They all looked instinctively at the royal box [...] The box was empty [...] ‘But if he dies?’ [Kitty] said, looking at the royal box, ‘d’you think they’ll stop it?’” (*TY*, 158). The king’s passing, after his

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<sup>73</sup> See Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night’: A Social History of Britain between the Wars*, 103.

<sup>74</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, *Collected Essays*, Vol. One (London: Hogarth, 1966), 320.

long illness, comes at the very end of the section, as Maggie, with the light fading on a summer evening and the shadows falling, hears the newspaper seller in the street:

The voice came nearer and nearer.

‘Death...?’ she said.

‘Death...?’ said Sara. They leant out. But they could not hear the rest of the sentence. Then a man who was wheeling a barrow along the street shouted up to them:

‘The king’s dead!’ (TY, 166)

And ‘1910’ ends. The effect is emotionally resonant. The dust falls at the end of the day, and the end of a reign. But also one feels, and surely the 1930s reader would have felt this, it falls on the final end of the Victorian era and the power and confidence that had marked that era for the British Empire, albeit King Edwards’s funeral was attended by almost as many kings and emperors as had attended that of Queen Victoria.

Narrating the events of ‘1911’, Woolf continues to show the ways in which the public events still intervene in the private life of people, are registered in the rhythms of everyday life. The strain of the political atmosphere of Europe, represented, for example, by the First Balkan War, becomes part of the daily conversation of the characters.<sup>75</sup> At Morris’s mother-in-law’s house, Morris and his guest, Sir William Whatney, discuss the dangers of the ‘Balkans’; the characters feel the threat of this war that would disturb the peace of their future: “‘There’s going to be trouble there in the near future,’ Sir William was saying. He turned to Morris; they discussed the situation in the Balkans” (TY, 175). Again the reader of 1930s would realise all too well, more than the characters can at this point, the disasters that would result from continued Balkan tension. The political tensions that precede the war, represented by the Second Balkan War,<sup>76</sup> occupy one individual’s mind in ‘1913’. Reading a newspaper in his lodging room, Martin becomes aware of the approaching danger that seems inevitable: “The war in the Balkans was over; but there was more trouble brewing—that he was sure. Quite sure” (TY, 192).

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<sup>75</sup> War broke out when the Balkan League (Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia, which got independence from the Ottoman Empire) attacked the Ottoman Empire in October 1912, since large part of their ethnic population remained under the rule of the Empire. See A. W. Palmer, *A Dictionary of Modern History: 1789-1945*, 42.

<sup>76</sup> In June 1913, Bulgaria attacked Serbia and Greece. Romania and the Ottoman Empire also moved against Bulgaria, occupying some territories. Due to these events Bulgaria lost most of the territories it gained in the First Balkan War in 1912. See Palmer, 42.

Moreover, even as they are being affected by public events and processes of the time in which they are living including the growing international tensions, the characters themselves are of course physically subject to the processes of time as the years slide by. As she has at some points in the earlier fiction, Woolf consistently registers the way the characters are physically marked by time. Eleanor, who is fifty-five by 1911, and has recently returned from Spain, looks tired and old: “That she was getting old was obvious; there were wrinkles across her forehead; hollows and creases where the flesh used to be firm” (*TY*, 172). On her way to visit her brother Morris, in his mother-in-law’s house, Eleanor notices the negative influence of time on her life; she feels that she is isolated and homeless, especially after the death of her father: “Seven times, eight times she had come she counted; but this year it was different. This year everything was different. Her father was dead; her house was shut up; she had no attachment at the moment anywhere” (*TY*, 169-170). Moreover, time signs its negative marks not only on human lives, but also on places. In the hall of Morris’s mother-in-law’s house, Eleanor finds that everything has lost its brightness and is getting old: “Everything seemed pale and frail and friendly. The rugs were faded; the pictures were faded. [...] Here it was always the eighteenth century” (*TY*, 170). Years are passing and human life has changed, although at this point the prevailing stable life of the upper classes is intact. Even so, the gradual passage of time makes Eleanor feel insecure, a feeling that increases her anxiety: “Things pass, things change, she thought [...] And where are we going? Where? Where?” (*TY*, 186).

The effects of time in changing the lives of the Pargiters are again very evident in ‘1913’. The Pargiters are affected by the loss of their father, Colonel Abel Pargiter, whose death hits the family economically; their London house is sold and they have to dispense with the services of Crosby, the housekeeper who has served them for many years. The selling of the large house in Abercorn Terrace, itself symptomatic of the beginning of socio-economic change within the world of the landed and financially-secure upper classes, marks the beginning of a life more in touch with classes below the Pargiters in society, a new life, in lodging rooms and rented flats, like those of Martin and Eleanor, in rather shabby places of London. The beginnings of the destruction of the old order are shown, however, not just in the life of the Pargiters but particularly in the life of Crosby. Meeting Eleanor to say good-bye on the day of selling Abercorn Terrace’s house, “Crosby, [who is] crying” (*TY*, 189), has to leave the basement, where she had spent all her life, indeed ‘spent’ it in more ways than one: “Now her blue gnat’s eyes

protruded and her cheeks were sunk” (*TY*, 189). In spite of the misery of the basement and “how dark, how low it [is]” (*TY*, 189), selling the house seems “the end of everything” (*TY*, 189) for her, since it is connected with her life itself—with her past, present and but, now, not with her future: “[The basement] was my home for forty years, Miss,’ said Crosby. The tears were running” (*TY*, 189). The end of Crosby’s service at the Pargiters’ can be seen as representing the passing of a way of life in domestic service. Due to the hardships of such service, young women were increasingly unwilling to accept such work as the century evolved and new opportunities for women slowly emerged.<sup>77</sup> But it seems that Crosby is one of those women who had been “willing to make the sacrifice of independence that residential service required, [...] to accept the poor standard of accommodation in damp basements or cold attics”.<sup>78</sup> Abandoning her past and its security, does not mean Crosby’s freedom or independence, but the beginning of Crosby’s isolation and loneliness: “And now she was going off, alone, to a single room at Richmond” (*TY*, 189).

The acute sense of time passing is marked throughout the novel not only by the processes of the natural world but by the (almost obsessive) way the book registers the mechanisms by which human society measures the passing of time: by the sound of clocks and of bells striking. These sounds not only constantly draw the reader’s attention to time passing, but frequently and subtly add to the sense of insecurity that the characters feel. On the night of his mother's death, the heaviness of time and mortality which Edward Pargiter feels is mirrored by the sounds of bells and clocks. At Oxford, where Edward studies, the sounds of the bells register in their slow resonance not just time but the absence of life and vitality: “One after another the bells of Oxford began pushing their slow chimes through the air. They tolled ponderously, unequally, as if they had to roll the air out of their way and the air was heavy” (*TY*, 41-42). The slow creeping of time makes Edward feel his physical fatigue: “The clocks went on striking [...] he felt as if he had thrown himself down on the turf after running a race.” (*TY*, 42). Sounds of bells generate negative feelings in Kitty, Edward’s cousin whom he loves: “But the bells were making their usual commotion. She hated the sound of the bells; it always seemed to her a dismal sound [...] They went walloping one over another, one after another, as if they would never be finished” (*TY*, 52). (The passage of time and awareness of the past as burdensome seem to be especially

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<sup>77</sup> Michael H. Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2005), 48.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

associated with Oxford: “And in the garden of the Lodge outside Kitty’s window [the rain] sluiced the ancient tree under which kings and poets had sat drinking three centuries ago” (*TY*, 53). Being informed of Mrs. Pargiter’s death, Mrs Malone, Kitty’s mother becomes sad, anxious and vulnerable: “Rose is dead, she thought—Rose who was about her own age” (*TY*, 70); Mrs Malone’s sense of fatigue, caused by Rose’s death is, almost inevitably, delineated by the striking of the clock, which comes to make her aware of the threat, represented by the insidious passage of time: “The bells came pushing forth one after another, one on top of another, through the damp, heavy air [...] There! It’s striking ten” (*TY*, 70). If time reminds Mrs. Malone only of age and death, Delia, who attends the funeral of her mother and is more aware of the full nature of the process, is “possessed by a sense of something everlasting; of life mixing with death, of death becoming life” (*TY*, 74). This feeling is revealed by the natural process that signals the beginning of Delia’s new life after her mother’s death: “For as she looked she heard the sparrows chirp quicker and quicker; she heard wheels in the distance sound louder and louder; life came closer and closer” (*TY*, 74).

Woolf opens ‘1914’ a few months *before* the outbreak of the First World War. The inexorable approach of the catastrophe is implicitly tackled through using a lot of images of time that create a sense of anxiety and insecurity. At the very beginning of this section, Woolf hints at the uneasiness of this year through, again, describing the sounds of clocks. In the bustle of London, the striking of the clocks seems to be curiously ‘irregular’ and confused: “In London all was gallant and strident; the season was beginning; horns hooted; the traffic roared; flags flew taut as trout in a stream [...] But the clocks were irregular” (*TY*, 196). In St. Paul Street, time is delineated as a power that is a threat to human peace: “The great clock, all the clocks of the city, seemed to be gathering their forces together; they seemed to be whirring a preliminary warning” (*TY*, 198-199). Time in this section passes quickly, and humans are aware of it. In Fleet Street, Martin who joins Sara to meet her sister Maggie, feels a characteristic anxiety about time: “He looked up. The station clock’s always fast, he assured a man who was hurrying to catch a train. Always fast, he said to himself as he opened the paper. But there was no clock” (*TY*, 206). In this ‘1914’ section especially clocks cause uneasiness; in Round Pond of Kensington Gardens, Martin and Sara hear the striking of the clock: “As they reached her [Maggie], the distant sound of a clock striking was wafted on the breeze. One, two, three, four it struck...Then it ceased” (*TY*, 213). While Sara is asleep, Martin and Maggie recall things related to the past; their

conversation is interrupted by the crying of Maggie's child, and again the cry is accompanied by the clocks' sound: "Their privacy was over. The child cried; and the clocks began striking. The sound came wafted gently towards them on the breeze. One, two, three, four, five" (TY, 216). The crying of the infant with the striking of the clock create a kind of awareness that makes the characters conscious of their present and stop talking about their past, a past that cannot be returned to again. In addition to that, clocks and hand watches seem to give unspecific time. On his way to Lady Lasswade's party, Martin has such a feeling: "He looked at his watch—it was just on eight-thirty. But eight-thirty means eight-forty-five he thought" (TY, 217). By doing so, Woolf draws the reader's attention to the relentless movement of time that unnerves human individuals in the face of the inexorable process of time and the approaching threat of world events.

Characters are throughout shown as being consciously aware of the way time is changing their lives, a fact that Kitty Lasswade becomes aware of on her way to the north of England: "The years changed things; destroyed things; heaped things up" (TY, 237). The same feeling accompanies Kitty even when she arrives the Lodge—her childhood's place: "All passes, all changes, she thought, as she climbed up the little path between the trees" (TY, 243).

### **Human Anxiety and Vulnerability**

By the time she was writing *The Years*, Virginia Woolf was not only aware as a reader of the writing of Sigmund Freud but as the publisher of his work in English, at the Hogarth Press. His essay "A Note on the Unconscious in Psycho-Analysis", written in 1912, was published by Hogarth in 1925. In this essay Freud defines "an unconscious concept [as] one of which we are not aware, but the existence of which we are nevertheless ready to admit on account of other proofs or signs".<sup>79</sup> Accordingly, Freud attributes some human functions, like talking to oneself, to the unconsciousness: "Certain deficiencies of function of most frequent occurrence among healthy people, e.g. lapsus linguae, errors in memory and speech, forgetting of names, etc., may easily be shown to depend on the action of strong unconscious ideas in the same way as neurotic

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<sup>79</sup> Sigmund Freud, "A Note on the Unconscious in Psycho-Analysis", *Collected Papers, Vol. IV*, trans., Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth, 1925), 23.

symptoms”.<sup>80</sup> Due to the anxiety and the stress caused by the approaching of the First World War, human beings in ‘1914’ of *The Years* resort to the world of ‘unconsciousness’ to escape their reality. In particular, the characters repeatedly and unconsciously talk to themselves, either silently or aloud; this behaviour seems to be part of their ‘lapsus linguae’. Meeting Sara in St. Paul Street, Martin notices that “[h]er lips [are] moving. She [is] talking to herself” (*TY*, 199). Then, “[a] middle aged woman [is] coming towards them [Martin and Sara]. She [is] talking to herself. Her lips mov[e]; she [is] gesticulating with her hand” (*TY*, 208). Talking to oneself seems to be a habit that accompanies almost everyone, even the young: “A young man came past them [...] He was muttering as he walked. He scowled at them as he passed them” (*TY*, 208). Rishona Zimring suggests that this scene amplifies the sense of ‘human disconnection’, in which there are speakers with no listeners.<sup>81</sup> But it seems that such scenes of talking to oneself are more than indicating ‘human disconnection’, since talking to oneself is exhibited by people whom Martin and Sara do not know, and do not need to listen to. Moreover, the tensions of this period seem to be reflected negatively in the appearance of people themselves; they look tired, strained and ‘worried’. Looking at the faces of her guests at the dinner party, Kitty (Lady Lasswade) feels that “their faces loo[k] harassed, worried; their hands mov[e] restlessly. Yet they’re brave, she th[inks]; and generous” (*TY*, 228). Kitty herself seems to be short-tempered and annoyed; “[s]he [is] irritable; she [is] restless” (*TY*, 231).

Human anxiety caused by the growing crisis can also be seen, of course, through the characters’ constant political discussion, as Martin says “‘The whole world,’ he said, ‘Politics; religion; morality’” (*TY*, 214). Woolf hints at the hazard of the war through the public’s expectation; they are aware that the war might “Roll up the map of Europe” (*TY*, 203), once it starts.

## **Gender and Masculinity**

In 1931, Woolf wrote her essay “Professions for Women”, in which she tackles the situation of women in Victorian society, a society that gives domination to masculinity; she describes Victorian woman as being: “The Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can [...]

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>81</sup> Rishona Zimring, “Suggestions of other Worlds: The Art of Sound in *The Years*”, *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol. 8, 2002 (New York: Pace U. P., 2002), 139.



She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily [...] In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel”.<sup>82</sup> ‘The Angel in the House’ was not a phrase original to Virginia Woolf, of course. Its origins extend back as far as 1854, to a poem by Coventry Patmore.<sup>83</sup> The phrase was used by a number of writers on women’s issues in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In the early sections of *The Years*, Woolf presents the Pargiters’ daughters as being essentially angels in the house, especially after their father is left a widow; they practise their role within ‘the difficult art of family life’ by remaining at home, engaged in domestic duties, while the male sons have their right to study or to engage in careers; for example, Morris becomes a lawyer and Edward, who studies at Oxford, has got an academic job there. The situation in the Pargiters’ house shows that this “patriarchal family contributes to war by creating heroic sons and angelic daughters”.<sup>84</sup> Accordingly, Eleanor and her sisters are deprived of having a chance of education like their brothers. Patricia Cramer points out that the death of the mother of the Pargiter family in 1880, supports and strengthens the patriarchal power in the house, as of course was the case in the Stephens’ household.<sup>85</sup> Indeed one can say that the absence of an active mother, starting with Mrs. Pargiter’s illness, increases the load on her daughters. The image of ‘the Angel in the House’ in the Pargiter family stays as it is till the sale of Abercorn Terrace that finds a kind of relief expressed by Eleanor herself: “she was so glad to be quit of it all” (*TY*, 189). Thereafter we see some of the Pargiter daughters begin to assert themselves in new roles: Eleanor is active in practical charitable work, collecting money to build houses for the London poor, while, more radically, Rose becomes a suffragette, a role that leads her to face the full force of gender conflict, as Martin tells Sara in ‘1914’: “Ought to see my sister in prison [...] Rose. For throwing a brick” (*TY*, 202-203). Even though the Pargiter daughters find a kind of independence in their living, in ‘Present Day’—Eleanor now has her own flat—they still suffer the influence of Victorian life and traditions on their lives, especially Eleanor, who remains unmarried and ultimately sacrifices her life both for her family and for others: “My life’s been other people’s lives” (*TY*, 321).

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<sup>82</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”, *Virginia Woolf Collected Essays*, Vol. Two (London: Hogarth, 1966), 285.

<sup>83</sup> See Coventry Patmore, *Poems*, Third Collected Edition, Vol. I (London: George Bell and Son, 1887). 1-153.

<sup>84</sup> Patricia Cramer, “Loving in the War Years: The War of Images in *The Years*”, *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, ed., Mark Hussey (Syracuse: Syracuse U. P., 1991), 207.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 207.

As in most of her novels, Woolf in *The Years*, still looks at masculinity as being the cause of war. In her essay “This is the House of Commons”, written in 1932, the year Woolf started writing *The Years*, Woolf addresses the nature and role of masculinity, represented by political men, who decide the destinies of the people and who make the decisions to wage war:

One has to say to oneself severely, ‘But this is the House of Commons. Here the destinies of the world are related. Here Gladstone fought, and Palmerston and Disraeli. It is by these *men* that we are governed. We obey their orders every day of the year. Our purses are at their mercy. They decide how fast we shall drive our cars in Hyde Park; also whether we shall have war or peace’.<sup>86</sup>

At the very beginning of her novel Woolf associates war with images of masculinity. Tackling the events of 1880, masculinity and militarism are connected. As in the case of Captain Barfoot, in *Jacob’s Room*, the mutilation of Colonel Abel Pargiter, is caused by war; he is a veteran, who has participated in the suppression of the Indian Mutiny of 1857: “He had lost two fingers of the right hand in the Mutiny” (*TY*, 10). The ‘world’ of Abel Pargiter, and ‘his companions’ in the (gentlemen only) club is the dominant masculine ‘world’:

Colonel Abel Pargiter was sitting after luncheon in his club talking. Since his companions in the leather armchairs were men of his own type, men who had been soldiers, civil servants, men who had now retired, they were reviving with old jokes and stories now their past in India, Africa, Egypt, and then, by a natural transition, they turned to the present. (*TY*, 2)

Hence, the Colonel is “one of those who impose the will of the Empire in the world”.<sup>87</sup> The link between patriarchy in its public, political manifestations and its domestic aspects is, clearly, epitomised by the Pargiter family. Indeed Linden Peach argues that Woolf presents the Pargiter family in this sense as an anti-social institution.<sup>88</sup> The centring of the early part of the narrative on the character of Colonel Pargiter, at home, reveals that the family itself can be seen as a military regiment that obeys his command without question: “He stood there very erect among them, as if he wished to give some order, but could not at the moment think of any order to give” (*TY*, 12). Abel Pargiter’s behaviour shows features not only of a Victorian father, but also those

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<sup>86</sup> Virginia Woolf, “This is the House of Commons”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. V: 1929-1932*, ed., Stuart N. Clarke (London: Hogarth, 2009), 325. My emphasis.

<sup>87</sup> Catherine Nelson-McDermott, “Disorderly Conduct: Parody and Coded Humor in *Jacob’s Room* and *The Years*”, *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol. 5, 1999 (New York: Pace U. P., 1999), 88.

<sup>88</sup> Linden Peach, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 171.

of a commander inspecting his soldiers: “The Colonel stood at the door and surveyed the group rather fiercely. His small blue eyes looked round them as if to find fault; at the moment there was no particular fault to find; but he was out of temper” (*TY*, 9), perhaps because of his wife’s illness, since she is “between life and death” (*TY*, 17). Being a Victorian father, the Colonel encourages his son Martin at one point by “handing [a] sixpence to his son” (*TY*, 10), ignoring his daughters.

The threats posed by a masculine/militaristic world are also dealt with through the perception of Rose, one of the Pargiter daughters, when a child. Being faced by her brother's refusal to join her in going to Lamely's shop, Rose decides to go there alone in the evening, although this innocent child is very aware that the outside world is not safe for a little child: “[S]he stole on tiptoe to the night nursery. Now she must provide herself with ammunition and provisions; she must steal Nurse's latchkey; but where was it? Every night it was hidden in a new place for fear of burglars” (*TY*, 21). The scene is described, through the adventurous child's eyes, in a way that creates a sense of foreboding: “It was growing dark [...]; the trees in the front gardens made a wavering network of shadow on the pavement [...] She had only to cross the desert, to ford the river, and she was safe” (*TY*, 22). On her way to the shop, Rose confronts masculine danger when she is frightened by “the figure of a man [who] suddenly emerge[s] under the gas lamp” (*TY*, 22); her response to the man with “a horrid face: white, peeled, pockmarked; [who] leer[s] at her [and...] put[s] his arm as if to stop her” (*TY*, 23), is immediately, a military one. She exclaims to herself: “The enemy! Bang! [...] pulling the trigger of her pistol” (*TY*, 23). The whole episode is seen by young girl in terms of a military incident, constructed probably from her reading of imperial adventure stories and also imbibed from the attitudes she is familiar with at home, including perhaps overhearing conversation between her father and her brother about the First Boer War. Clearly this little girl, as much as her bothers, has absorbed the register of warfare: “She was riding by night on a desperate mission to a besieged garrison, [...] She had a secret message [...] to deliver to the General in person [...] The British flag was still flying on the central tower” (*TY*, 22).

Woolf does not cease drawing her reader's attention to the dominant masculine power throughout *The Years*. In ‘1891’, at the court, attending one of her brother, Morris's cases, Eleanor feels the authoritative masculine power and supremacy of the court and barristers: “They

all looked like pictures; all the barristers looked emphatic, cut out, like eighteenth-century portraits hung upon a wall” (TY, 93). Eleanor is affected by the solemnity of the court that is dominated by a masculine judge sitting proudly under the badge of the British state: “She glanced round. It was an odd mixture of solemnity and licence. [...] She gazed at the Judge himself. He was now lying back in his great carved chair under the Lion and the Unicorn, listening” (TY, 95). The authoritative power which Kitty, Lady Lasswade, gains from being the wife of a Member of Parliament is clearly shown at Delia’s party. Like Lady Bruton, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Kitty is delineated as being a lady who gives orders and enforces obedience, as North sees her: “She was one of those well-set-up rather *masculine* old ladies who repelled him slightly [...] He could see her, as she stood there, doing the honours of Government House. ‘Sit here. Sit there. And you, young man, I hope you take plenty of exercise?’” (TY, 344. My emphasis.) But, again like Lady Bruton, this woman achieves ‘masculine’ authority by virtue of her male affiliation, not as a woman in her own right.

### **Treatment of the First World War**

In *The Years*, as we have noted, three sections are devoted to the period of the First World War, implicitly and explicitly: ‘1914’, ‘1917’ and ‘1918’. In ‘1914’, Woolf does not mention the war directly, probably because this section starts a few months before the outbreak of the war itself. However, the 1930s readers will of course have been fully aware of what is about to happen, aware of a sense of anxiety and vulnerability with which they themselves were becoming all too familiar.

In the holograph manuscript of *The Years*, Woolf tackles the First World War by presenting scenes during the war itself in ‘1914’, and after the war in 1921. In fact these scenes were deleted before the publication of the novel, probably because Woolf did not want to repeat herself, since these scenes deal with the sense of patriotism that was prevailing during the war, as well as with the post-war period. The first of the two extracts that “survived in unmarked galleys in the holdings of the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library”,<sup>89</sup> starts (unlike the published version of ‘1914’ which ends in July) in “[t]he sultry September”, one month *after* the outbreak

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<sup>89</sup> Hermione Lee, Appendix, *Virginia Woolf: The Years* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1992), 414.

of the war.<sup>90</sup> In the first scene from the first extract, war is portrayed as already part of daily life; people keep “talking about the War” (*HTY*, 414) and soldiers fill most of the London Streets: “A company of young men in khaki were marching down Richmond High Street. A drum beat a regular tick, tick, tick, tick” (*HTY*, 414). The picture here shows that these soldiers are ‘young men’ who have been drawn into the tide of patriotism, like Jacob Flanders, Septimus Warren Smith, and Andrew Ramsay. The patriotic sense with which the young men regard the war also encourages North Pargiter to follow. In ‘1917’ of the published novel, the reader is informed that North, the son of Morris, has joined the war as a soldier in the Royal Regiment, as he tells Sara: “I leave for the Front tonight, [...] I’m a lieutenant” (*TY*, 249). There is no doubt that North drifts into the tide of the war as a combatant, following the heroism he learns from school. Like Percival in *The Waves*, North is presented in ‘1911’ as a “cricketing boy” (*TY*, 176), who is in the prime of life; he tries to prove his manliness, “puffing at a cigar which was his first” (*TY*, 181). Woolf here concentrates on the falsity of the war that makes young men fall victim to it.

The holograph manuscript of *The Years* also shows a sense of patriotism through the admiration of civilians for the soldiers who occupy most of the train:

They stood in a line down the middle of the carriage, hanging on to the straps, talking and joking as if they had been out all day taking exercise together. Their faces were red; the necks of their uniforms were open. The civilian passengers kept looking up at them surreptitiously over the edges of their newspapers. They looked at them admiringly. (*HTY*, 417)

At the same time there is already “[a] vague sympathy” (*HTY*, 419) for those going to the war; an old woman in the train looks at a young officer, with a girl in evening dress: “They’re having a last night together before he goes to the Front, the old lady thought” (*HTY*, 419-420). The inner strain the young man is under is suggested by the fact that “he hardly spoke. His hand went mechanically to his chin; little clipped words seemed to issue from his firm red lips” (*HTY*, 420). The old lady thinks of “thousands of young men [...] standing in the rain; thousand are lying wounded, she thought” (*HTY*, 420). We might suggest, in fact, that, the war being only a month old, it is unlikely that this old lady would have had such a thought. It is, rather, an anxious perception from the 1930s.

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<sup>90</sup> Virginia Woolf, Holograph of *The Years*, Appendix, in *The Years*, ed. Hermione Lee Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1992), 423. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *HTY*.

Responding to the disastrous events of the war that lead to the tragic destinies of young soldiers, civilians examine daily the newspapers that list the names of ‘casualties’. Reading the newspapers, “a sense of futility comes over her [Eleanor]” (*HTY*, 428); she is shocked by the death of a sailor she “meet[s] at Morris’s” (*HTY*, 427): “‘Casualties, casualties,’ she murmured [...] There were some names in the stop-press news; [...] she came to the name of Rankin” (*HTY*, 427). Eleanor feels the absurdity of life, since humanity cannot stop the tide of war that lifts young men like Rankin: “She saw the gently swaying waves lifting him up and down as he lay helpless in the moonlight” (*HTY*, 427-428). It is an elegiac and moving passage, but Eleanor’s mood, one might suggest, is perhaps that of a period later than September 1914, only one month into the war, another reason for the passage to be excited.

In the published novel, humans are immediately engaged in the war in ‘1917’. The scene opens with the darkness that envelops London in the blackout: “Darkness pressed on the windows; towns had merged themselves in open country. No light shone, save when a searchlight rayed round the sky” (*TY*, 244). Woolf herself had experienced such darkness during the war; in her diary in January 1915, she writes:

Moreover, London on a Sunday night now, with all its electric globes half muffled in blue paint, is the most dismal of places. There are long mud coloured streets, & just enough daylight & insufficient electric light, to see the naked sky, which is inexpressibly cold & flat.<sup>91</sup>

The electric light that is ‘muffled in blue’ is indeed mirrored in this section of the novel, where Eleanor is on her way to dine with her cousin Maggie and Renny, her husband; she has to use a torch because of the darkness: “The further side of the street was almost invisible. The lamps were shrouded in blue. She flashed her torch onto a name on a street corner” (*TY*, 244). Maggie’s complaint of being “extremely dirty” (*TY*, 247) and dining in the basement “[b]ecause we’ve no servants” (*TY*, 247), hints at the domestic problems that are created by the war. It is the same problem that Mrs. MacNab suffers in *To the Lighthouse*, in which she cannot find a servant to help her in cleaning the house, since most of the servants had stopped working in houses and joined the war effort to work in military service and get a better income. This may be the Home Front, but the war is inescapable, permeating all aspects even of domestic life.

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<sup>91</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. I: 1915-1919*, ed, Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1977), 5-6. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *DI*.

The horror and danger of the war in this section make the characters confront death itself. Eleanor, Maggie, Renny, Sara and Nicholas—all have been frightened by the air raid that spoils not only the dinner, which is prepared in the basement, but even the happiness of being gathered together. The sense of being frightened permeates the characters. It makes everything round Eleanor lose its brightness: “The siren wailed again [...] ‘The Germans...’ said Eleanor as the door shut. She felt as if some dull bore had interrupted an interesting conversation. The colours began to fade” (*TY*, 252). Outside Maggie’s house, the street also conveys the danger of the war that threatens every individual, even in London. Images like “the rush of wheels in the street” (*TY*, 252) and the confusion in passengers that the air raids create, “[e]verything seem[s] to be going past very quickly” (*TY*, 252)—these images show the stress that the civilians endure during the war. In the basement, Maggie and Renny accompanied by their guests sit listening to the sounds of the anti-aircraft guns: “Then there was a violent crack of sound, like the split of lightning in the sky” (*TY*, 254). The unreality of such terrifying moments is shown in the characters’ faces: “They looked at each other. Draped in their quilts and dressing-gowns, against the grey-green walls, they all looked whitish, greenish” (*TY*, 255). Unsurprisingly the anxiety that is caused by the air raids makes the characters here long for peace and a “new world” (*TY*, 258) that might bring a better life, but as yet this longing seems a forlorn hope; Eleanor murmurs Nicholas’s words: “[H]ow can we improve ourselves [...] live more naturally... better... How can we?” (*TY*, 258). Finding herself imprisoned in the horrible ‘world’ of the war, Eleanor wishes to be free from danger: “Eleanor wished that [Nicholas] would go on talking [...] When, she wanted to ask him, when will this new world come? When shall we be free?” (*TY*, 259). It seems that Woolf here ironically hints at the ‘new world’ of the thirties, one that, as the reader would be aware, has only opened the way to another world war.

A sense of human vulnerability and of sombreness caused by the war fills most of ‘1918’, which opens in November, the month of the Armistice. Crosby, the Pargiters’ servant, is seen as having “aged greatly during the past four years” (*TY*, 264). There is no doubt that the war had its negative influence on all classes, especially on the lower class, that of Crosby, who might suffer additional poverty and difficult circumstances in the war: “Her face twitched as she walked, as if her muscles had got into the habit of protesting, involuntarily, against the spites and obstacles that tormented her” (*TY*, 264). Describing the Armistice in her diary on 11 November 1918, Woolf shows how peace is celebrated by ‘guns’ rather than another peaceful means: “Twenty [-]

five minutes ago the guns went off, announcing peace. A siren hooted on the river. They are hooting still. A few people ran to look out of windows. The rooks wheeled round, [...] So far neither bells nor flags, but wailing of sirens & intermittent guns” (*DI*, 216). By the end of the ‘1918’ section we have been informed of the conclusion of the war, portrayed, exactly as it is described in Woolf’s diary, by “a siren floated out its melancholy wail of sound [...] and] a dull explosion [...] The rooks, scared by the gun-fire, rose and wheeled round the tree tops” (*TY*, 266); as Hermione Lee points out, the end of the war here is declared in a way that brings no particular sense of hope.<sup>92</sup> This is why Crosby receives the news with a sense of bleakness, even incredulity: “The guns went on booming and the sirens wailed. The war was over—so somebody told her as she took her place in the queue at the grocer’s shop” (*TY*, 266).

The post-war period is tackled in the second deleted extract of the holograph manuscript of *The Years*: “it’s now nineteen-twenty-one” (*HTY*, 432). Even though the war is over, it still signs its melancholic mark on human memories. Walking with Kitty Lasswade, talking about Oxford, Edward Pargiter relives the tragic past and how “[m]any of his pupils had been killed in the War” (*HTY*, 435). Memories from the war come to Eleanor’s mind and interrupt her conversation with Kitty; Nicholas’s words during the time of the war echo again in her ears: “How difficult it is to know people” (*HTY*, 446). As she has done in the post-war world of *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf here registers a new sense of the isolation that the individuals feel after the war.

### ‘Present Day’

The stress and tension of the Thirties occupied Woolf, as we have seen, throughout that decade. Commenting on Hitler’s violent action on 30 June 1934, the ‘Nights of the Long Knives’, when he ordered the execution of several prominent military rivals and their families,<sup>93</sup> Woolf wrote to Ethel Smyth on 2 July 1934, telling her:

For the first time almost in my life I am honestly, without exaggeration, appalled by the Germans. Can[’]t get over it. How can you or anyone explain last week end! Their faces! Hitler! Think of

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<sup>92</sup> Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1977), 187.

<sup>93</sup> See, Nigel Nicolson, ed, Footnote 1, *The Sick Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. V: 1932-1935*, 313.



that hung before us as the ideal of human life! Sometimes I feel that we are all pent up in the stalls at a bull fight. (LV, 313)

That final sentence is brilliantly expressive of the contemporary sense of stress. In September 1935, in her diary, Woolf expressed her anxiety about the increasing tension of the European political atmosphere, represented by Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia: "A very sensational voice on the loudspeaker last night. M[ussolini] closes the door. Deep disappointment. What next?" (DIV, 338). Hence, 'Present Day' comes to display the unease of the whole period of the Thirties that occupies the life of characters. 'Present Day', that seems to be the early mid-1930s, the period in which Woolf started writing *The Years*, focusses on the pressure of the decade on human consciousness. Such pressure can be seen through the anxious eyes of the inter-war generation, a tension that Woolf tries to manifest here, as she herself confesses to Stephen Spender in a letter in April 1937, telling him about *The Years*:

But what I meant I think was to give a picture of society as a whole; give characters from every side; turn them towards society, not private life [...] Keep one toe on the ground by means of dates, facts [...] and then shift the stress from present to future. (LVI, 116)

The gloomy shadows of the political atmosphere of the Thirties envelope human life in 'Present Day'. The characters in this section are presented as being engaged completely in their public world, 'society, not private life' as it is referred to in Woolf's letter; in such a world the private might be impinged upon by the events in the public world at any minute. The characters here are afraid of the threat not only to human life but to all they hold dear, all that is important in life, especially as far as Bloomsbury is concerned; for Eleanor Fascism "means the end of everything we cared for [...] Freedom and justice" (TY, 289). The political issues the characters discuss and the constant references to 'facts' such as 'dictators' that fill most of their conversations make one ever aware of the stress of "the gloomy thirties".<sup>94</sup> Nicholas' satirical words about 'great men' that he expresses "with a little laugh" (TY, 245) in '1917', during the war, echo again in this section in Eleanor's house, where he and Eleanor do not cease talking politics: "They had been discussing dictators; Napoleon; the psychology of great men" (TY, 270). Woolf illuminates her idea, about understanding 'the psychology of [those who aspire to be] great men' later in 1938 in

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<sup>94</sup> Mowat, 480.

her essay *Three Guineas*, in which she addresses men, arguing that their love of power and eminence leads them to fight and wage war; they become dictators rather than ‘great men’:

How can then are we to understand your problem, and if we cannot, how can we answer your question, how to prevent war? The answer based upon our experience and our psychology—Why fight?— is not an answer of any value. Obviously there is for you some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting which we have never felt or enjoyed. (*TG*, 14)

Tackling the psychology of such men, Woolf hints at the aggressive psychologies of both Hitler and Mussolini. The rise of Fascism draws the attention of North Pargiter, who returns from Africa after being there several years. On his way to visit Sara, North notices that “Somebody had chalked a circle on the wall with a jagged line in it” (*TY*, 270). What is drawn on the wall, as the 1930s reader would realise, denotes the symbol of the British Union of Fascists.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, anti-Semitism was not confined to the British Union of Fascism, or the political right. As elsewhere in her fiction, Woolf registers—and does *not* seem to criticise—the casual anti-Semitism of her class. In a scene that is more shocking to a post-Holocaust world than to English upper-middle-class society in the 1930s, Sara is disgusted by the dirtiness of her Jewish neighbour with whom she shares a bathroom, as she tells North: “The Jew [was] having a bath [...] And tomorrow there’ll be a line of grease round the bath” (*TY*, 296). Sharing Sara’s feelings, North replies: “Damn the Jew!” (*TY*, 296). Sara here expresses something of what Woolf feels towards Jews, a feeling presented in her diary of January 1915, a feeling of disgust and dislike: “I do not like the Jewish voice; I do not like the Jewish laugh” (*DI*, 6). But here Woolf has a specific individuals in mind: in 1912 she had met Leonard’s mother and sister, and did not like them.

Karen L. Levenback suggests rather oddly that in the ‘Present Day’ section there is little evidence to show that the Pargiters, including combatants like North, remember their own experiences of the war; that they seem to deny the war.<sup>96</sup> In fact, however, the characters in ‘Present Day’ do not stop mentioning the First World War; their anxious recalling of their

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<sup>95</sup> The political party in the United Kingdom formed by Oswald Mosley in 1932, a supporter of Fascist ideas. The party was proscribed in 1940, and Mosley was interned. See Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 92-118.

<sup>96</sup> Karen L. Levenback, “Virginia Woolf and Returning Soldiers: The Great War and the Reality of Survival in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Years*”, *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol. 2, 1996 (New York: Pace U. P., 1996), 80-81.

experience in the war shows their fear of the future, as the shadows of another war gather in 1930s. The way in which their consciousness has been marked by that earlier war, as most of Woolf's readers would have been aware, is constantly evident. Waiting for a taxi to take her to Delia's party, Eleanor, who is now "over seventy" (*TY*, 268), remembers the night of the First World War air raids: "Now, because she had been talking to North, it brought back the war; how she had stood there one night, watching the searchlights. She had come home, after a raid; she had been dining in Westminster with Renny and Maggie" (*TY*, 287). Eleanor repeats Morris's words, said during the war: "The world will never be the same again" (*TY*, 287). It seems that the previous bitter experience of the war comes to be repeated here through the characters' constant anxiety about their public world. Looking at the evening paper, Eleanor is shocked by a "picture of a fat man gesticulating" (*TY*, 288); the picture seems likely to be either that of Hitler or, perhaps more likely, of Hermann Goering: "What a face! [...] Damned [...] bully" (*TY*, 288). And again Eleanor remembers the horror of the war that had led to the tragic end of Charles, her nephew, "a nice dull boy who had been killed" (*TY*, 293-294) in the war itself, since "[his] death had been very sad" (*TY*, 294). Enjoying their time at the party, characters, who are under the influence of present political events, again relive the past with its bitter experiences; Kitty has unpleasant memories of the past: "But speaking for myself, the old days were bad days, wicked days, cruel days" (*TY*, 350-351). Even though the post-war world brought a kind of independence to some colonies like Ireland, Patrick, as an Irishman, protests against the war and its consequences: "'What's the war done for us [...]' He wagged his head with melancholy tolerance from side to side" (*TY*, 350). North, who supposedly returns more optimistic from Africa, where he has enjoyed security, cannot escape his memories of the war that he had experienced as a combatant: "[H]e had been in trenches; he had seen men killed" (*TY*, 353). It has changed him irrevocably, as it had changed his generation and, as she recalls the war in this section, Woolf manifests the scarred consciousness of her contemporaries, scars made painful again by the fear of the outbreak of another war.

On the other hand, the changes that the war creates can be seen in 'Present Day' by other shifts: for instance, through the liberation of women. Female characters in this section, one notices, are now free to smoke; Sara talks to North with her cigarette "puff[ing] her smoke out" (*TY*, 282) and Peggy, Eleanor's niece, in the presence of her aunt, lights "another cigarette" (*TY*, 285). A number of women do not marry, preferring not to be bound by domestic life. In spite of

confessing to North her feeling towards Nicholas: “I love him” (*TY*, 282), Sara provokes North’s wondering at her being unmarried: “She had never married; he wondered why not” (*TY*, 282). The progress of life and its modernity, symbolised by technological developments such as telephone and gramophone, show the changes that the society witnessed after the war.

### **Sense of Unreality**

Repeatedly the sense of insecurity and vulnerability, and the constant anxiety which the characters feel as the crisis of 1930s develops, are manifested by their feeling the familiar world around them as ‘unreal’. In many aspects this feeling is tackled in Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (1919), referred to earlier in the present discussion. This sense of unfamiliarity and ‘unreal’ is a state of mind, provoked by specific circumstances which appear in a domestic setting in the earlier sections of *The Years*. Delia, in the stress of watching her mother die, has just such a sense of ‘unreality’: “At this hour of the evening the sick-room had an *unreal* cleanliness, quiet and order. There by the bedside was a little table set with spectacles, prayer-book and a vast of lilies of the valley. The flowers, too, looked unreal” (*TY*, 17. My emphasis.) The description shows Delia’s lack of hope at finding any improvement or change in her mother’s health, since her mother is described as if “she had entered the private world of illness” (*TY*, 17). It is domestic stress that gives rise to similar feelings in Morris, the son of Abel Pargiter, who feels himself under the atmosphere of “suppressed emotion” (*TY*, 37) that makes him feel the unfamiliarity of the home around him: “There he was cooped up with all these women in an atmosphere of unreal emotion” (*TY*, 37). On her way home after visiting the Robsons at “the red cheap villas that her father disliked so much” (*TY*, 54), an area that is different from her own upper-middle-class street, Kitty sees things that are familiar to her—things in her own street—as being unfamiliar and ‘unreal’:

But for a moment all seemed to her obsolete, frivolous, inane. The usual undergraduate in cap and gown with books under his arm looked silly. And the portentous old men with their exaggerated features, looked like gargoyles, carved, mediaeval, unreal. (*TY*, 63)

Like Kitty, Rose Pargiter, who visits Maggie and Sara in ‘1910’, is captured by the same feeling of uncertainty when she talks about her life in Abercorn Terrace:

They talked, she thought, as if Abercorn Terrace were a scene in a play. They talked as if they were speaking of people who were real, but not real in the way in which she felt herself to be real. It puzzled her; it made her feel that she was two different people at the same time; that she was living at two different times at the same moment. (*TY*, 145)

Rose's feeling of the absence of reality in Abercorn Terrace's life creates a feeling of being detached from her life and the people she knows there, since Abercorn Terrace reminds her of her childhood that is associated with insecurity caused by being frightened by the man on her way to Lamely's shop: "She started slightly, roused from her thoughts about her childhood, and separated the glasses" (*TY*, 145). Even in Abercorn Terrace, Rose has felt alienated and 'unhomed'.

But such feelings of 'unreality' and alienation are a constant presence in the younger generation in 'Present Day', represented for instance by North and Peggy, who "are confused and bitter about the legacy of the past and the suffering of the present".<sup>97</sup> Woolf has chosen North and Peggy to convey other characters' impressions and feelings, and give their own comments, if not criticism. Both of them here are presented to show Woolf's ideas about the Thirties. Due to economic complications in the British Empire and its colonies in 1930, some of the British, who were living in the colonies returned home; they found themselves alienated from the British life; that society had changed profoundly, whereas life in India and other parts of the Empire was still being lived according to pre-war attitudes and values.<sup>98</sup> Like Peter Walsh in *Mrs. Dalloway*, North, Morris's son, who has been in Africa for several years, has realised how things have been changed and people whom he knows look different: "All these years, he thought to himself, [...] Children he had left in the nursery were grown-up men at college; girls with pigtails were now married women. He was still confused by it all" (*TY*, 269). North feels that it is difficult to coexist with people and society again, since he feels that they look either sensitive or savage: "Anyhow they all romanticised solitude and savagery" (*TY*, 270). The change in people that North has observed makes him suffer loneliness and isolation, a sense of being 'unhomed': "He felt an outsider. After all these years, he thought, everyone was paired off; settled down; busy with their own affairs" (*TY*, 277). Karen L. Levenback attributes North's feeling of being 'outsider' to the fact of being a combatant survivor of the First World War and compares his

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<sup>97</sup> Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, 187.

<sup>98</sup> Pugh, 408- 409.

solitary life with traumatised soldiers, like Philip Woolf, the brother-in-law of Virginia Woolf, and Septimus Smith of *Mrs Dalloway*.<sup>99</sup> Undoubtedly, most ex-soldiers, especially those who are traumatised, suffer the horror of the war, even after the end of it. But for North it seems that the case is different, since he does not endure shell shock and is not returning to London from the Front at this point, but “[h]e’s been [in Africa] on a farm there” (*TY*, 350), in which he hoped to enjoy peaceful life, since it does not negatively affect him: “And you haven’t changed” (*TY*, 268). Unlike Septimus, whose wife tries to support him, North is presented as alone, without a wife or a friend. North’s isolation, caused by seeing people ‘busy with their own affairs’, is increased by the gloomy political atmosphere of the Thirties, including the threat of another war that is clear in his relatives’ constant conversation: “Politics as usual, money and politics, North thought, overhearing them” (*TY*, 349). On his way to Sara’s house, North “ha[s] a feeling that he [is] no one and nowhere in particular” (*TY*, 272). The same sense of uncertainty mingled with unease accompanies North even while he is dining with Sara: “This half knowing people, this half being known, [...] She smiled at him, as he sat there, holding his hat uncertainly” (*TY*, 273). The land and society North had expected to be familiar, to be ‘home’, has become unfamiliar and unknown to him; he is like one, who, as Sara puts it, “dropped from the clouds in an aeroplane” (*TY*, 277) and lands, as he himself says “[o]n to an unknown land” (*TY*, 277). At Delia’s party, North keeps feeling an outsider, an impression indeed that Delia has about him: “Captain Pargiter! [...] you’re quite a stranger” (*TY*, 318). Being introduced to his aunt Milly, North does not feel that he belongs to his relatives; he is detached from them: “Everything, he felt, became dulled. She cast a net over them; she made them all feel one family; he had to think of their relations in common; but it was an *unreal* feeling” (*TY*, 327. My emphasis.) North feels no attachment to others; all those in the party look as if they are far from being ‘certain’, or serious; they seem to North as if they belong to a parodic ‘world’: “Gross, obese, shapeless, they looked to him like a parody, a travesty, an excrescence that had overgrown the form within, the fire within” (*TY*, 332). North, who “longed for—assurance, certainty” (*TY*, 332), feels the deformity of his ‘world’, especially when he listens to Maggie’s constant reference to her children and registers her physical gestures, again examining them in a curiously impersonal way, as if the hands were detached from Maggie: “He looked down at her hands. They were strong hands; fine hands, but if it were a question, he thought, watching the fingers curl slightly, of ‘my’ children,

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<sup>99</sup> Levenback, 73-74.

of 'my' possessions" (TY, 332). Maggie's way of speech and her stress on her possessions make North feel the futility of people's way of thinking: "We cannot help each other, he thought, we are all deformed" (TY, 332).

Being sympathetic and sensitive, Peggy, who has experienced the loss of her brother Charles in the war, seems here, in 'Present Day', to suffer a similar sense of being detached, particularly from North, her brother, since she has "always found North much the more interesting of the two" (TY, 294) of her brothers. When she hears her aunt Eleanor saying "[i]t's nice, having North back again" (TY, 294), Peggy, replies "Yes [...] He says we talk nothing but money and politics" (TY, 294). Peggy's speech here shows that she feels that North is no longer accepting their lives and the way they talk; she feels the gap between her and her brother and ultimately this makes her in her turn feel possessed by a sense of estrangement, 'unreal' and 'unhomed'. And at the same time, Peggy seems to be influenced by North's view about people. Joining her relatives at her aunt's party, Peggy finds herself isolated, albeit here she is content to be so: "She was left alone. She was glad to be alone. She had no wish to talk" (TY, 310). Peggy thinks those at the party "talk such nonsense...such complete nonsense [...] drawing herself back against the wall" (TY, 306). Such a generation looks tired, vulnerable; as Peggy puts it: "[W]e all talk so much of ill-health" (TY, 308). Peggy's mood draws her aunt's attention to her: "But why don't you enjoy yourself more? Eleanor said to herself" (TY, 294). Peggy sees herself as 'peculiar' and quite different from those who attend the party: "Or am I the exception, the peculiar person? she continued, for the others seemed happy enough [...] I'm the exception; hard; cold; in a groove already; merely a doctor" (TY, 309). It seems that Peggy here suffers a sense of lacking maternity, a sense that is the outcome of either, as Martine guesses, "[l]oving only [...]her] own sex" (TY, 311) or as she herself says "[g]etting into a groove" (TY, 311) of her work, since "she look[s] serious; she look[s] tired. She works too hard (TY, 311).

Hermione Lee suggests that the characters in *The Years* are struggling towards some concept of happiness that seems remote.<sup>100</sup> This struggle is seen in 'Present Day' more than in any other section. Even in what should be relaxed, enjoyable social situations, the interwar generation does not feel such pleasure. The need of pleasure that this generation has lost is a feeling that Peggy does show at the party: "But one wants somebody to laugh with, she thought. Pleasure is

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<sup>100</sup> Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, 196.

increased by sharing it” (TY, 307-308). But being unhappy, Peggy keeps looking at her watch the whole time at the party; she is bored and she feels the heaviness of time: “Fifteen minutes only had passed” (TY, 309). Peggy wishes that time would pass quickly in order for the party to end; again, pages later: “She turned her watch on her wrist and looked at it surreptitiously. Time was getting on. An hour is sixty minutes, she said to herself; two hours are one hundred twenty minutes. How many have I still to stay here?” (TY, 335). We noticed that boredom and isolation at the party is shading into more existential anxiety.

In July 1932, a few months before start working on *The Years*, Woolf wrote in her diary: “‘Immunity’ I said to myself an hour ago, lying back in my chairs. That’s the state I am (or was) in. And it’s a holy, calm, satisfactory flawless feeling—To be immune, means to exist apart from rubs, shocks, suffering; to be beyond the range of darts” (DIV, 116-117). But, as we have seen, the characters in ‘Present Day’ do not feel immune; they are afraid of communicating with others even though they are relatives. Indeed the very presence of the stresses we have been noting indicates that Woolf’s mood of immunity was evidently a brief one. North summarises the human situation in the Thirties as he looks around at his relatives: “We are all afraid of each other, he thought; afraid of what? Of criticism; of laughter; of people who think differently” (TY, 362). North detects the same sense of insecurity in Edward Pargiter’s behaviour when he attends the party: “He can’t say what he wants to say; he’s afraid. They’re all afraid; afraid of being laughed at; afraid of giving themselves away” (TY, 362). In other words, in *The Years*, Woolf captures the ways in which the consciousness, the moods and thoughts of individual people, are infected by their ‘age of anxiety’; private vulnerability is directly related to social crisis. As Richard Overy has recently summed up, there is a “morbid connection made between the death or debilitation of civilization and the death or psychological decline of the observer”.<sup>101</sup> Hence, characters in this part show their fear not only of the present day, but of the immediate future, a view confirmed by Woolf’s aim—“shift[ing] the stress from present to future”— as she told Stephen Spender in her letter previously mentioned. Woolf hints at the danger, represented by Mussolini’s attack on Abyssinia and the approaching of another world war; such anxiety is experienced by the characters themselves, who feel this danger as a direct threat to their lives;

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<sup>101</sup> Overy, 16.



Peggy, who seems here to be in some ways Woolf's spokeswoman, conveys her opinions and ideas by referring to the political, and thus personal, tensions of her time:

But how can one be 'happy'? she asked herself, in a world bursting with misery. On every placard at every street corner was Death; or worse—tyranny; brutality; torture; the fall of civilisation; the end of freedom. We here, she thought are only sheltering under a leaf, which will be destroyed. And then Eleanor says the world is better, because two people out of all those millions are 'happy'.  
(*TY*, 339)

Such an acute sense of vulnerability makes the characters feel that their present security, represented by Delia's party, is something transient and might be violated at any time. Peggy's thoughts about 'the misery of the world' increases her sense of stress: "She did not want to think [...] Thinking was torment; why not give up thinking, and drift and dream? But the misery of the world, she thought, forces me to think" (*TY*, 340). Peggy's words here, seem to echo the feelings that Woolf expressed to Lady Ottoline Morrell, while Woolf was absorbed in tracing the development of the political events in Europe in October 1935: "Now Leonard has turned on the wireless to listen to the news, and so I am flicked out of the world I like into the other. I wish one were allowed to live only in one world, but that's asking too much" (*LV*, 429). The gloomy picture of the Thirties creates a kind of depression and despair that can be seen on the dispassionate faces of people that Peggy sees around her: "Again she saw the ruby-splashed pavement, and faces mobbed at the door of a picture palace; apathetic, passive faces; the faces of people drugged with cheap pleasures; who had not even the courage to be themselves, but must dress up, imitate, pretend" (*TY*, 340).

Perhaps unsurprisingly the sense of insecurity has physical repercussions: a sense of exhaustion never seems far away from many of the characters in 'Present Day'. Even as they relax at the party, the characters resort to sleep. Sara spends most of the time at the party asleep: "There she was curled up in a corner with her head against a table asleep apparently" (*TY*, 378). Falling asleep takes Eleanor far from the 'world' of her present and into another one which seems to give her tranquil moments: "She looked peaceful, far from them, rapt in the calm which sometimes gives the sleeper the look of the dead" (*TY*, 331). Feeling the need for 'silence and solitude', after being tired, North resorts to sleep: "Silence and solitude, he repeated [...] His eyes half closed themselves. He was tired; he was dazed; people talked; people talked. He would

detach himself, generalise himself” (*TY*, 370-371). Like her brother, Peggy also feels tired and exhausted: “She did not want to move, or to speak. She wanted to rest, to lean, to dream. She felt tired” (*TY*, 342). The age of anxiety is at the same time an age of exhaustion.

### ***The Years* and ‘The Next War’**

As Anna Snaith points out, the materials for writing *The Pargiters* and *Three Guineas* were prepared by Woolf in the same period:

Woolf compiled three notebooks full of quotations, newspaper articles and letters. The first notebook contains materials from 1931 to 1933, undoubtedly fuel for *The Pargiters*; in the second and third notebooks the material dates mainly from 1935 to 1937, and is therefore most likely research for *Three Guineas*.<sup>102</sup>

The fact of the ‘Present Day’ section being so directly grounded in contemporary events is itself revealing. Snaith focuses on discussing the early parts of *The Years*, connecting them with Woolf’s arguments in *Three Guineas*, related to women’s issues in the Victorian period, and particularly Woolf’s emphasis on the fact that women were deprived of the chance of an education, comparable to that of their brothers, that would enable them to have economic independence. Regarding *Three Guineas* as being ‘a non-fictional appendix’ to *The Years*, Hermione Lee discusses the analogy between paternalism and Fascism, which the two works addressed.<sup>103</sup> But, again, Lee concentrates on the first sections of *The Years*—the ones before ‘1914’—in connecting the two works. The present discussion will focus on the sections relating to the First World War and to ‘Present Day’. They are sections which were being written during the anxieties of the 1930s. Woolf was in a state of constant anxiety, as she confesses to Lady Ottoline Morrell: “I can[']t sleep at night for thinking of politics” (*LV*, 428). Thus, the relevant sections, written in 1935-36 are composed in a shadow of war, and they allude to Hitler’s rise to power and to Nazi aggression; these events are also addressed in *Three Guineas*. Woolf embarked on the latter, while she was writing these sections of *The Years*. On 27 October 1935, Woolf documents in her diary: “I’m doing Kitty’s party” (*DIV*, 348), which is in ‘1914’. In the

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<sup>102</sup> Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 92.

<sup>103</sup> Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, 191.

same diary entry, Woolf reveals her intention to start writing the 'Next War', later renamed *Three Guineas*:

Then there[i]s my Next War—which at any moment becomes absolutely wild, like being harnessed to a shark; & I dash off scene after scene. I think I must do it directly The Years is done. Suppose I finish The Years in Jan: then dash off The War (or whatever I call it) in six weeks. (*DIV*, 348)

Like most of her works, for all of Woolf's stylistic concerns, the main aim of *The Years* and *Three Guineas* is to deal with 'facts', facts related to the effects of the events and processes of life and time on the human individual. Ann Snaith points out that in *Three Guineas* Woolf shows that she is still in the 'real world' rather than locating herself in 'an ivory tower'.<sup>104</sup> Tracing the final sections of *The Years*, especially "Present Day", and what is argued in *Three Guineas*, shows that both of them engage the tensions of the Thirties—'facts', as Woolf told Stephen Spender, in her letter in April 1937, or what Snaith calls the 'real world'.

In *Three Guineas* Woolf opens her argument by trying to answer the question in an educated man's letter to her: "[H]ow to prevent war?" (*TG*, 14). The implicit or half-conscious wish that the imminent war could in some way be prevented pervades the minds of the characters in the First World War and 'Present Day' sections of *The Years*, as we have seen. In '1917', Eleanor feels that she is imprisoned by the war: "When shall we live adventurously, wholly, not like cripples in a cave?" (*TY*, 259). In 'Present Day', North notices that people have become bound up in talking of 'money and politics'. Money and political power, which are ultimately the motives for war, are also the concern of patriarchy; such a concern is manifested in *Three Guineas*, in which Woolf talks about the professional life of educated men, the patriarchal 'world':

They have no time to look at pictures. Sound goes. They have no time to listen to music. Speech goes. They have no time for conversation. They lose their sense of proportion—the relations between one thing and another. Humanity goes. Money making becomes so important that they must work by night as well as by day. Health goes [...] What then remains of a human being [...] Only a cripple in a cave. (*TG*, 131-132)

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<sup>104</sup> Snaith, 114.

One notices that direct echo of Eleanor's feelings of constraint and limitation. Being absorbed in their 'world' of money and business, middle-class men become limited in awareness and sensitivity; they are dominated by the sense of having power through their professions, and trying to impose their power on others, causing others to be "cripple[s] in a cave". By doing so, in Woolf's view, they share qualities with European military dictators; they are dictators at home; they wage war by creating restrictions and distinctions between classes and between the sexes. In the final section of *The Years*, the reader becomes aware of the absence of 'humanity', and the sense of materialism that dominates human relations. We see an example of this in the portrayal of Morris Pargiter, the barrister and his children in the first sections of *The Years* and at the party in 'Present Day': "Here her [Peggy's] father came in. He paused at the door; put his head up as he were looking for someone, and advanced with his hand out" (TY, 306). The solemnity that Morris, the professional man uses in his relationship with his children seems a behaviour that accompanies him till the end of the novel, since we do not know even his reaction to the return of North, his son, after an absence of years. Meeting Edward, who looks "so calm, so carved" (TY, 356) at the party, North notices he is "[g]lazed over with the smooth glossy varnish that those in authority wear. For he was now—what? North could not remember. A professor? A master? Somebody who had an attitude fixed on him, from which he could not relax any longer" (TY, 356). North seeks to get rid of his uncle's formality and solemnity that make him look like a headmaster treating his pupil rather than an uncle talking to his nephew; North feels: "It was a relief that the interview with the headmaster should be broken up" (TY, 355). Edward's way of dealing with North leads the latter to feel tense and uneasy: "Why can't he flow? [...] Why's it all locked up, refrigerated?" (TY, 357). Thus, essentially socially-constructed, patriarchal formality dominates the emotional relations between these men: "[T]hey [find] it difficult to talk" (TY, 355). The masculine authoritative power that those in positions of authority have, as Woolf points out in *Three Guineas*, becomes a barrier that imprisons the liberty of both their relatives and the other people that these men dominate.

In 'Present Day', the Pargiters, who are representative of remnants of the Victorian patriarchal 'world', are presented as going round the same circles in which they were brought up, especially the old generation, whether male or female; they cannot change their attitudes and patterns of behaviour, cannot break the dominant "sense of the family" (TY, 343) and Victorian patriarchal beliefs. At the party, the Pargiters focus narrowly on their own 'property' and their own identity,

as North feels while listening to Maggie: “Jimmy was in Uganda; Lily was in Leicestershire; *my* boy-*my* girl... they were saying. But they’re not interested in other people’s children, he observed. Only in their own; their own property.... How then can we be civilised, he asked himself?” (TY, 330 -331). Imposing their authoritative power on their societies or families, ‘educated men’ show their sense of possessiveness, as Woolf puts it in *Three Guineas*:

It seems as if there was no progress in the human race, but only repetition. We can almost hear them [educated men] if we listen singing the same old song, ‘Here we go round the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree’ and if we add, ‘of property, of property, of property’, we shall fill in the rhyme without doing violence to the facts. (TG, 120)

Singing round ‘the mulberry tree of property’, which is possessed by his/her own profession, property or opinion, leads the individual to be ready to fight, since any violation of his/her property might provoke the fire of war; as Woolf says: “[t]hey [the professions] make the people who practise them possessive, jealous of any infringement of their rights, and highly combative if anyone dares dispute them” (TG, 121). Thus, Woolf makes a direct connection between war and (a predominantly masculine) sense of property, which is the outcome of authority.

Addressing women, Woolf encourages writers in *Three Guineas* to participate in preventing war by avoiding writing for the sake of money, since it leads to what Woolf calls “‘Adultery of the brain’ [... which] means writing what I do not want to write for the sake of money” (TG, 170), rather than telling truths or ‘facts’. There is no doubt that in fact Woolf’s advice here is addressed to all writers whether male or female. In a conversation between Sara and North in the final section of *The Years*, we are informed that North used to write letters to Sara from Africa, where he has spent years “in that farm [...] where no one came for months at a time” (TY, 278). It seems that “in the wilds of Africa” (TY, 278), North maintains his sense of manliness, the same sense that motivates him to join the war, as his letters sent to Sara show: “And then you had a day off [...] and jolted along a rough white road in a springless cart to the next town [...] Sixty miles away” (TY, 279). Sara indirectly satirises North’s letters when he asks her to tear them up: “No! ‘They were beautiful letters! Wonderful letters!’ she exclaimed, raising her glass. A thimbleful of wine always made her tipsy, he remembered” (TY, 279). Then we learn that the correspondence between the two is stopped; it is Sara, in fact, who stops writing first which makes North stop writing to her as well: “‘Then you stopped writing,’ she said [...] ‘When I

forgot what you were like', he said looking at her. 'You gave up writing too'" (TY, 279). It seems that Sara had come to refuse to share North's 'nonsense', his masculine sense of the world; he himself describes his writings: "I must have written you a lot of nonsense!" (TY, 279). Sara does not want to participate in "the brain-selling trade" (TG, 171) that Woolf refers to in *Three Guineas*, in which she encourages woman not to "accept any of those baubles and labels by which brain merit is advertised and certified—medals, honours, degrees—we must ask you to refuse them absolutely, since they are all tokens that culture had been prostituted and intellectual liberty sold into captivity" (TG, 171). Trying to prevent North from continuing to live his vision of masculinity, and colonial authority, Sara breaks her correspondence with him. Woolf presents Sara as being the most vital character among the Pargiters. In spite of, or perhaps because of, being "uncommonly flighty", Sara seems to carry the message that Woolf wants to convey to her readers.<sup>105</sup> Hermione Lee suggests that Sara stands for 'facts and visions'.<sup>106</sup> Accordingly, Sara is the one who tells truths related to war; she has her own 'vision' by which she is aware of the patriarchal domination in her society. She is the one, who mocks Martin's speech when he proudly says that he is 'Crosby's God': "Crosby's God! Almighty, all-powerful Mr Martin!" (TY, 202). Sara here is presented as being the voice of Woolf's social commentary.<sup>107</sup> Compared to her relatives, Sara is the only one who has a sense of humour; she does not stop her joking even at the moments of danger in the air raids of '1917', in which she laughs at North's decision to join the war: "Then she [Sara] burst out: 'Because of that damned fool'" (TY, 249). As Catherine Nelson MacDermott suggests, Sara here mocks the propaganda made to support the war, since she knows the truth.<sup>108</sup> Having the sensitivity of an artist, Sara realises the futility of the war and its militarism.

Being a writer, North, as Peggy his sister expects, might continue his writing having returned to England: "What'll you do then? Make money. Write little books to make money" (TY, 341). But it seems that North, in 'Present Day', intends to stop writing to 'make money'; indeed, he now shows his disgust towards, in keeping with Woolf's comments in *Three Guineas*, people's conversations, about "politics and money" (TY, 353). He no longer wishes to write and commit

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<sup>105</sup> Quentin Bell, Introduction, Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, x.

<sup>106</sup> Hermione Lee, Introduction, Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (Oxford: Oxford U.P. 1992), xxii.

<sup>107</sup> Peter Naccarato, "Re-Defining Feminist Fiction in *The Years*", *Virginia Woolf: Turning the Centuries: Selected Paper from the Ninth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds. Ann Ardis & Bonnie Kime Scott (New York: Pace U. P., 2000), 205.

<sup>108</sup> MacDermott, 92.

‘Adultery of the brain’ with all its temptations, “its money motive, power motive, advertisement motive, publicity motive, vanity motive and so on” (*TG*, 175-176). Being presented as an “actor and critic” (*TY*, 360), North, who had joined the First World War, seems in “Present Day” no longer to believe in it; he realises the falsity of his previous patriotism and of war in general: “war’s poppy-cock” (*TY*, 328). This is why he stops writing in ‘Present Day’. North confesses to Sara: “We were very foolish when we were young” (*TY*, 281). Listening to the conversations of the young men at the party, North feels disgust for the things he has learnt in his past, like the sense of manliness that had led him to be sucked into the tide of the war: “It was like hearing small boys at a private school, hearing these young men talk politics. ‘I’m right...you’re wrong.’ At their age, he thought, he had been in the trenches; he had seen men killed. But was that a good education?” (*TY*, 353). North, who criticises Kitty Lasswade, “the widow of the Governor-General” (*TY*, 344), as being “dictatorial” (*TY*, 344), becomes aware of the truth of politics and people of power: “[W]e who make idols of other people, who endow this man, that woman, with the power to lead us, only add to deformity, and stoop ourselves” (*TY*, 332). North’s words are, again, similar to what Woolf argues in *Three Guineas*: “If newspapers were written by people whose sole object in writing was to tell truth about politics and the truth about art we should not believe in war, and we should believe in art” (*TG*, 176). North, who experiences the war at first-hand, is presented here as in search for ‘truth’ and he has found it, as he says: “Nothing would be easier than to join a society, [...] But he [North] did not believe in joining societies” (*TY*, 354). North refuses to participate in a society that does not know the real meaning of “Justice and Liberty [..., since] there’s a gap, a dislocation, between the word and the reality. If they want to reform the world, he thought; why not begin there, at the centre, with themselves?” (*TY*, 354). By abandoning his writing, North refuses to surrender to patriarchy, represented by its materialistic motives; North struggles against war-like dictatorship; North refuses the ‘Adultery of the brain’.

## Chapter Four: Virginia Woolf's Response to the Second World War

### I. Woolf and the Phoney War

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 was the final culmination, and in a way release, of tensions that had been building inexorably throughout the 1930s. The Munich Agreement of 1938, gave many in England a brief period of hope that war might be avoided.<sup>1</sup> At the same time that agreement afforded Britain time to prepare for the eventuality of the war; such was the continued mistrust of Hitler's regime that, after Munich, the British government embarked on preparing the public mind for war. Civilians began to be supplied with gas masks and a programme of accepting and training volunteers as ARP wardens (Air Raid Precautions) was begun.<sup>2</sup> As many feared, the promise of peace following the Munich Agreement was transient, since on 1 September 1939 German troops crossed the Polish frontiers, violating the Agreement and precipitating war between Britain, her allies, and Germany. Last minute efforts had been made by the British government to avoid the war by persuading Mussolini to call a conference, promising to rewrite the entire Treaty of Versailles if the Germans agreed to withdraw their troops from Poland. However the British parliament grew restive at Hitler's continued procrastination. On 3 September the British government was obliged to declare its entry into the war;<sup>3</sup> Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, told the British nation in a broadcast that announced the declaration of war with Germany: "Everything that I have worked for, everything that I have hoped for, everything that I have believed in during my public life has crashed into ruins".<sup>4</sup> However, fighting did not break out immediately; the formal declaration of the war was initially followed by what became known as the "Phoney War". No bombs fell, but as part of the preparation for the war, air-raids sirens sounded, inevitably adding to civilians'

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<sup>1</sup> The Munich Conference was an agreement between the Nazi Germany, Britain, France and Italy held in September 1938; it permitted the Germans to expand their power into the Sudetenland territory in Czechoslovakia, inhabited by German speakers. Accordingly, Hitler gave a promise to stop his military expansion in Europe. After a few months the Germans violated this agreement by their invasion of the whole of Czechoslovakia and then came their attack on Poland. See A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961), 151-186.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Pugh, *'We Danced All Night': A Social History of Britain between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009), 441-442.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!': Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London: Pimlico, 2006), 287.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Martin Pugh, *'We Danced All Night': A Social History of Britain between the Wars*, 439.



sense of anxiety and making them live the atmosphere of the war and its horror several months before the British army became involved in battle.<sup>5</sup> The ‘Phoney War’, which lasted nine months, made people suffer most of the discomfort and horror of the war without any of its actuality.<sup>6</sup>

During the Phoney War, despite the lack of bombing that was feared, the ‘home front’ was miserable and tense; the evacuation of a huge number of children, moving them by trains out of London to the safety of rural areas, was not an easy task and, of course, added to the prevailing distress as families were separated.<sup>7</sup> A million women and children were installed under the roofs of houses and cottages and in seaside basements, away from London, while schools and swimming baths stood ready to receive corpses.<sup>8</sup> Faced with these desperate preparations, the British people were more resigned than surprised, since the dominant atmosphere was one of gloom to the extent that no one was under the illusion that it would be a short war, some prophesying that it might even last for ten years.<sup>9</sup>

Responding to the extraordinary atmosphere of this period, Virginia Woolf was deeply engaged in listening, observing and examining the political stage, and, of course, she responded in her fictional and non-fictional works, written during that period. As we have seen, Woolf had traced the political turmoil conscientiously in the 1930s and had manifestly been quite aware that the rapid developments of the political atmosphere might lead to war. Hermione Lee points out that between September 1939 and March 1940, Woolf’s experience of the Phoney War, was both increasingly personal and accurately observant.<sup>10</sup> A consideration of Woolf’s non-fictional works, especially her diaries and letters written in the late Thirties shows that in a sense Woolf experienced the Phoney War earlier than 1939. In March 1938, Woolf documents in her diary: “Hitler has invaded Austria [...] his army crossed the frontier, unresisted”.<sup>11</sup> A few days later, Woolf writes: “The Public world very notably invaded the private [...] Almost war: almost expected to hear it announced” (*DV*, 131); the world of private events and relationships were

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Hurrah for the Blackshirts!’: *Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars*, 287.

<sup>6</sup> ‘We Danced All Night’: *A Social History of Britain between the Wars*, 442- 443.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 1999), 33.

<sup>8</sup> E. S. Turner, *The Phoney War on the Home Front* (London: Michael Joseph), 1961), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in ‘We Danced All Night’: *A Social History of Britain between the Wars*, 442.

<sup>10</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 719.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. V: 1936-1941*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1984), 129. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *DV*.

about to be violently disrupted, she realised, by these public events. Quentin Bell points out that when Hitler occupied Austria, it became difficult for Woolf to think of anything save the growing menace of the war.<sup>12</sup> Hitler's action against Czechoslovakia in September 1938 that led to the Munich Conference increased Woolf's anxiety and made her very aware of the threat that hovered over Europe; she writes in May 1938: "But as the whole of Europe may be in flames—it[']s on the cards. One more shot at a policeman, & the Germans, Czechs, French will begin the old horror [...] Hitler therefore is chewing his little bristling moustache. But the whole thing trembles" (*DV*, 142). Being aware of the chaos and riots that happened in Czechoslovakia after Hitler's invasion, Woolf realises that the approach of the war that Hitler aimed at cannot be avoided: "Things worse today. Rioting in Prague. Sudeten ultimatum. It looks as if Hitler meant to slide sideways into war. Raises riots: will say cant be stopped." (*DV*, 170). Absorbed in the latest political developments of 1938 leading to the Munich Agreement, Woolf writes on 29 September:

We listened in yesterday at 5 expecting to hear that War was declared. Instead Mr Chamberlain made a sensational announcement. He has been invited by Herr Hitler to meet him tomorrow at Munich. Signor Mussolini & Daladier will be present [...] It was like coming out of a dark room. Now we are waiting. (*DV*, 175-176)

Even Woolf dares to hope, in her revealingly graphic image, that even at this late hour peace might be possible; she writes on 30 September: "[T]erms are being made at Munich. I can[']t go into them. But it means peace" (*DV*, 176). But the sense of grim anxiety is caught in *Between the Acts* through Giles's vision of Europe: "Only the ineffective word 'hedgehog' illustrated his vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes. At any moment guns would wake that land" (*BA*, 33). Europe, for Woolf, bristles with armaments and threat as it frantically prepared itself against ever-approaching darkness of war.

The preparation for war, made after Hitler's moving against Czechoslovakia, inevitably increased Woolf's anxiety; she writes in September 1938: "Meanwhile the aeroplanes are on the prowl, crossing the downs. Every preparation is made. Sirens will hoot in a particular way when there's the first hint of a raid. L[eonard] & I no longer talk about it" (*DV*, 167). Again the outer tension invades the domestic life of Woolf. Even though the voices of the public celebrated the

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<sup>12</sup> Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography, Vol. 2 Mrs Woolf 1912-1941* (London: Hogarth, 1972), 205.

apparent avoidance of war, and “[t]he obvious feeling everywhere was [w]e don’t want this war” (*DV*, 177), people couldn’t really escape the sense of tension. Woolf’s diary on 30 September 1938 gave a detailed picture of the preparation for the war and the evacuating of children to areas of safety:

Northeast Barn already turned into a hospital; Gwen’s daughter ‘evacuated’ to school at Stammer Park; 60 children laid on mattresses in the gallery; marvels of organisation recited on the BBC last night. All who wish to leave London to go to certain tube stations, with a thick coat & enough food for the day: children to bring no [...] glass bottles: parents not to come. Public will then be taken free of charge to towns & villages 50 miles out of London [...] No choice of destination [...] The net result is that we are presented with 2 gas masks by the Gov[ernmen]t: & have bought 4 candlesticks at Woolworth, & ordered an extra supply of coals. (*DV*, 177)

The emotional tension of September 1938, portrayed here—the evacuation of children without their parents and people being supplied with gas masks with all that that implied for possible horrors to come—made the whole situation feel as if Britain were already involved in war. In the eyes of Woolf it was “a huge nightmare unreality that clouded all distinct feeling” (*DV*, 176); it was a nightmare that accompanied Woolf for the rest of her remaining life.

Leonard Woolf also describes the situation immediately before the war itself as consisting of ‘terrible nightmares’ and ‘horrible’ to endure:

the last years of peace before the war broke upon us in 1939 were the most horrible period of my life [...] Life became like one of those terrible nightmares in which one tries to flee from some malignant, nameless and formless horror, and one’s legs refuse to work, so that one waits helpless and frozen with fear for inevitable annihilation.<sup>13</sup>

The ‘horror’ that Leonard Woolf talks about here does not only mean the political tension in the period, but it also alludes to the Germans’ threat to the Jews that, as Leonard Woolf knew from press reports, had become more overt and violent through the decade and increased in 1938. Leonard Woolf writes: “When a Jew shot a German diplomatist in Paris, the Government instigated an indiscriminate pogrom against Jews throughout Germany. Jews were hunted down,

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<sup>13</sup> Leonard Woolf, *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters: An Autobiography of the Years 1939-1969* (London: Hogarth, 1969), 10-11.

beaten up, and humiliated everywhere publicly in the streets of towns”.<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, Leonard Woolf here refers to the attack against the German counsellor von Rath, who was wounded in that violent attack.<sup>15</sup> As the inevitability of the international war grew, the hostility against Jews everywhere became worse; in January 1939, Hitler declared: “If international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeeded once again in plunging the nations into a world war, then it will not end with a victory of Jewry but rather with the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe”.<sup>16</sup> The fear of the Germans’ attack against Jews made Woolf and her Jewish husband understand all too vividly the real and specific danger that the war might bring to them.

## II. Virginia Woolf in the War Years

The transient peace of the Munich Conference of 1938, called by the Prime Minister Chamberlain “Peace with Honour”<sup>17</sup> disregarded what was happening in Czechoslovakia. Woolf and her husband suspected this peace and “were sure of [it as being] peace with dishonour”.<sup>18</sup> Woolf’s fear of this peace came to be true; the Munich peace was violated in September 1939 by the German attack on Poland. The declaration of the war with Germany inevitably increased Woolf’s stress and anxiety; on 3 September 1939 she writes: “One’s too tired, emotionally, to read a page” (*DV*, 234). Even though she knows that “force is the dullest of experiences” (*DV*, 234), Woolf makes herself work: “My plan is to force my brain to work on Roger [her biography of Roger Fry]” (*DV*, 234). Discussing with her husband what would be the result of the war, Woolf seemed to be dissatisfied with Leonard Woolf’s opinion of winning the war, as she writes in September 1939: “Leonard said it[’]s better to win; because the Germans, vanquished, are what they are” (*DV*, 233). Quentin Bell asserts that Leonard’s view that Britain had to win the war, even at the cost of violence and death, was not wholly accepted by his wife.<sup>19</sup> For Virginia

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<sup>14</sup> *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> See, Hermann Graml, *Antisemitism in the Third Reich*, trans., Tim Kirk (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Adolf Hitler, quoted in Wolfgang Benz, *The Holocaust: A German Historian examine the Genocide*, Trans. Jane Sydenham-Kwiet (London: Profile, 2000), 61.

<sup>17</sup> Neville Chamberlain, quoted in John Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 140.

<sup>18</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Leave the Letters till We’re dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1936-1941*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1980), 279. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as *LVI*.

<sup>19</sup> Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf A Biography, Vol. 2 Mrs Woolf 1912-1941*, 211.

Woolf, nothing can justify the violence of the war; war does not mean military triumph and political victory; war is a destructive machine, killing people in 'cold blood': "This war has begun in cold blood. One merely feels that the killing machine has to set in action" (*DV*, 235).

As a civilian, Woolf herself of course lived the danger of the war, mainly in London, and felt its difficulties; she received some refugees, who, to escape the hazard of the war, came to stay in Monk's House and the area nearby, as Woolf mentions in a letter to Vita Sackville-West, on 8 September 1939:

Every now and then one seems completely cut off. Not in the body. That is, there's an incessant bother of small arrangement—2 Hogarth Press clerks [...] to put up; mattresses to buy, curtains to make; the village swarming with pregnant women and cottages without a chair or table to furnish out of scraps from the attic. So why does one feel inert, oppressed with solitude? (*LVI*, 357)

The unsettled life that was created by the war perhaps inevitably pushed Woolf into a gloomy anxious mood, a mood that is clearly expressed in her letter to Ethel Smyth: "And I'm not going to tell you all the worries and bothers: the expectant mothers, curtain making, entertaining refugees—for the less we talk of these things [...] the better" (*LVI*, 358).

On 23 September 1939 Virginia Woolf comments in her diary: "Civilisation has shrunk [...] They say the war will last 3 years" (*DV*, 237). The ruin of civilisation that the war brought is depicted through Woolf's vision of a more primitive life that the war created; in her writing at this time Woolf creates vivid images of a dark place, regressing to an earlier uncivilised state. Portraying London's darkness on 29 September 1939, Woolf writes to Philippa Woolf: "They say London is like a dark drain with a few blind fish, and sharks, and only the blind can see" (*LVI*, 361). In her diary on 22 October 1939, Woolf sees that, "the dark was as thick as Hell" (*DV*, 242). For Woolf the war made life seem like "[a] reversion to the middle ages" (*DV*, 242). The war paralyzed human life and made it completely stagnant and difficult to live; frustration and despair were the real feelings of people during the time of the war, as Woolf puts it in 1939:

You never escape the war in London. People are all thinking the same things [...] Hitches & difficulties hold one up. Very few buses. Tubes closed. No children. No loitering. Everyone humped with a gas mask. Strain & grimness. At night it[']s so verdurous & gloomy that one expects a badger or a fox to prowl along the pavement. (*DV*, 242)

Again, Woolf's vision of life is of the great modern city going back to being a wild and pre-civilised place: "My only comfort lies in the obvious horror we all feel for war: but then with a solid block of unbaked barbarians in Germany, what[']s the good of our being comparatively civilised?" (LVI, 366). Such an opinion is clearly shown again in *Between the Acts*, through Mrs. Swithin's reading of Wells' the *Outline of History* with its vision of history as moving in cycles based on the recurrent conquest of civilisation by nomads and uncivilised culture. It was Virginia Woolf's sense of stress, again unsurprisingly given her mental history, as much as the threat from bombing, which drove her and Leonard Woolf from London to Monk's House, as she herself tells Sackville-West in December 1939: "The war makes one horribly bad tempered. Against that I set the country: no, I don[']t think I shall ever live in London again" (LVI, 373). At the same time life seems empty, silent and ominous. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf repeatedly draws images of silence, for instance through the description of Mr. Oliver's house ("Empty. Empty, empty; silent, silent, silent"<sup>20</sup>) and through describing the audience at the pageant: "They were silent. 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" (BA, 40). Darkness, "empty streets [and a] curious strained silence" (DV, 236) is the prevailing image she gives of London, indeed the whole country.

In part because of the government controls, people began to experience shortages of food and petrol. The impact of the war on daily life and economy is also referred to in Woolf's diaries and letters. The war hit the economic aspects of life and caused the quality of everyday life to become worse. The Woolfs, of course, were no exceptions to the growing shortages, adding to Virginia Woolf's sense of stress.

There is no petrol today: so we are back again with our bicycles at Asheham 1915. And once more L[eonard] & I calculate our income [...] how much we both earn? [...] My old age of independence is thus in danger. But in fact it[']s hard to keep aloof & do my books [...] then one begins stinting paper, sugar, butter, buying little hoards of matches. The elm tree that fell has been cut up. (DV, 237)

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<sup>20</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Hogarth, 1990), 22. Hereafter, references will be included in the text, abbreviated as BA.

The fall of the ancient ‘elm tree’, immediately used for fuel, takes on (presumably conscious) symbolic meaning here. Although E. M. Forster points out that, “money she had not to consider, because she possessed a private income, and though financial independence is not always a safeguard against commercialism, it was in her case”, the war did oblige Woolf to pay attention to money.<sup>21</sup> It was difficult for Woolf to earn her living and cover the cost of publishing literary works, since paper became expensive and was then rationed. Therefore, there was indeed a pressing worry over money, since Woolf and her husband still needed to pay the rent of their London house at Mecklenburgh Square, which housed the Press.<sup>22</sup>

By 1940, the effects of the war on daily life had become worse; Woolf herself describes the situation in her diary on 19 December; she indicates how the war has changed the everyday life of people, herself included, although she does try to keep these problems in proportion:

Our ration of margarine is so small that I can[']t think of any pudding save milk pudding. We have no sugar to make sugar puddings: no pastry, unless I buy it ready made. The shops don't fill until midday. Things are bought fast. In the afternoon they are often gone [...] All prices rise steadily [...] We buy no clothes but make do with the old. These are inconveniences rather than hardships. (DV, 344)

The passage on domestic supplies is illustrated by Woolf's reaction to Vita Sackville-West's sending her a box of butter:

I wish I were Queen Victoria: then I could thank you—from the depths of my Broken Widowed heart. Never [...] have we had such a rapturous astounding glorious [...] All I can say is that when we discovered the butter in the envelope box we had in the household—Louie that is—to look. That[']s a whole pound of butter I said. Saying which I broke off a lump and ate it pure. (LVI, 447-448)

The inconveniences and frustrations caused by wartime shortages were to last for the rest of Woolf's life. Returning from London in February 1941, Woolf's exasperation is again evident, as she moved between Monk's House and the Press in London: “Our Press is up in a glass case. No country to look at. Very long train journeys. Food skimpy. No butter, no jam” (DV, 356). And

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<sup>21</sup> E. M. Forster, *Recollections of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Joan Russell Noble (London: Peter Owen, 1972), 186.

<sup>22</sup> Lee, 719.

underneath the domestic shortages and the struggle to keep the business going was, always, the danger and the fear of invasion.

### **Virginia Woolf's View of 'Subconscious Hitlerism'**

In November 1939, the Woolfs had been listening to a recording of Hitler on the radio: “we listened to the ravings, the strangled hysterical sobbing swearing ranting of Hitler at the Beer Hall. The offer of mediation—Holland & Belgium—is the fat on the fire” (*DV*, 245). In his autobiography, Leonard Woolf recalls vividly his wife's reaction to another of Hitler's broadcast speeches:

One afternoon [in the late summer 1939] I was planting in the orchard under an apple-tree iris [...] Suddenly I heard Virginia's voice calling to me from the sitting-room window: 'Hitler is making a speech'. I shouted back: I shan't come. I'm planting iris and they will be flowering long after he is dead.'<sup>23</sup>

The outcome of Woolf's listening to such statements by Hitler is shown in her 1940 essay “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, which reflects Woolf's vision of such men as Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. In this essay, Woolf connects fighting with what she calls ‘subconscious Hitlerism’—an instinct that dominates Hitler's behaviour and motivates him and men like him to fight. Woolf sees Hitler's violent ranting as epitomising and giving voice to what she saw as frighteningly, fundamental instincts towards war and the ‘glory’ that some saw it as bringing. As her Bloomsbury values told her, they were not instincts restricted to Germany alone, in her view: “We must help the young Englishmen to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations. We must create more honourable activities for those who try to conquer in themselves their fighting instinct, their subconscious Hitlerism”.<sup>24</sup> Obviously, Woolf here associates the behaviour of war dictators with a male ‘instinct of fighting’; again she stresses her view that war is the outcome of masculinity: “Up there in the sky young Englishmen and young

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<sup>23</sup> Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919-1939* (London: Hogarth, 1967), 254.

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941*, ed. Stuart N Clarke (London: Hogarth, 2011), 244.



German men are fighting each other. The defenders are men; the attackers are men”.<sup>25</sup> In a letter sent from her to Shena, Lady Simon, in 1941, Woolf makes a similar point: “No, I don[’t] see what[’s] to be done about the war. Its manliness; and manliness breeds womanliness—both so hateful” (*LVI*, 464). According to this opinion, the dominant patriarchal system does not only help to marginalise the role of women, but it fans the fire of war itself.

In spring 1940 the threat of the German invasion of Britain seemed to be very real. As a result, a call for home defence is declared; men who were not already in the military service were encouraged to be volunteers.<sup>26</sup> In response to this call, “Leonard Woolf did not join, but undertook Fire Watching and Air Raid Precautions duties in the village”.<sup>27</sup> But, for his wife, sticking firmly to her Bloomsbury ideals, being engaged in the action of the war and wearing any sort of military uniform, at any justification, is ‘ridiculous: “An appeal last night for home defence—against parachutists. L[eonard] says he’ll join [...] L[eonard] evidently relieved by the chance of doing something. Gun & uniform to me slightly ridiculous” (*DV*, 284). The male’s response to the voice of the war, even as represented by her husband’s not unreasonable decision to join the Local Defence Volunteers, is mocked by Virginia Woolf. Alluding again to the patriarchal fighting desire, Woolf writes in 1940 in her essay “The Leaning Tower”: “Every politician who has made a speech since September 1939 has ended with a peroration in which he has said that we are not fighting this war for conquest; but to bring about a new order in Europe”.<sup>28</sup> Woolf here criticises the politicians’ justifications of the war, by which they try to convince the masses as to the legality of the violence of war. Looking at literature as being devoted to glorify patriotism and the prevailing patriarchal system, Woolf writes in the same essay: “She [England] deserves to have nothing but detective stories, patriotic songs and leading articles for generals, admirals and business men to read themselves to sleep with when they are tired of winning battles and making money”.<sup>29</sup> Woolf in this period confirms that “[a]ll the idea makers who are in a position to make ideas effective are men”.<sup>30</sup> Obviously, Woolf in this period

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 242.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain During the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2002), 60.

<sup>27</sup> See Anne Olivier Bell, Note 5, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* Vol. V., 284.

<sup>28</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Leaning Tower”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* Vol. VI: 1933-1941, 275.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 276.

<sup>30</sup> “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, 242.

stresses similarly gendered views in her writings as those expressed during the First World War and the Spanish Civil War.

### **The Lack of Writer's Immunity**

The only time for Woolf during which she can to some extent distract herself from the war and its destruction is while she is reading and writing. In fact, Woolf finds her solace in being engaged in her literary world, as she said in 1939, answering Edward Sackville West, who had praised her for writing *The Waves*: “It was nice of you to write to me about the Waves [...] And a word of praise from a reader like you almost persuades me that I could get back to that world in spite of the war” (*LVI*, 365). Even though she tried to escape the war by resorting to the world of art, the intensive pressure of the war made it impossible for Woolf to do so. As a writer, Woolf felt that the war violated her immunity and deprived her of the mood, even the capacity, to be creative. Feeling the need for such immunity, Woolf wrote in her diary in October 1939: “if one can[']t write, as Duncan said yesterday, one may as well kill oneself. Such despair comes over me—waking early” (*DV*, 239). It is a grim indication of her state of mind and a hint of what was to come. Her sense of the writer's immunity being violated during the war is discussed also in 1940, in “The Leaning Tower”, in which Woolf comments on the life of the early nineteenth-century writers, who witnessed the Napoleonic wars, such as Jane Austen and Walter Scott; Woolf notes that they seem to have maintained a creative immunity:

Each lived through the Napoleonic wars; each wrote through them. But, though novelists live very close to the life of their time, neither of them in all their novels mentioned the Napoleonic wars. This shows that their model, their vision of human life, was not disturbed or agitated or changed by war. Nor were they themselves [...] Wars were then remote; wars were carried on by soldiers and sailors, not by private people.<sup>31</sup>

The remoteness of the Napoleonic wars from the lives of those writers separated them from the direct events of those wars, since the ‘wars were carried by soldiers’ and military force, not civilians. Comparing her present life to Jane Austen's and Walter Scott's lives, Woolf feels

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<sup>31</sup> “The Leaning Tower”, 261.

herself and the writers of her time, to be part of the war itself, since they endure its horror and they live its danger and stress each day:

Today we hear the gunfire in the Channel. We turn on the wireless; we hear an airman telling us how this very afternoon he shot down a raider; his machine caught fire [...] Scott never saw the sailors drowning at Trafalgar; Jane Austen never heard the cannon roar at Waterloo. Neither of them heard Napoleon's voice as we hear Hitler's voice as we sit at home of an evening.<sup>32</sup>

The lack of immunity that Woolf suffered from during the war changed the condition of her life from the security of Bloomsbury civilisation to one in which the sounds of 'gunfire' and the roaring of 'Hitler's voice' were part of her daily life. The negative effects of the absence of security and peace are implicit throughout her discussion of these earlier writers: "They had leisure; they had security; life was not going to change; they themselves were not going to change".<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, for Woolf, as she writes in 1940: "My contribution to the war is the sacrifice of pleasure" (*DV*, 288). And not of course simply her pleasure, but her emotional, and ultimately her mental, tranquillity and balance.

Living in the dangerous atmosphere of the war in 1940, Woolf saw that the role of the artist, despite the fact that s/he might appear peripheral, is on the contrary more important than ever, as she wrote to Benedict Nicolson:

This all sounds as though I wish to say that the artist, the intellectual, has no place in modern society. On the contrary, his mission is now more vital than it has ever been. He will still be shocked by stupidity and untruth but instead of ignoring it he will set out to fight it; instead of retreating into his tower to uphold certain ethical standards his job will be to persuade as many other people as possible to think and behave in the same way—and on his success and failure depends the future of the world. (*LVI*, 414)

Woolf looks at the writer during wartime as having the important and difficult role of expressing resistance; the writer, in Woolf's eyes, has to stand against pressures made by anti-truth telling. In Woolf's own opinion, the war did not only affect her present writers' generation, but it will

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 261.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 264.

affect even the next generation; in “The Leaning Tower”, Virginia Woolf shows her pessimistic and gloomy vision about that generation:

[T]here will be a next generation, in spite of this war and whatever it brings. Have we time then for a rapid glance, for a hurried guess at the next generation? [ ...] Must it too be a leaning-tower generation—an oblique, sidelong, self-centred, squinting, self-conscious generation with a foot in two worlds? Or will there be no more towers and no more classes and shall we stand, without hedges between us, on the common ground?<sup>34</sup>

The values of the future generation, as Woolf sees, will be damaged. Their imaginative sensitivities uncertain, the post war generation that will be a generation caught in its ‘leaning tower’, separated from its society.

### **Virginia Woolf and the Climax of the War**

The dramatic events of the war in 1940, represented by Hitler’s rapid and victorious sweep across several European countries, inevitably came to increase Woolf’s anxiety and fear. The direct threat to Britain itself seemed to become more unavoidable as the weeks and months passed and the German army reached the French coast. Woolf’s words in April, describing the theatre of the war in this year echo that of Churchill himself: “The First crunch of the war—that[?]s how Winston puts it. The G[erman]s have invaded Norway. Battles are going on” (*DV*, 279). More than that, the Jews in the occupied territories became directly subject to Nazi violence, a violence that led them to try to emigrate from these countries.<sup>35</sup> In *Between the Acts*, Woolf hints at the Jewish emigration from Europe through the fragmented speech of the villagers of Pointz Hall. Such events made Woolf very worried about her country in general and her private life in particular; she can never have forgotten the likelihood of what would happen to Leonard Woolf, and probably to herself, if the Germans invaded England. The period bounded by the retreat from Norway and the Battle of Britain is considered to be the time of lowest civilian morale.<sup>36</sup> Woolf was no exception: the ominous situations affected the British so much

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 274.

<sup>35</sup> Graml, 151. See also Benz, 35-36.

<sup>36</sup> Mackay, 60.

and Virginia Woolf was one of them: “And we have withdrawn from Norway. The first defeat of the war” (*DV*, 283). As the possibility of defeat and invasion loomed, Woolf’s sense of helplessness grew; she writes on 14 May 1940: “Yes, we are being led up garlanded to the altar” (*DV*, 284). The real danger that Woolf feels here evokes her sense of hopelessness that was intensified by the call for home defence: “An appeal last night for home defence—against parachutists” (*DV*, 284). Woolf’s fear and strain are aggravated, and the idea of committing suicide seems to be the only choice to escape torture or death if Britain is invaded: “Behind that the strain: this morning we discussed suicide if Hitler lands. Jews beaten up” (*DV*, 284). Talking about the same issue in his *Autobiography of the Years 1939-1969*, Leonard Woolf writes: “We agreed that, if the time came, there would be no point in waiting; we would shut the garage door and commit suicide;”<sup>37</sup> Virginia Woolf and her husband kept some petrol in the garage specifically for this purpose.<sup>38</sup> Even though they decided to do so, the idea of death was difficult and bitter for Woolf: “No, I don[’]t want the garage to see the end of me. I’ve a wish for 10 years more, & to write my book wh[ich] as usual darts into my brain” (*DV*, 285). As ever the fear of nullity and death is confronted with the ideas of certainty and imaginative activity. Woolf’s comments here show that the circumstances of the war did not only stand behind her subsequent decision to commit suicide, but also contributed to the deterioration of her psychological condition that led to the final tragedy.

With the fall of the battle of France in June 1940, “the great battle which decides our life or death” (*DV*, 292), Woolf felt more vulnerable than ever: “I will continue—but can I? The pressure of this battle wipes out London pretty quick” (*DV*, 292). Woolf’s fear about her country seemed to be more than that about her own life; such fear was increased with “[b]lack news [and] French apparently withdrawing” (*DV*, 294) and defeat by the Germans. The defeat of the French and “Paris [...being] in the hands of the Germans” (*DV*, 296) came to add to Woolf’s apprehension; she writes on 20 June: “The French stopped fighting: what’s to become of me? [...] Now we suffer what the Poles suffered. Fight in our fortress: are conquered: I have my morphia in pocket [...] Adrian promises us a prescription” (*DV*, 297). Woolf has decided this time to die by a prescription, brought by her brother Adrian, rather than by petrol. Listening to the broadcasts that gave news of the latest events, Woolf writes on 20 June: “Churchill

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<sup>37</sup> *The Journey not the Arrival Matters*, 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 216.

broadcasts. Reassuring about defence of England; not all claptrap. Now we're fighting alone with our back to the wall. Bombs first, then invasion" (*DV*, 297); clearly Churchill's fine words had not finally reassured her. To be in touch with truth, Woolf also gave importance to what was narrated by people, especially soldiers, who came from the front line. Woolf details in her diary, on 20 June, what was said by Louie's brother, Harry, who came back from the front line after being involved in the desperate retreat from Dunkirk:

Harry came back on Monday. It pours out—how he hadn't boots off for 3 days; the beach at Dunkirk—the bombers as low as trees—the bullets like moth holes in his coat—how no English aeroplanes fought; how the officer told them to take their shoes off & go past a pill box on all fours. Then went himself with a grenade & blasted it. At Dunkirk many men shot themselves as the planes swooped. Harry swam off, a boat neared. Say Chum Can you row? Yes, he said, hauled in, rowed for 5 hours, saw England, landed—didn't know if it were day or night or what town—didn't ask—couldn't write to his mother—so was despatched to his regiment [...] He saw his cousin dead on the beach; & another man from the street. (*DV*, 297)

The vividness of the images here, even the snatch of the dialogue, indicates the degree of Woolf's imaginative involvement in Harry's account. Hence, the full graphic reality of events in France is brought home to Woolf, and the strength of her imaginative empathy is all too evident. Dunkirk's evacuation had been regarded as a kind of victory; in a message hailing the British forces that escaped from there, the king saw it as a 'triumph'.<sup>39</sup> But for Woolf, the pictures described by Harry seemed to her quite different from this 'triumph' and what the government tried to spread among people, in the authoritative voice of the BBC, seemed to be far from reality. Two days later, as an attempt to raise the morale of people, and as a kind of patriotic propaganda, made by the BBC, a soldier—'laughing heroic boy'—had been presented to the public; he pretended the bravery which was assumed to be general among those who had participated in the battle of France. Again Woolf was unconvinced by this propaganda; she had her own vision of the whole situation at the front line, as she notes on 22 June:

Is Harry the real animal behind the brave, laughing heroic boy panoply which the BBC spreads before us nightly? [...] a natural human being, not made for shooting men, but for planting potatoes

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<sup>39</sup> Henry Pelling, *Britain and the Second World War* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1970), 83.

[...] And is he, as I suspect, the average sample? I gather he'd shoot himself rather than go to France again. (*DV*, 298)

The two contrasting pictures of these soldiers—Harry, the brother of Woolf's servant, and the 'heroic boy', presented by the Government-controlled media—made Woolf characteristically sceptical of what was displayed by BBC.

### **The Air Raids on Woolf's "majestic city"**

Undoubtedly, the bombardment of the war against civilians affected people physically and psychologically. To be out of London, was to escape the intensive air raids, as Woolf wrote to Ethel Smyth on December 1939: "Thank God, we're out of London, and in front of a fire, alone, this frosty night" (*LVI*, 376). Even in the air-raid shelter in central London people were not safe; Leonard Woolf narrated one of the horrible nights, he and Virginia Woolf through lived after looking at the shelter close to their London house: "We were in Mecklenburgh Square in one of the earliest night raids. We did not go into the shelter which had been built in the centre of the square, though we had look at it. We thought it better to die, if that were to be our fate, in our beds".<sup>40</sup> But even though she was in the Sussex countryside, Woolf did not escape the horror of the bombing that increased in the summer 1940; she wrote to John Lehmann on 29 July indicating the dangerous life she was living even at Monk's House: "We're both very sorry you couldn't come to Monk's House [...] We could have offered you a great variety of air raid alarms, [and] distant bombs" (*LVI*, 408). Experiencing the direct threat of the air raids in August 1940, Woolf writes in her diary: "They came very close. We lay down under the tree. The sound was like someone sawing in the air just above us. We lay flat on our faces, hands behind head. Don't close y[ou]r teeth, said L[eonard]" (*DV*, 311); and, repeatedly, Woolf shows her awareness of how, elsewhere, people were dying, night after night: "Nightly raids on the east & south coast. 6, 3, 12 people killed nightly" (*DV*, 298). The constant bombing of her country created a feeling of panic and horror: "Now we are in the war. England is being attacked. I got this feeling for the first time completely yesterday. The feeling of pressure, danger [and] horror" (*DV*, 313).

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<sup>40</sup> *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*, 38.

From the end of August 1940, France having been conquered, the full fury of the Luftwaffe was vented on Britain, especially London. Nor, again, were the Woolfs themselves safe, as Leonard Woolf comments:

The real air war began for us in August 1940. On Sunday, August 18, Virginia and I had just sat down to eat our lunch when there was a tremendous roar and we were just in time to see two planes fly a few feet above the church spire, over the garden, and over our roof, and looking up as they passed above the window we saw the swastika on them. They fired and hit a cottage in the village and fired another shot into a house in Northease.<sup>41</sup>

In the period from September 1940 to May 1941, London and several provincial cities were subjected to almost continuous heavy bombing.<sup>42</sup> London was the main target of the Germans; as Woolf put it “the bombing of London of course preparatory to invasion” (*DV*, 317). London witnessed the most severe bombing during what was called Blitz, as Robert Mackay describes:

On the night of 7 September a devastating raid was carried out on the dockland area of London. For seventy-six consecutive nights after this [...] fleets of over 200 German bombers unloaded their cargo of firebombs and high explosives onto the capital, killing nearly 10,000 people and injuring and dehousing many thousand more.<sup>43</sup>

Woolf herself did not escape the effects of the Blitz’s bombardment; her house in Mecklenburgh Square, rented for the Hogarth Press, was made uninhabitable because of bombs that fell in the square itself.<sup>44</sup> A detailed description of the ruins of the whole square is documented in Woolf’s September 1940 diary:

Back from half a day in London [...] Meck[enburgh] S[quare] roped off. Wardens there, not allowed in. The house about 30 yards from ours struck at one this morning by a bomb. Completely ruined. Another bomb in the square still unexploded. We walked round the back. Stood by Jane Harrison’s house. The house was still smouldering. That is a great pile of bricks. Underneath all the people who had gone down to their shelter. (*DV*, 316)

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>42</sup> Mackay, 45.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>44</sup> See Leonard Woolf, *The Journey not the Arrival Matter*, 38.



The writer John Lehman, employed at the Press, had phoned the Woolfs: “He was in Meck[enburgh] Square the night of the raid. Wants the press moved at once [...] Our windows are broken John says. He is lodging out somewhere” (*DV*, 317-318). Making her visit to London, Woolf realised that the damage to her house made it impossible for the Press to continue to function there; this directly affected their business engagements, and thus their income, and also directly affected the biography of Roger Fry with which Woolf had in past distracted herself: “Blew out all windows, all ceilings, and smashed all my china [...] Uninhabitable now apparently—Press has been moved to Letchworth—What remains of it. Sale of Roger of course ruined” (*LVI*, 432). John Lehman himself described the damage to the Press that was caused by September raids:

The Hogarth press building was set on fire by incendiary bombs, and further damage was caused by the floods of water directed on to it by the machines of Fire Service. I believe a great mass of precious letters addressed to Virginia herself from innumerable correspondents, letters of a lifetime, disappeared in that fire, in that inundation.<sup>45</sup>

On top of this, the intensive air raids led also to the ruin of Woolf’s nearby Tavistock Square house: “Our private luck has turned. John Lehman says Tavistock Square is no more” (*DV*, 329). By the destruction of her houses in London, Woolf was obliged to stay in Sussex for the rest of the war.

The aggression against civilians is also addressed in her essay “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, in 1940: “The Germans were over this house last night and the night before that. Here they are again. It is a queer experience, lying in the dark and listening to the zoom of a hornet which may at any moment sting you to death. It is a sound that interrupts cool and consecutive thinking about peace”.<sup>46</sup> The ceaseless sounds of guns made it impossible for anyone to think of peace and seek a secure place: “Let us think what we can do to create the only efficient air-raid shelter while the guns on the hill go pop pop pop”.<sup>47</sup> In other words, Sussex was far from being a safe and quiet home. Even here the sounds of anti-aircraft guns, of planes and of bombs became constant and familiar sounds for Woolf during the severe bombing of 1940: “[Y]esterday at 5

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<sup>45</sup> John Lehman, *Recollections of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Joan Russell Noble, 42.

<sup>46</sup> “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raids”, 242.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 242.

pm. pop, pop pop out over the marshes [...] They bombed the train at Newhaven: the driver died this morning. Passengers lay under seats. Rails wrecked” (*DV*, 299-300). Woolf’s writings during that time show that Woolf vividly understands the real danger that attacked the lives of innocent people, who were victims of the war.

Although she is in Sussex, the war reveals the strong connection between Woolf and London. Observing the constant destructive bombing over her “majestic city” (*DV*, 317), Woolf was extremely upset, almost more than by the loss of her personal security and material life; such fear disturbed her psychology and contributed to her illness, since she was emotionally connected to London. Tracing her diaries and letters written between Summer 1940 and 1941 shows that the strain she lived was very considerable. Hermione Lee argues that Woolf’s feeling for England—and especially London—was romantic and heroic. London was an essential part of Woolf’s English identity, and she loved, respected and sympathised with the ordinary people.<sup>48</sup> Hence, it was acutely painful for her to see London destroyed by the Germans; she wrote to Ethel Smyth on 12 September 1940: “to see London all blasted, that too raked my heart” (*LVI*, 431). In the eyes of Woolf London became “like a dead city” (*LVI*, 433). The horror that the bombing brought to civilians and the daily expectation of German attacks on London created a kind of ‘stagnation’, as Woolf describes in September 1940 after returning from London: “A strong feeling of invasion in the air. Roads crowded with army wagons: soldiers. Just back from half day in London. Raid, unheard by us, started outside Wimbledon. A sudden stagnation. People vanished” (*DV*, 318). In her next diary, Woolf notes: “A sense of invasion—that is lorries of soldiers & machines—like cranes—walloping along to Newhaven. An air raid is on. A little pop rattle wh[ich], I take to be machine guns, just gone off. Planes soaring & roaring” (*DV*, 319-320). Woolf’s description here gives an impression that the whole country has become like a front line; such an image shows that she was under constant stress and anxiety. Woolf did not cease expressing her strong feeling towards London even in her letters: “[W]hy do I dramatise London perpetually? When I see a great smash like a crushed match box where an old house stood I wave my hand to London” (*LVI*, 434). The daily life of civilians under the bombs was a frontline life;<sup>49</sup> it made people see their world totally disrupted and themselves disorientated from what had been familiar; as Woolf wrote to Angelica Bell in October: “I am like a bottle turned upside down.

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<sup>48</sup> Lee, 744.

<sup>49</sup> Mackay, 69.

The fires—Mecklenburgh Square in ruins” (*LVI*, 436). The “conditions [that were] very unpleasant in England” (*LVI*, 438) made Woolf think of her friends that were under the constant bombing of London:

I wish I didn't feel myself a coward. Most of my friends are as chirpy as crickets, working at the Treasury, sleeping in basements. When the bombs make our windows rattle I always jump. I don't like sitting of an evening and thinking the drone which is weaving its web above me is about to drop. (*LVI*, 439)

The constant anxiety, anxiety about London and her friends as well as the business and herself, left its marks upon Woolf's psychology. By the end of 1940, Woolf's symptoms of illness were quite obvious, as she herself indicates in a letter to her doctor, Octavia Wilberforce, in December 1940: “I have lost all power over words, can[']t do a thing with them” (*LVI*, 456).

### III. Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

**“The War is like desperate illness” (*DV*, 285).**

The diaries and letters of Virginia Woolf written between the late months of 1938—the period of the Munich Crisis and also when she began writing *Between the Acts*—and 1941, when she ended her life, show her as living in a constant state of anxiety. In August she wrote to Ethel Smyth: “Just listened in to the Prime Minister, from which it seems that there's another day of peace anyhow” (*LVI*, 353). On 28 September 1938, as Chamberlain met Hitler at Munich, Woolf documented in her diary: “This may be the last day of peace; so why not record it” (*DV*, 174). The tension caused by the Munich Crisis Woolf expresses as almost a struggle with time itself, its passage bringing ever closer the end of the fragile peace and the final catastrophic collapse into war; as she writes in her diary on 2 October: “Yet extreme physical relief when peace seemed 24 hours longer” (*DV*, 178). But the peace that the Munich Conference brought was transient; the spring of 1939 showed that the whole world was on the brink of violence and destruction, as Woolf describes in April 1939: “the severance that the war seems to bring: everything becomes meaningless: can[']t plan [...] this horror of war—at the same moment. Never felt it so strong before” (*DV*, 215). Though being engaged in writing her biography of

Roger Fry, Woolf inevitably gave the war priority in her diary, noting on 25 August 1939: “Perhaps it is more interesting, to describe ‘The Crisis’ than R[oger]’s love affairs. Yes we are in the thick of it. Are we at war? At one I am going to listen in [to the radio news]” (*DV*, 230). Three days later, Woolf, like many British people, became aware of the inevitability of the war that might end her “possibly last night of peace [...] Everyone’s writing I suppose about this last day” (*DV*, 231). Hitler’s military action against Poland on 1 September 1939 obviously increased Woolf’s fear and anxiety: “War is on us this morning. Hitler has taken Dantzig: has attacked—or is attacking—Poland. Our Parliament meets at 6 tonight [...] Now at 1 I go in to listen I suppose to the declaration of war” (*DV*, 232).

The stress and anxiety documented in Woolf’s diaries are reflected in the novel she was writing in this period, *Between the Acts*, initially called *Pointz Hall*, which Woolf intended to write to help her cope with this stress, as she confesses to her sister Vanessa Bell on October 1938: “All books are now rank with the slimy seaweed of politics; mouldy and mildewed. I wish I could settle to pure fiction; indeed had to rush headlong into a novel; as a relief” (*LVI*, 294). Thus, *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf’s final novel, is created at a time of increasing stress and in the fact of the horror of the war itself; it is begun in the spring of 1938 and completed in 1941. The novel was, sadly, published only in July 1941 after Woolf’s suicide on 28 March the same year.

Even though the events of *Between the Acts* start on “a June day in 1939”, three months before the outbreak of the Second World War itself, the novel is full of images of the war that threatens the peaceful life of individuals (*BA*, 46). Woolf also colours this novel with images of time: history from its remote origins, human time, natural process and, once more, sea and water images; such images ultimately convey her sense of the precarious nature of the point in time she inhabited. They show her anxiety and fear of the danger of the German invasion that threatened her private life, on the one hand, since she was the wife of a Jew, and her country as being one of the struggling European powers, on the other. The whole action of the novel takes place around Pointz Hall, “in this remote village in the very heart of England” (*BA*, 9). Like *Mrs. Dalloway*’s novelistic technique, the events of *Between the Acts* occur in a single day, in which Mr. Bartholomew Oliver, his family, his guests and the villagers gather and watch an annual pageant, which presents the history of Britain; the pageant is directed by Miss La Trobe and acted by the villagers themselves.

## Images of Time, Process, Sea and Water, History and Prehistory

*Between the Acts* is full of images of time that are presented through references to history, process, the actual time itself, registered, as in the earlier novels, by the sounds of church bells and clocks, and also as in the previous novels by images of process, often expressed in images of tide and sea, even though the setting is distant from the coast. These images are clearly presented to stress the tension of the present moment in the flow of history and process, a moment of darkness and gloom in the life of the individual. Virginia Woolf, who was aware that the war was a real threat to civilisation and her own country, remembers and celebrates the continuities of English history and culture through the novel itself and the pageant of Pointz Hall's villagers.

A few years previously, in 1934, her friend E. M. Forster had written and helped produce *The Abinger Pageant* in the village near his home, with music by Ralph Vaughan Williams (played by the village band).<sup>50</sup> This pageant had also celebrated the history of Britain, as the pageant's narrator indicates:

*And now the Britons are coming down the paths I have cut, then you shall see the Romans come, then the bugle will sound and, like the falling leaves, the Romans will go back to Rome. Then the Saxons will come, and after them monks and the coming of Christ.*<sup>51</sup>

One notices those 'falling leaves', registering the seasons' passing: the whole pageant traces events in British history, as they impinged on the village, from the days of King John through the Middle Ages and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to "Towards Our Own Times"; in other words, like the pageant in Woolf's novel, Forster's pageant is acutely aware of the passage of time and of the transience of human events in this small corner of England: "Centuries of life amongst obscure trees and unnoticed fields!"<sup>52</sup>

A further pageant *England's Pleasant Land* was put together by the same group, including Forster, who provided the script, in 1938 and performed at Milton Court, Westcott, Surrey, and, given the involvement of one of England's leading novelists and its leading composer, was given

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<sup>50</sup> Francis King, *E.M. Forster and his World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 94.

<sup>51</sup> E. M. Forster, "The Abinger Pageant", *Abinger Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1936), 339.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 351.

a half column review in *The Times*.<sup>53</sup> Woolf would have read the text of the earlier pageant when it was published in 1936; moreover Forster, in composing the script of *England's Pleasant Land* evidently consulted her, as Woolf writes in her diary in May 1938: “[T]hen Morgan asking some literary help about a quotation in a pageant” (*DV*, 139). Woolf seems to have attended the performance of this second pageant, since in her diary in July 1938, she notes: “I’m stuck in a bristle of dates. Can[’]t get on. Wet, black cold—worst July on record—Morgan’s pageant” (*DV*, 156). Thus, reading Forester’s first pageant and watching the performance of the other, was one factor which inspired Woolf to write *Between the Acts*, through which Woolf presents her own pageant of the history and culture of her country, threatened by the war.

Pointz Hall, the house, the village and the surrounding area, where the events of Woolf’s novel take place, are presented as a receptacle of the past. Chatting with Mrs. Haines, his neighbour, the elderly Bartholomew Oliver, refers to the historical, and specifically military, background of this village that shows the cultural processes that have made England: “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” (*BA*, 1). Pointz Hall is repeatedly associated with the military history of its inhabitants: “The butler had been a soldier; had married a lady’s maid; and under a glass case there was a watch that had stopped a bullet on the field of Waterloo” (*BA*, 3). History is also implied in the description of Bartholomew Oliver’s house: “[F]or the house before the Reformation, like so many houses in that neighbourhood, had a chapel; and the chapel had become a larder, changing [...] as religion changed” (*BA*, 19). Being very ancient, the house becomes part of the Olivers’ own history; Mrs. Swithin, Bartholomew Oliver’s sister, invites her guest William Dodge to view the house, noting at one point that she herself “was born [there] in this bed” (*BA*, 43) and when they come to the nursery room, she comments that such nurseries are, almost literally: “The cradle of our race” (*BA*, 44). Mrs. Swithin “retire[s] to Hastings” (*BA*, 4) every winter, seeking peace and security; the fact that Virginia Woolf chooses this particular town, with all its historical resonance, is presumably not accidental.

The Olivers have been in Pointz Hall for “over a hundred and twenty years” (*BA*, 3), but “the Swithins were there [in the area] before the Conquest” (*BA*, 18). The Olivers are not the only

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<sup>53</sup> King, 94.

family that has historical roots in the area around Pointz Hall; most of the families that inhabit there are interrelated in a social unity that ultimately reflects the community of England: “[T]he Warings, the Elveys, the Mannerings or the Burnets; the old families who had all intermarried, and lay in their deaths intertwined, like the ivy roots, beneath the churchyard wall” (BA, 3). Even as continuity is recorded, the passage of time and process and the transience of individuals are registered. The ancient features of the area are documented in the Guide Book, one of the several histories referred to:

The Guide Book still told the truth. 1833 was true in 1939. No house had been built; no town had sprung up. Hogben’s Folly was still eminent; the very flat, field-parcelled land had changed only in this—the tractor had to some extent superseded the plough. (BA, 32)

The pageant itself, that is performed by the villagers, enacts time and history. It starts with a narrator who embodies English history from the time of Chaucer to the present time of the performance: “*England am I*” (BA, 47). Alex Zwerdling indicates that the pageant suggests the English ‘cultural continuity’, since it presents different historical eras.<sup>54</sup> It portrays the very community of England that Woolf saw, anxiously, as being under the threat of the war in April 1939: “[T]hen there comes too the community feeling: all England thinking the same thing—this horror of war—at the same moment. Never felt it so strong before” (DV, 215). Even though the pageant unifies Pointz Hall’s people, this unity seems to be vulnerable since the threatening clouds of war are gathering over their heads.

Like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Between the Acts* portrays the processes of time which shadow the human individual’s present life through the sounds of clocks and bells. Their constant striking makes one continually conscious of the passage of time as England slides inexorably into war, like the days recorded in Woolf’s diary: “It was early morning. The dew was on the grass. The church clock struck eight times” (BA, 4). Being absorbed with her daily work at the kitchen, Mrs. Sands the cook has been awakened by the striking of the clock: “Sands heard the clock tick; saw the cat; noted a fly buzz” (BA, 20). While they are preparing for the pageant’s performance, the Olivers are suddenly interrupted by the sounds of the church clock: “Isa heard the first chime; and the second; and the third [...] And which would it be, wet or fine? And they all looked out of

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<sup>54</sup> Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (California: California U. P., 1986), 312.

the window” (BA, 28). Time, here—the sounds of the bells— makes the characters and even Woolf’s reader aware of the passage and vicissitudes of life, represented by time itself.

The sounds of clocks are used to show the stress and anxiety that envelope the atmosphere of the pageant itself. In *Where there is a will there's a Way*, a play presented in the pageant itself, time invokes the anxiety of the play’s characters themselves. In one of the scenes, Valentine keeps checking time; he “pull[s] his watch out” (BA, 86). Valentine waits Flavinda, his beloved, away from the eyes of others, and when he meets her, time seems to be warning of a danger that might assault the two of them and threaten their love: “(They embrace) The clock strikes nine” (BA, 86).

Sometimes, time is portrayed as a means which constrains human liberty. Waiting for the starting of the pageant’s action, the villagers feel that they are prisoners of time itself: “We aren’t free, each one of them felt separately to feel or think separately, nor yet to fall asleep” (BA, 40). The same feeling possesses them even while they are watching the performance of the pageant; they are tied together by the time of the play itself: “Time was passing. How long would time hold them together?” (BA, 94). The audience are unified, temporarily, by the gramophone’s constant ticking that is explicitly compared to the sounds of a clock: “Tick, tick, tick, the machine continued. Time was passing. The audience was wandering, dispersing. Only the tick tick of the gramophone held them together” (BA, 95).

The actual time—the sounds of clocks—seems to be part of the processes of the natural world and the farming culture of the area around the Hall. Sitting in the kitchen of the inn after the end of the pageant, Miss La Trobe “took her chair and looked through the smoke at a crude glass painting of a cow in a stable; also at a cock and a hen” (BA, 131). While Miss La Trobe is absorbed in drinking her glass and looking at the view, time, represented by the ticking of the clock, parallels the insidious movement of the smoke that obscures things: “The cheap clock ticked; smoke obscured the pictures. Smoke became tart on the roof of her mouth. Smoke obscured the earth-coloured jackets” (BA, 131). The image of time here—the ticking of the clock—intensified by the smoke, might suggest the uncertainty of the human individual’s future. Near the end of the novel, the ticking of the clock in the Olivers’ house is accompanied by the cracking of the whole house, as if time is a huge power that causes the vibration of the house and intimations of vulnerability: “The clock ticked. The house gave little cracks as if it were very



brittle, very dry. Isa's hand on the window felt suddenly cold. Shadow had obliterated the garden. Roses had withdrawn for the night" (*BA*, 134). The ticking of the clock, the shifts in the ancient house's structure again hint at the approaching of the danger and darkness of the war, that its 'shadow' might envelope the human present.

At some points the house, and all it represents, is even more explicitly haunted by intimations of destruction, and reversion to an earlier, pre-civilised mode of existence: "The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks" (*BA*, 136). The image here suggests a loss of protection and shelter that will again be visited on England. Moreover the image of 'the house [that] has lost its shelter' suggests what Woolf has argued in *Three Guineas* when she comments on the horrible photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses, during the Spanish Civil War. Woolf connects the ruin of that house with the ruin of the public world: "Both houses will be ruined, the public and the private, the material and the spiritual, for they are inseparably connected."<sup>55</sup> Thus, the Olivers' house here stands for both the public and the private worlds that lack security and peace. In the previous paragraph, on the final page of the book, the tensions in the relationship between Giles Oliver and his wife, Isa, are similarly presented as having to be acted out in a world that seems stripped of the reassuring shelter of civilisation, a relationship being fought out, again, in terms of the elemental life of the natural world:

Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. (*BA*, 136)

That echo of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a novel evoking a world stripped of the arbitrary but necessary codes of civilisation and gesturing towards an existence in a world which is ultimately a void, lacking meaning and significance, is indeed not an accident. For *Between the Acts* contains at points images that hint at some void beyond time itself, a sort of heart of darkness moment, which suggests something of the meaninglessness and 'emptiness' that Woolf herself feels during the war, as she notes in her diary in September 1939: "Our first air raid warning at 8.30 this morning [...] Emptiness. Inefficiency [...] Yes, it[']s an empty meaningless

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<sup>55</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth, 1938), 259.

world now” (*DV*, 234). At one point in the novel, ‘emptiness’ fills the dining room of the Olivers, evoking fear and a sense of futility: “Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room is a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence” (*BA*, 22). The profound and resonant silence is emphasised by the human voices which echo from the elsewhere in the house: “Across the hall a door opened. One voice, another voice, a third voice came wimpling and warbling: gruff—Bart’s voice; quavering—Lucy’s voice; middle toned—Isa’s voice” (*BA*, 22). It is an eerie moment, an intrusion of some bleak emptiness beyond time, a sense of ultimate meaninglessness, directly akin to that glimpsed in Woolf’s diary entry.

Such intimations of emptiness ultimately suggest again the anxiety and stress felt by human individuals. Wandering towards the stable yard in the interval of the pageant, Isa is possessed by a feeling of depression, by which she feels that time has stopped for a while:

‘Where do I wander?’ She mused ‘[...] Where the eyeless wind blows? And there grows nothing for the eye [...] In some harvestless dim field where no evening lets fall her mantle; nor sun rises. All’s equal there. Unblowing, ungrowing are the roses there. Change is not; nor the mutable and lovable; nor greetings nor partings; not furtive findings and feelings, where hand seeks hand and eye seeks shelter from the eye’. (*BA*, 96)

The anxiety that Isa expresses here makes her feel hopeless and frustrated; in her eyes the present seems meaningless and bleak. It is a desolate vision of a timelessness which represents not immortality but emptiness and infertility (‘some harvestless dim field’). Isa, who we are carefully told, is “thirty-nine” (*BA*, 11) years old, is possessed by the pain of the past, represented by the First World War that Isa has experienced when she had been fourteen, a pain that is recreated by the present tension: “How am I burdened with what they drew from the earth; memories; possessions. This is the burden that the past laid on me” (*BA*, 96). While her mind is occupied with memories from the past—the First World War—Isa (almost inevitably) looks at “[t]he gilt hands of the stable clock pointed inflexibly at two minutes to the hour. The clock was about to strike” (*BA*, 96-97). Time is like a weapon, threatening the human individual by its passage and ultimately heralding the approach of the war.

Observing the gloomy outlook of her husband, Isabella silently murmurs some words of poetry: “Fade far away and quite forget what thou amongst the leaves hast never known...’ Isa supplied the first words that came into her head by way of helping her husband out of his difficulty” (BA, 33). The quotation here is derived from John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”; the singing of this little bird in the dark of the forest catches the attention of the poet and helps draw him away from his own thoughts of suffering and grief, his awareness of human mortality in a world burdened by the processes of time:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The wariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow.<sup>56</sup>

The poet here shows his desire to be free, like this bird, and escape his sorrow and pain. Isa wishes that Giles, whose mood is disturbed by his acute awareness of the imminence of war could be released from *his* painful thoughts.<sup>57</sup>

Relatedly Woolf delineates images from the processes of the natural world to reflect human beings’ lives. The natural world is at times presented as an enemy that invades the security of the human. Standing beside the window looking at the natural view outside, Mrs Swithin recalls what has been told to her by her brother: “Then he told her the famous story of the great eighteenth century winter; when for a whole month the house had been blocked by snow” (BA, 4). Natural process here paralyzes life and imprisons human beings. Natural process, embodied by winter, brings with it mortality and death: “when winter wept its damp upon the panes, and

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<sup>56</sup> John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”, *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Longman, 1970), 526-527.

<sup>57</sup> The reference to Keats might suggest that his odes, consistently concerned with the processes of human passion and pain in time, were in Virginia Woolf’s mind in the period. The reference, cited previously, to the vase standing in eerie silence perhaps evokes Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “unravish’d bride of quietness”, free of human pain, but, being out of time, inhabiting a timeless world which is cold and passionless, a vision almost as bleak as Woolf’s at this moment. See John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Longman, 1970), 532-538.

chocked the gutters with dead leaves” (BA, 4). To resist winter’s severity and “to escape from nature” (BA, 4), the house is built “in the hollow, facing north” (BA, 4).

The natural world can also invoke a momentary sense of unfamiliarity. Sitting in the garden drinking coffee with their guests, the Olivers remain silent looking at the views that seem to them unfamiliar, even though they are the same views they see every day: “They looked at the view; they looked at what they knew, to see if what they knew might perhaps be different today. Most days it was the same” (BA, 32). Such a feeling seems to be created by the menace of the war that the characters are very aware of its danger.

Describing the Barn that “had been built over seven hundred years ago” (BA, 62), Woolf again evokes the natural processes that, ultimately, threaten its security:

The Barn was empty. Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood [...] All these eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, looked from different angles and edges. (BA, 62)

This emblem of civilisation, the Barn that “remind[s] some people of a Greek temple, others of the middle ages” (BA, 62), is quietly eroded by mice, swallows and insects when it is deserted. Again, however old, human structures are vulnerable, destruction not far away.

The description of the library in Mr. Oliver’s house shows that mortality and death are equally dominant images there:

The fire greyed, then glowed, and the tortoiseshell butterfly beat on the lower pane of the window; beat, beat, beat; repeating that if no human being ever came, never, never, never, the books would be mouldy, the fire out and the tortoiseshell butterfly dead on the pane. (BA, 9-10)

At the same time the image here shows that human civilisation, represented by ‘the books’, is subject to the threat of natural process. Moreover, the working country people are seen very much in terms of the constantly changing landscape they work in: Bond, the cowman is seen: “Leaning, silent, sardonic, against the door, he was like a withered willow, bent over a stream, all

its leaves shed, and in his eyes the whimsical flow of the waters” (BA, 16). Again the countryside is seen not lyrically, but as subject to time’s ‘flow’.

Time, portrayed by the natural process, seems to reflect human pain and misery. The sun “in compassion [...] withdrew, covering its face, as if it forebore to look on human suffering” (BA, 13). A few minutes before the beginning of the pageant, the non-human world seems to react with the enthusiasm of waiting for the next hours—the starting time—of the pageant itself: “The heat had increased. The clouds had vanished. All was sun now. The view laid bare by the sun was flattened, silenced stilled. The cows were motionless, the brick wall, no longer sheltering, beat back grains of heat” (BA, 40). The process of time is portrayed even in the scenes of the pageant itself: “*Past is the day of corn and lover./ The bud has flowered; the flower has fallen*” (BA, 59). And always the cycle of time is shown through images of natural process; swallows, for instance, return to Pointz Hall every year for nesting: “Across Africa, across France they had come to nest here. Year after year they came” (BA, 67).

A few days before the outbreak of the war, Virginia Woolf describes the atmosphere in London in her diary on 28 August 1939: “For us it’s like being on a small island [...] And the strain. Like waiting a doctor [’s] verdict.” (DV, 231). On 27 June 1940, Woolf notes in her diary: “We pour to the edge of a precipice [...] I can[’]t conceive that there will be a 27<sup>th</sup> June 1941” (DV, 299). Possibly not unexpectedly, Virginia Woolf delineates the anticipation of war in *Between the Acts*, as in her diary, through a variety of sea and water images by which the characters and even the whole life in Pointz Hall are presented as living in water or being sunk into water. In her first appearance, Isa, Giles Oliver’s wife, is portrayed as entering: “like a swan swimming its way” (BA, 2). Isa, who is at this point attracted to a local farmer, Haines, imagines herself and the farmer, when she hears old Oliver reading some poetic lines from Byron’s “She walks in beauty like the night”: “The words made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans down stream” (BA, 2). Mrs. Manresa, the guest of the Olivers, is also described as being in water: “[L]ike leaping dolphins in the wake of an ice-breaking vessel” (BA, 25). Through the course of the pageant, Mrs. Manresa, who seems absorbed in watching this performance, “[is] afloat on the stream of the melody” (BA, 49). Miss La Trobe, the director of the pageant, who seems to know everyone in Pointz Hall, “but refuse[s] to be mixed up in it” (BA,

39), is also described through water imagery: “She splashed into the fine mesh [of the community] like a great stone into the lily pool” (*BA*, 39).

Virginia Woolf describes even the natural landscape around Pointz Hall as seemingly to be sinking into water: “Nature had provided a stretch of turf half a mile in length and level, till it suddenly dipped to the lily pool” (*BA*, 5) and the narrator continues delineating more water images that make one feel that the water fills everywhere in Pointz Hall:

Water, for hundreds of years, had silted down into the hollow, and lay there four or five feet deep over a black cushion of mud [...] Silently they [fish] manoevered in their water world, poised in the blue patch made by the sky, or shot silently to the edge where the grass, trembling, made a fringe of nodding shadow. On the water-pavement spiders printed their delicate feet. A grain fell and spiralled down; a petal fell, filled and sank. (*BA*, 26)

As we have noted in her previous fiction, through such recurrent images of water, Woolf evokes not only the fluidity of life in time, but also its vulnerability and its transience. Such imagery is even present, again, in the Barn, the “great building in the farmyard” (*BA*, 15); Woolf portrays the greatness of its doors through the wagons that carry products: “[W]hen the doors at the end stood open, as they did to let the wagons in—the long wagons, like ships of the sea, breasting the corn, not the sea, returning in the evening shagged with hay” (*BA*, 15). Images of the sea and the vulnerability of human constructions in the sea, fill even the house of the Olivers: “Everyone was out in the garden. The room was like a ship deserted by its crew” (*BA*, 44).

The characters themselves at times have a sense that the things round them are either floating on water or sinking into it. In the eyes of old Oliver, the landscape itself looks as “flowing fields, heath and wood” (*BA*, 7). Looking through her window, Isa also sees “the innocent island float[ing] under her window” (*BA*, 8). The sense of seeing the land as floating on water dominates even Mrs. Swithin’s way of walking; she enters the library room “sidling, as if the floor were fluid under her shabby garden shoes” (*BA*, 12). At the time of the pageant’s interval, William Dodge, sees George, Isa’s little son, as if struggling against a relentless sea: “A small boy battled his way through the crowd, striking against skirts and trousers as if he were swimming blindly” (*BA*, 65). A cognate motif again suggests, perhaps, human vulnerability. After reading his newspaper, old Oliver “was drowsy; and so sank down into the chintz-covered

chair with the dog at his feet—the Afghan hound” (BA, 10). While she wanders in the house with her guest, William Dodge, Mrs. Swithin feels tired and “[h]er voice died away. She sank down on the edge of the bed” (BA, 43). Sitting among the audience watching the pageant, “[t]he beldame [...] had sunk back on her chair” (BA, 57). Going to have some refreshment at the time of the interval, the audience seem still under the influence of the gramophone’s song: “*Dispersed are we*, the music wailed [...] Giles remained like a stake in the tide of the flowing company” (BA, 60). After the interval, the audience continue watching the pageant; in the eyes of Miss La Trobe they seem “sink[ing] down peacefully into the nursery rhyme” (BA, 76).

Sea and water images are on occasion associated more overtly with threat and danger. Even though “[t]hey were so far from the sea. A hundred miles away” (BA, 17), the villagers of Pointz Hall “can hear the waves on a still night. After a storm, they say, you can hear a wave break” (BA, 17). The sounds of the waves here that break the silence of a night after terrible weather convey an image of danger that disturbs the peace and calmness of the individual’s night. According to what she has read in H. G. Wells’s *The Outline of History*, Mrs. Swithin sees the sea as a reminder of the pre-civilised past, the evolutionary processes of life and perhaps an intuition that the past world is still in flux: “‘Once there was no sea’ [...] ‘No sea at all between us and the continent. I was reading that in a book this morning. There were rhododendrons in the Strand; and mammoths in Piccadilly’” (BA, 17). At the time of the pageant’s interval, and still being under the influence of the pageant itself, Isa audibly hums “All is over. The wave has broken. Left us stranded, high and dry” (BA, 60). Isa looks unhappy and absent-minded most of the time. To please herself, she thinks of going to the wishing well, where the inhabitants of Pointz Hall go to make their wishes; but, even this idea seems to be hopeless and dangerous: “Down the ride, that leads under the nut tree and the may tree, away, till I come to the wishing well [...] But what wish should I drop into the well?’ [...] ‘That the waters should cover me’ [...] ‘of the wishing well’” (BA, 64).

Woolf continues to paint water images even in the description of the colourful pageant’s costumes: “The clothes were strewn on the grass [...] There were pools of red and purple in the shade; flashes of silver in the sun” (BA, 38). The scenes of the pageant itself are coloured by water and sea images. At its opening scene, ‘England’ is associated with watery origins: “*a child new born [...] /Sprung from the sea*” (BA, 48). On the stage, Mrs. Clark, who acts the role of

Queen Elizabeth, looks like “a rock in the ocean [...] with the blue and sailing clouds behind her” (BA, 52). In the presentation of the Victorian age, Edgar, one of the characters of the pageant describes his life through water imagery: “*My life has passed [...] like a ripple in water*” (BA, 102). After the performance of *Where there is a Will there’s a Way*, a play presented within the pageant, the narrator describes the natural view that seems to be part of the pageant itself, where “[t]he sun was sinking; the colours were merging” (BA, 83). The image of water colours not only the natural view but even the feelings of the audience and their outlook. Mrs. Elmhurst, one of the audience, feels herself after watching *Where there is a Will there’s a Way*, as if she “was still floating unattached, and didn’t settle” (BA, 93).

Water images are used to suggest death itself that threatens human life. The pool of Pointz Hall is connected to death and horror: “It was in that deep centre, in that black heart, that the lady had drowned herself. Ten years since the pool had been dredged and a thigh bone recovered” (BA, 26). In spite of being probably fictional, the story of the drowned lady frightens the servants, who feel that there is no security in life. Therefore, they stop “walk[ing] by the lily pool at night” (BA, 26). Being engaged in the gloomy public world, in August 1938, Woolf documented in her diary a similar tragic end of a lady at Rodmell:

The old woman who lived up at Mt Misery drowned herself 3 days ago. The body was found near Piddinghoe—my usual walk. Her son died; she turned queer; had been a midwife in Brighton; lived in the broken windowed half of Mr Bradfield’s house. (DV, 161)

Woolf here is negatively affected by the story of this woman to the extent, it seems, that she uses such a story in *Between the Acts*. The way in which the event poignantly anticipates Woolf’s own end scarcely needs comment.

Living in the danger of the Second World War, Woolf notes in her diary on 16 February 1940: “But our talk?—it was about Civilization [...], this war means that the barbarian will gradually freeze out culture” (DV, 268). ‘Civilisation’ under threat of the war and its ‘barbarian’ outcome, is depicted in *Between the Acts*, in which Woolf presents images from prehistoric time to counterpoint the present. Reading Wells’ *Outline of History*, “[which] is an attempt to tell, truly and clearly, in one continuous narrative the whole story of Life and mankind”, Mrs Swithin feels



the danger of the hazard, since images of monsters provoke her sense of foreboding.<sup>58</sup> These images occupy her mind and lead her to “spen[d] the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated” (BA, 4). The violent and savage images, show again her intuitions of civilisation's instability, but also perhaps intimations of war and its dictators—‘barking monsters’, who reduce human life to that of brutes: “[...] populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend” (BA, 4). Mrs. Swithin finds it difficult to escape the uneasiness she has felt when she reads of this prehistoric period, since it makes her think also of her present:

It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about [...] to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest. (BA, 4)

The horror of what she has read makes her unable to distinguish between the colours of the tray and that of the imagined monster. At the same time, these images perhaps echo for Virginia Woolf the words of the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, who said in his broadcast on the eve of the war: “It is evil things we are fighting against [...] brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution.”<sup>59</sup> Hence, the “[p]rehistoric man, [...] half-human, half-ape, [which] roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones” (BA, 135) and had invaded in prehistoric times the land where London streets now stand, suggests again the ‘brute force’ of war dictators, who represent the real threat to civilisation, and a return to a monstrous, barbarian, world.

Images of savagery provoke also the fear of Isabella, Old Oliver's daughter-in-law: “[H]er dentist had told her that savages could perform very skilful operations on the brain. Savages had false teeth, he said. False teeth were invented, she thought he said, in the time of the Pharaohs” (BA, 18). Like his wife, Giles Oliver is also possessed by an awareness of the previous world of

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<sup>58</sup> H. G. Wells, “Book 1: The Making of Our Life”, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (London: George Newnes, [1919]), 1.

<sup>59</sup> Neville Chamberlain, quoted in Henry Pelling, *Britain and the Second World War*, 31.

savagery, which war may cause to return to human life: “He kicked—a flinty yellow stone, a sharp stone, edged as if cut by a savage for an arrow. A barbaric stone; a pre-historic” (BA, 61). The fragments of the villagers’ conversation show also part of the dominant fear caused by the threat to civilisation; Mrs Parker tells Giles “‘Surely, Mr. Oliver, We’re more civilised?’” (BA, 69). Even the words, said on the stage of the pageant, reflect the same dominant feeling—a falling of civilisation—that occupied people’s minds during the war:

*Palaces tumble down [...] Babylon, Nineveh, Troy... And Caesar’s great house... all fallen they lie  
[...] Digging and delving we pass... and the Queen and the Watch Tower fall...for Agamemnon has  
ridden away...Clytemnestra is nothing but... (BA, 86-87)<sup>60</sup>*

Immediately after this scene, the stage remains empty, no character is presented and a sense of fear dominates the pageant’s director: “Miss La Trobe leant against the tree, paralysed. Her power had left her [...] ‘This is death,’ she murmured” (BA, 87). Explicitly, Miss La Trobe’s feeling seems to be caused by her fear of the pageant’s failure, but implicitly it shows that she is identified with the action that provokes her fear of the present moment in which she lives, that may lead at any time to war. Away from the stage, the natural world seems to support what is presented on Miss La Trobe’s stage: “From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was a primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment” (BA, 87). Even the natural world shows a response to the shifts in the human world that is associated with ‘primeval’, hints also at the ‘present moment’, which is shadowed by the gloom of unavoidable war.

### **War and the Anticipation of War**

The ghosts of war frighten the characters of *Between the Acts*; they do not stop talking about war, whether by recalling the First World War or revealing their fear and anxiety about their present that is threatened by the danger of the Second World War. The bitterness of the First World War

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<sup>60</sup> The image of ‘the Watch Tower fall[s]’, the sense of the vulnerability of ‘civilisation’, and the passing of previous ones, echo what Woolf portrays in *Jacob’s Room*; Woolf again reminds the reader of T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, in which the Eliot hints at the threat to civilisation caused by the First World War: “What is the city over the mountains/Cracks and reforms and burst in the violet air/Falling towers/Jerusalem Athens Alexandrian/Vienna London/Unreal.” See T. S. Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber 1972), 41.

still shows its signs in the lives of villagers and even the guests of Mr. Oliver like Mrs. Manresa whose husband was killed in the war: “Ralph, when he was at the war, couldn’t have been killed without her seeing him” (BA, 27), and “Mrs. Ball lived with another man while her husband was in the trenches” (BA, 39). More directly, the hazard of the Second World War can be seen through the characters’ awareness of it. At the very beginning of his arrival on the scene at Pointz Hall, Giles, Isa’s husband shows his disturbance and concern caused by the news he reads on his way home, that shows the first signs of the war:

The ghost of convention rose to the surface, as a blush or a tear rises to the surface at the pressure of emotion [...] Had he not read, in the morning paper, in the train, that sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned, just over there, across the gulf, in the flat land which divided them from the continent? (BA, 28)

Such news make Giles keep silent and gloomy while sitting among his family; he is most acutely aware of the political danger and angry that others don’t seem to share his concerns. The whole image of Europe with its preparation for the war looks to him like the ‘hedgehog,’ already noted, that is ready to attack at any moment: “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” (BA, 33). Giles's anxiety makes him feel tired, vulnerable, even slightly unbalanced mentally; he remembers King Lear’s words on the health: ““I fear I am not in my perfect mind”” (BA, 53). The allusion to one of Shakespeare’s most brutal and disturbing, plays evokes for the reader a whole vision of disturbance and potential savagery. But he is not alone in his fears of potential violence; the precarious position of the Jews is referred to in the fragmented conversation of villagers: “And what about the Jews? The refugees” (BA, 76).

The crisis of the coming war has become the dominant subject of social conversation, as Woolf herself mentions in her diary in August 1939: “Workmen discussing war on the road—one for it, one against” (DV, 231). In *Between the Acts*, the villagers of Pointz Hall are at times very pessimistic and gloomy, since they too are conscious of the inevitability of the war: ““It all looks very black’ [...] ‘No one wants it—save those damned Germans”” (BA, 94). The war issues become part of the villagers’ conversations: “No, I don’t go by politicians. I’ve a friend who’s been to Russia. He says...And my daughter, just back from Rome, she says the common people,

in the cafés, hate dictators” (BA, 75). After the surrender of Madrid in the final stage of the Spanish Civil War, Woolf notes in March 1939 in her diary the first signs of the German threat against her country: “KM. [Kingsley Martin] privately told L[eonard] that German aeroplanes have been flying over London”(DV, 211). This menace is also drawn in *Between the Acts* through the discussion of the villagers: “I agree—things look worse than ever on the continent. And what’s the channel, come to think of it, if they mean to invade us? The aeroplanes, I didn’t like to say it, made one think...” (BA, 123). Not only are they all too aware of the bombing of the First World War, as was Woolf herself, but recent war in Spain, with its systematic bombing of civilians had revealed the possibility of even more brutal attacks, should war breakout.

In May 1940, Home Intelligence reported the low ebb of people’s morale; the population was being negatively affected by false and unhealthy spreading rumours, which, for instance, said that the royal family was about to leave for Canada, and even that the Government planned to move there too before a German invasion.<sup>61</sup> The stress and anxiety of people caused by such rumours can be seen in *Between the Acts*, in which the characters continue to engage themselves in the news of war: “‘It’s brave of the king and Queen. They’re said to be going to India’” (BA, 64-65), another voice says: “‘I thought they said Canada, not India’”, (BA, 64-65), while the other adds: “‘D’you believe what the papers say?’” (BA, 65).

The atmosphere of war colours the mood and the feelings of the characters; they look anxious and vulnerable. William Dodge, the guest of the Olivers, faced by the approach of the war feels upset and hopeless: “‘The doom of the sudden death hanging over us,’ he said. ‘There’s no retreating and advancing’” (BA, 71). Robert Mackay points out that the absence of social life during the war made people see the whole country as an empty, lonely, grim and boring place.<sup>62</sup> Hence, the characters do not look happy; even in a time of entertainment—watching the pageant—they are unable to detach themselves from their bleak present; when Giles silently says “‘I am damnably unhappy’” (BA, 109), William Dodge shares him the same feeling: “‘So am I’ Dodge echoed” (BA, 109), and even Isa agrees with him: “‘And I too,’ Isa thought” (BA, 109). Giles does not have the desire even to watch the pageant: “‘Let’s hope to God that’s the end’” (BA, 109). They are all made to feel tired and vulnerable by their present and do not have any hope of

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<sup>61</sup> Mackay, 61-62.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 46.

escaping war: “They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle” (BA, 109). They sit waiting for the ‘Present time’ scene watching the empty stage and captured by the sounds of the machine:

All their nerves were on edge. They sat exposed. The machine ticked. There was no music. The horns of cars on the high road were heard. And the swish of trees. They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo. Tick, tick, tick went the machine. (BA, 110)

The characters here are presented as sitting and waiting as if for something bad to happen. The constant ticking of the machine, accompanied by the silence of the audience, invokes a sense of foreboding that is portrayed through a desperate image of rain, which is described as ‘tears’; such an image becomes part of the ‘Present time’ scene itself: “Down it [the cloud] poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears, Tears. Tears” (BA, 111). Written presumably after 1939, in the war itself, the image here comes to describe the suffering of Britain, a suffering the audience themselves are already anticipating; as Isa exclaims: “O that our human pain could here have ending!” (BA, 111). Meanwhile, Miss La Trobe, the director of the pageant, makes her audience see themselves through mirrors and “[a]nything that’s bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves” (BA, 113). Accordingly, fragments and pieces of human images are reflected in the mirrors: “Here a nose...There a skirt...then trousers only... Now perhaps a face... Ourselves?” (BA, 114). By this way, as Galia Benziman suggests, “the audience experiences a defamiliarizing encounter with its own image, and this encounter is shown to be formative for the development of its new sense of identity.”<sup>63</sup> It is a disturbed, and disturbing, image of a distorted and fragmented community, a visual image of inner anguish. This portrayal is shown without any ornamentation; Woolf satirically mirrors the human world, and humanity itself that is mingled with brutality and wildness: “*Ourselves. Some bony. Some fat [...] Liars most of us [...] The poor are as bad as the rich are [...] Consider the gun slayers, bomb droppers here or there. They do openly what we do slyly [...] O we’re all the same*” (BA, 115-116). These fragmental images of the characters’ pictures, which make their bodies look mutilated, again bring back to mind the destructive images of the Spanish Civil War, represented by the photographs of dead

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<sup>63</sup> Galia Benziman, “‘Dispersed Are We’: Mirroring and National Identity in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*”, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Winter, 2006), pp. 53-71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30224638>. Accessed 22-5-2014.

bodies that are described in *Three Guineas*. On the other hand, the refrain song “*Dispersed are we*” (BA, 123) that the gramophone keeps singing till the end of the pageant, reflects the reality of the human world, barely hanging together as a community, each individual feeling his/her growing private anxiety.

### **Masculinity and Gender**

Masculinity is dealt with in *Between the Acts* either through presenting men who have the dominant role in the family like Bartholomew Oliver and his son Glies, or through the domestic role of females like that of Isa. Woolf also stresses masculinity through the character of Miss La Trobe, the director of the pageant.

Like Captain Barfoot in *Jacob's Room* and Colonel Abel Pargiter in *The Years*, Bartholomew Oliver has spent his life in one of the colonies of the Empire, albeit in the civil service: “[He is] of the Indian Civil Service, retired” (BA, 1). Even though he is not a military man, Bartholomew Oliver is dominated by a sense of militarism that seems to occupy his own thinking and even the world of his dreams. Being influenced by the worsening political tension of 1939 that fills the newspapers, Bartholomew Oliver, “[who has] read his paper” (BA, 10), falls asleep and dreams of his years in India: “[A] young man helmeted; and a cascade falling [...] in the sand a hoop of ribs; a bullock maggot-eaten in the sun; and in the shadow of the rock, savages; and in his hand a gun” (BA, 10). Again, not only is the alien world of imperial power registered but also, again, the transience of the flesh and the threat of savagery. In the eyes of his sister, Mrs. Swithin, Bartholomew Oliver is seen in an image from childhood, in which she still recalls her brother confronting her with a terrifying bloody image of a fish caught by him: “Once, she remembered, he had made her take the fish off the hook herself. The blood had shocked her [...] for the gills were full of blood” (BA, 12). Bartholomew Oliver's asperity and rigidity are obviously seen in fishing itself linked with the bloody image. A man of his generation, his masculinity is again indicated by the autobiographical books of military men and adventurous leaders which occupy most of his library shelves: “Arms akimbo, he stood in front of his country gentleman's library. Garibaldi; Wellington; Irrigation Officers' Reports; and Hibbert on the Diseases of the Horse. A

great harvest the mind had reaped” (BA, 72). Since “[b]ooks are the mirrors of the soul” (BA, 9), the library of Mr. Oliver reflects the active masculine sense that dominates his behaviour.

From the perspective of George, Isa’s little child, Bartholomew Oliver’s presence brings fear and danger; Mr. Oliver looks like a monster trying to attack his victim—George—and disturb his peaceful moments of playing with flowers:

Then there was a roar and a hot breath and a stream of coarse grey hair rushed between him [George] and the flower. Up he leapt, toppling in his fright, and saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms. (BA, 6)

To please his grandson, Bartholomew Oliver creates a game that, however, terrifies little George; he “crumpled the paper which he had cocked into a snout and appeared in person. A very tall old man, with gleaming eyes, wrinkled cheeks, and a head with no hair on it” (BA, 6). With his “wild yellow eyes” (BA, 10), Mr. Oliver looks like a brute and he comes towards his Afghan hound shouting like military commander asking obedience from his soldiers: “‘Heel!’ The old man bawled, as if he were commanding a regiment” (BA, 7). Luisa Maria Roderiques Flora points out that this episode, perhaps suggests the powerlessness of Bartholomew Oliver who represents the decline of the British Empire, an old man threatening those who cannot resist.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, it shows that this man cannot stop expressing aggressive, masculine behaviour, that is reflected even in the game that makes his little grandson “burst[s] out crying” (BA, 7) once he sees the frightening figure of his grandfather. Observing that his game does not work, Bartholomew Oliver ‘scornfully’ describes this little boy as being “a coward” (BA, 11), a feature that does not go with the fully masculine character of Mr. Oliver himself.

Being like his father, Giles Oliver also shows a manliness that can be seen in his outlook and in his behaviour. Giles is described as having the look of “a cricketer, in flannels, wearing a blue coat with brass buttons” (BA, 28). Mrs. Manresa sees him as having the features of a romantic hero: “He was the very type of all that Mrs. Manresa adored. His hair curled; far from running away, as many chins did, his was firm; the nose straight, if short; the eyes, of course, with that hair, blue; and finally to make the type complete, there was something fierce, untamed, in the

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<sup>64</sup> Luisa Maria Roderiques Flora, “Manacled to a rock he was: Exhausted Patriarchy in *Between the Acts*”, *Daedalus* (1995): 169-182. Google Scholar: Spring, 2011.

expression” (BA, 29). Like most of young men of his generation, Giles has his chance either to enter a university and then the world of the professions; he has preferred world of money and power: “[H]e had chosen, after leaving college, to take a job in the city” (BA, 28), as a stockbroker.

Giles gains the love of his wife, Isa, by his manly actions while fishing in Scotland where they meet: “Her line had got tangled; she had given over, and had watched him with the stream rushing between his legs, casting, casting, casting—until, like a thick ingot of silver bent in the middle, the salmon had leapt, had been caught, and she had loved him” (BA, 29). Even though his domestic life with his wife repeatedly seems “strained” (BA, 66), Giles is still seen by his wife, Isa as a hero: “But here he was; and the muscular, the hirsute, the virile plunged him into emotions” (BA, 66).

Giles cannot detach himself from his own masculine instincts. Walking in the garden, Giles is shocked by a violent scene from the natural world:

There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion. (BA, 61-62)

Alex Zwerdling points out that the image of the snake and toad struggling shows the return of predatory forces into the human world and it shows also the inevitable destructive end of the two obstinate struggling forces, which symbolise the coming war.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, Woolf connects the struggling violent action of the snake and the toad with masculinity. Coming close to the action, Giles stamps on the struggling creatures and “his tennis shoes was [sic] blood-stained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the Barn, with blood on his shoes” (BA, 62). By doing so, Giles, who feels relief, becomes part of the struggle itself; the image of blood on Giles’s tennis shoes can be interpreted as sings of a war-like action, waged by patriarchal power. As a male, Giles here cannot be neutral; he thinks that “it is better to kill than to be killed.”<sup>66</sup> In the view of Woolf, as a young man, Giles here is dominated by his ‘Subconscious Hitlerism’, an instinct she portrays in her essay “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, in 1940; Giles behaves like the airman who has the instinct to fight: “the young airman

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<sup>65</sup> Zwerdling, 307.

<sup>66</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Women Must Weep”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941*, 136.



[...] is driven by voices in himself—ancient instincts, instincts fostered and cherished by education and tradition.”<sup>67</sup> Isa, herself is disgusted by such cruelty: “‘I don’t admire you,’ [...] ‘Silly little boy, with blood on his boots’” (*BA*, 69).

The effects of masculinity can be seen through the life of Isa, the wife of Giles Oliver. She is at “the age of the century, thirty-nine” (*BA*, 11); she is encircled by her domestic life that most of the time means she is engaged only in her house work; in the expository scene of the novel, Isa has been introduced to the reader as she is ordering fish for lunch. Through the portrayal of Isa, who “loathed the domestic, the possessive; the maternal” (*BA*, 11) in her society, Woolf stresses the domesticity that woman is buried in by a society that still pays much attention and concern to men rather than women. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf connects the preventing of war with having access to women’s independence and liberty; Woolf addresses her male readers: “For to help women to earn their livings in the professions is to help them to possess that weapon of independent opinion which is still their most powerful weapon. It is to help them to have a mind of their own and a will of their own with which to help you prevent war”<sup>68</sup>

Like most of the female characters of Woolf’s novels, Isa is deprived of attending University and being equal to her husband’s generation. Running her eyes along the books of the library room, Isa feels injustice: “Book-shy she was, like the rest of her generation; and gun-shy too” (*BA*, 11), since as Woolf puts it in “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”: “Arms are not given to Englishwomen either to fight the enemy or to defend herself. She must lie weaponless to-night.”<sup>69</sup> Woolf here develops what she has mentioned in 1938: “both the Army and the Navy are closed to our [female] sex.”<sup>70</sup> Isa feels the injustice that her female generation endures; she shows her desire to be aware of the political news of the public world, a world, as a female, she cannot be involved in: “For her generation the newspaper was a book; and, as her father-in-law dropped the *Times*, she took it and read” (*BA*, 11).

In spite of looking very proud of her husband: “‘He is my husband’ [...] ‘The father of my children.’ [...] she felt pride; and affection” (*BA*, 29), Isa seems frequently to be detached from her husband. Even though “[he] ha[s] been furiously in love with his wife” (*BA*, 28), no

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<sup>67</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1933-1941*, 244.

<sup>68</sup> *Three Guineas*, 106.

<sup>69</sup> “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, 242.

<sup>70</sup> “Women Must Weep”, 137.

conversation is documented between Giles and his wife: “She had not spoken to him, not one word. Nor looked at him either” (BA, 69). Isa’s love of art is restricted by her patriarchal society, represented by the domination of her husband. Isa “[is] afraid, of her husband [to the extent that] she write[s] her poetry in a book bound like an account book lest Giles might suspect” (BA, 30). Hermione Lee suggests that Isa’s poetry is an attempt at escaping towards a fantasy life like that of Rhoda in *The Waves*; both of them long for another world, where there is freedom and truth.<sup>71</sup> But it seems that Isa is more realistic than Rhoda, since the latter is a victim of her world of dreams and illusions, while Isa seems to be victimised by her real world—the patriarchal world. Isa’s poetry is a reflection of her own emotions that she needs to hide from others.

Reading the *Times*, Isa is shocked by an incident that occurs to a young girl, who is deceived by some soldiers: “The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed” (BA, 11). Patricia Laurence suggests that the “the domestic rape reported in the newspaper serves as counterpoint to the political rape of lands by Hitler.”<sup>72</sup> In fact, the rape of the girl, committed by the masculine militaristic world, seems to be a “real” (BA, 12) incident; it negatively affects Isa, who spends time thinking of this tragedy. Karin E. Westman suggests that “the girl’s pain from being deceived and subjected to masculine authority is not unique, but one that Isa and others shared.”<sup>73</sup> Woolf is all too aware of the potential for sexual violence even of her own country’s supposed soldier heroes. At the same time, Isa, who is herself in a world of militarism and masculine threat, feels the pain of this victimised girl and a fear of facing such a horror. While she sits thinking of this incident, Isa’s thoughts are interrupted by Mrs. Swithin’s entrance: “she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer” (BA, 12). The two images here, the raping of the girl, on one the hand, and Mrs. Swithin’s carrying a hammer, on the other, suggest at one level the image of war that is drawn in Woolf’s diary on 6 September 1939: “It

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<sup>71</sup> Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Holmes and Meier), 1977), 208.

<sup>72</sup> Patricia Laurence, “The Facts and Fugue of War: From *Three Guineas* to *Between the Acts*” *Virginia Woolf and the War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, ed. Mark Hussey (Syracuse: Syracuse U. P., 1991), 241.

<sup>73</sup> Karin E. Westman, “For her Generation the Newspaper Was Book’: Media, Mediation, and Oscillation in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 2, making Correction (Winter, 2006), pp.1-18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831789>. Accessed 22-5-2014.

seems entirely meaningless—a perfunctory slaughter, like taking a jar in one hand, a hammer in the other” (*DV*, 235). There seems here—indeed it is present even in just the novel—a connection in Woolf’s mind between male violence and the hammer.

Woolf also engages the issue of what constructs masculinity through the character of William Dodge, who longs to be a man. Dodge, the “unknown young man with tow-coloured hair and a twisted face” (*BA*, 22) comes to Pointz Hall accompanied by Mrs. Manresa. Even though he looks “a gentleman; witness socks and trousers; brainy-tie spotted [...] urban, professional” (*BA*, 23), in the eyes of Isa, Dodge does not show manliness; when he denies being an artist and even when he hesitates in expressing his opinion about the picture in Oliver’s house, Isa asks herself: “‘Why’s he afraid?’ [...] A poor specimen he was; afraid to stick up for his own beliefs” (*BA*, 30). Giles Oliver, who “took against him” (*BA*, 29) when they meet, sees Dodge as a person who lacks something: “What for did a good sort like the woman Manresa bring these half-breeds in her trail? Giles asked himself” (*BA*, 30). Giles recognises a masculine ‘lack’ in Dodge. The point is only hinted at that Dodge is homosexual. Giles’s reaction to this suspicion is predictable, albeit part of his distaste is displaced frustration and anxiety about the political situation:

[G]ave Giles another peg on which to hang his rage as one hangs a coat on a peg, conveniently. A toady; a lickspittle; not a downright plain man of his senses; but a teaser and twitcher [...] not a man to have straightforward love for a woman [...] but simply a—At this word, which he could not speak in public, he pursed his lips. (*BA*, 37)

Giles and his creator, may leave out the dismissive, and probably abusive, noun. But, a page later, his wife’s attitude is a more tolerant one than her husband’s orthodox, masculine hostility: “Isabella guessed the word that Giles had not spoken. Well, was it wrong if he was that word? Why judge each other? Do we know each other? Not here, not now” (*BA*, 38). Woolf’s characteristic refusal to judge, her awareness of how little we can know another person, leads her to construct a very different, tolerant and more ‘feminine’ response to Dodge’s homosexuality. Apart, of course, from the fact that Woolf had several homosexual or bisexual friends—Forster, Strachey, Keynes—it was the qualities she characterised as ‘masculine’ that had brought about too many wars, and were about to put Britain into another. William Dodge’s inner pain which he silently reveals to Mrs. Swithin shows his sexual vulnerability: “And he wished to kneel before her, to kiss her hand, and to say: ‘At school they held me under a bucket of dirty water, Mrs.

Swithin; when I looked up, the world was dirty [...]; so I married; but my child's not my child [...] I am half-a-man” (BA, 45). Dodge invokes the pity of Mrs. Swithin herself: “She spoke as if she must overcome her tiredness out of charity towards a stranger, a guest” (BA, 43). It is, again, the female who reveals charity and compassion, the ‘feminine’ qualities.

However, like Lady Bruton in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Miss La Trobe, the director of the pageant is a ‘masculine’ woman both in her features and in her behaviour. She does not show the outlook of a conventional female, especially with her roughness and “[h]er abrupt manner and stocky figure; her thick ankles and sturdy shoes” (BA, 39). Miss La Trobe, who looks “swarthy, sturdy and thick set” (BA, 36), strides around “sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; [and] often with a whip in her hand” (BA, 36). Generally, “she [isn’t] altogether a lady” (BA, 36). Miss La Trobe’s name “[is not] presumably pure English” (BA, 35). This woman has been suspected to have “Russian blood in her” (BA, 35). Her life is enveloped with vagueness, since “[v]ery little [is] actually known about her” (BA, 35-36).

Tracing the behaviour of Miss La Trobe throughout the performance of the pageant suggests that Woolf wants to delineate this woman, not only in terms of ‘masculine’ supremacy, but even as a dictator figure, the sense of ‘subconscious Hitlerism’. Listening to one of Hitler’s war-like speeches on the radio in September 1938, Woolf scornfully satirised his violent speech in her diary:

No war yet anyhow. Hitler boasted & boomed but shot no solid bolt. Mere violent rant, & then broke off. We listened in to the end. A savage howl like a person excruciated; the howls from the audience; then a more spaced & measured sentence. Then another bark. Cheering ruled by a stick. Frightening to think of the faces. & the voice was frightening. But as it went on we said (only picking a word or two) anti-climax. This seems to be the general verdict. He daren[?]t cross the line. Comes up to it & stands bawling insults. (DV, 169)

Hitler’s violent verbal performance described here can be seen to be echoed in Miss La Trobe’s behaviour and treatment to people she knows and, especially, to those who work with her in the pageant. Miss La Trobe lives a life of failure: “Rumour said that she had kept a tea shop at Winchester; that had failed. She had been an actress. That had failed. She had bought a four-roomed cottage and shared it with an actress. They had quarrelled” (BA, 35). Such failure rankles

for a long time and seems to be reflected in her behaviour. Having “the look of a commander pacing his deck” (*BA*, 38), Miss La Trobe orders that the pageant should be performed out of the Barn and “[a]ll stage properties [...] must be moved from the Barn to the bushes” (*BA*, 38); she has a sense of adventure and “a lady of wonderful energy” (*BA*, 36), and cleverness. Miss La Trobe is “always all agog to get things up” (*BA*, 35). But everyone is under her command: “[S]hading her eyes in the attitude proper to an Admiral on his quarter-deck” (*BA*, 38), she has decided to take responsibility and “to risk the engagement out of doors” (*BA*, 38), without caring about the weather, whether it would be wet or fine. Like a military man, Miss La Trobe needs to keep her audience in order and silence; she is poised ready to order them to listen to the performance of the play: “The audience seated themselves, hastily, guiltily. Miss La Trobe’s eye was on them. She gave them ten seconds to settle their faces” (*BA*, 99). Generally, in her “name, ethnic origin, physical appearance, sexual affiliation, social class, occupation, Miss La Trobe’s difference is accentuated. Her position in relation to her audience is an external one.”<sup>74</sup> Ultimately this shows that Miss La Trobe is detached from her audience—the villagers of Poinz Hall—and her relationship with them is constructed by her commanding role at the pageant, by her unrelenting, dictatorial way of directing the pageant. In the course of the presentation of the pageant, Miss La Trobe seems like Hitler, who looked as ‘[a] savage howl like a person excruciated’, and a man who ‘stands bawling insults.’ Miss La Trobe, does not cease “gnash[ing] her teeth” (*BA*, 76) like a monster, using rough and “strong language” (*BA*, 36), such as ““Curse! Blast! Damn’em!”” (*BA*, 58). Miss La Trobe’s instinct to achieve triumph and glory by totally controlling others, like her actors and actresses or even her audience, is again part of what Woolf calls “subconscious Hitlerism that [...] is the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave.”<sup>75</sup> Shouting at her actors and actresses: “Louder! Louder!”[, Miss La Trobe] threatened them with the clench of her fists” (*BA*, 86). As Woolf puts it in describing Hitler’s dictatorship in her above mentioned diary: ‘Frightening to think of the faces. & the voice was frightening’.

Miss La Trobe’s tone—“bark[ing] out in guttural accents” (*BA*, 39) and we notice that adjective—to her actors and actresses, echoes Woolf’s words in describing Hitler: ‘Then another bark. Cheering ruled by a stick’. By doing so, Miss La Trobe impose her will on those who work under her command; tellingly, in spite of the fact that “[n]o one liked to be ordered about singly.

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<sup>74</sup> Benziman, 62.

<sup>75</sup> “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, 243.

But in little troops they appealed to her” (BA, 39). Despite her dictatorial tone—or it is surely suggested, because of it—“they hailed her” (BA, 39) as if saluting a military leader. La Trobe is possessed also by a sense of eminence and glory: “She could open her arms. She could say to the world, You have taken my gift! Glory possessed her—for one moment. But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon. It was in the giving that the triumph was” (BA, 129). Directing the villager’s pageant for seven years—“seven summers” (BA, 13), Miss La Trobe seems to have been associated with her commanding role for the same number of years as Hitler’s rise to power—seven years since the later came to power in 1933.

*Between the Acts* seems to be the novel among Virginia Woolf’s fictions that most shows how the writer’s acute awareness of the danger of the war in the shadows of whose threat Woolf seems consciously to have lived from early in 1938 until her death in 1941. Hence, the intensive images of time and process, history, sea and water images, and the role of masculinity reflect the stress and tension of these years that Woolf herself lived and suffered. Such gloomy and dangerous years affected not only the private life of Woolf, but even the lives of her characters, whom Woolf depicts here their anxiety and fear of the war that fill most of the scenes of this novel.

### **The War and Woolf’s Final Depression of 1941**

1941 opened for Woolf with the symptoms of depression and a profound sense of solitude that were finally to overcome her. Woolf’s diaries in this year show that the war was the real killer of Woolf. Leonard Woolf himself comments that “it was only in the first days of 1941 that the deep disturbance in her mind began to show itself clearly”.<sup>76</sup> At the beginning of the year, in January, Woolf made her final visit to London; she walked on London Bridge defying the air raids:

We were in London on Monday. I went to London Bridge. I looked at the river; very misty; some tufts of smoke, perhaps from burning houses. There was another fire on Saturday. Then I saw a cliff of wall, eaten out, at one corner; a great corner all smashed [...] A complete jam of traffic; for streets were being blown up. So by tube to the Temple; & there wandered in the desolate ruins of my old squares. (DV, 353)

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<sup>76</sup> *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*, 77.

The ‘burning houses’ and ‘the ruins of [her] old squares’—including parts of Bloomsbury itself—were images of destruction that precipitated the sense of depression and despair that attacked her a few days after this visit: “A Battle against depression [...] This trough of despair shall not, I swear, engulf me. The solitude is great. Rodmell life is very small beer. The house is damp. The house is untidy. But there is no alternative” (*DV*, 354-355). The ruin of London, on the one hand and the cold, dampness and isolated life at Monk’s House that was intensified by the war, on the other, helped to increase Woolf’s despair that closed in on her in the last months of her life. Isolating herself from others, Woolf began to prefer loneliness: “I like being alone. How can one do nothing?” (*DV*, 354). Part of Woolf’s depression is also due to the idea of having an uncertain future in the time of the war, as she wrote in her January diary: “Yes I was thinking: we live without a future” (*DV*, 355). The stress of life in wartime had become unchanging and relentless: “Life is rapid but eventless” (*LVI*, 472). The frustration that Woolf had in 1941, especially the last months of her life, led her to avoid talking about the war in her letters. In doing so, Woolf futilely wanted to escape the war itself that exacerbated her depression. Being absorbed in reading much more than before, Woolf tried to forget the anguish of the war. But her letter to Ethel Smyth on 1 February 1941 shows that she had failed to overcome her melancholy; Woolf is psychologically tired and exhausted: “I read and read like a donkey going round and round a well [...] I can no longer control my brain” (*LVI*, 467). Woolf’s depression made her lose the capacity for concentration; she starts her diary in February: “Why was I depressed? I cannot remember” (*DV*, 355). Woolf seemed to be haunted by the destructive pictures of London streets that she observed through her last visit; she was increasingly affected to the extent that she herself confessed to her husband such things on 8 March:

Last night I analysed to L[eonard] my London Library complex. That sudden terror has vanished [...] the sight of Oxford Street & Piccadilly which haunt me. Oh dear yes, I shall conquer this mood. (*DV*, 358)

Even though she tried her best to conquer the terror caused by the war, especially her final London visits, Woolf failed to do so; a few days after this diary entry, it was evident to Leonard Woolf that she “was not well and in the next week I became more and more alarmed”.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

Probably in the same week of being unwell, her husband suspected that Woolf had attempted to commit suicide:

I am not sure whether early in that week she did not unsuccessfully try to commit suicide. She went for a walk in the water-meadows in pouring rain and I went, as I often did, to meet her. She came back across the meadows soaking wet, looking ill and shaken. She said that she had slipped and fallen into one of the dykes.<sup>78</sup>

Woolf did her best to fight her new enemy and overcome it, but unfortunately she failed because she was already exhausted by the horror of the war. On 23 March 1941, Woolf sent a letter to Vanessa confessing that she cannot resist her illness:

But I feel that I have gone too far this time to come back again. I am certain now that I am going mad again. It is just as it was the first time, I am always hearing voices, and I know I shan[']t get over it now. [...] I have fought against it, but I can[']t any longer. (*LVI*, 485)

Being ‘certain of going mad’ makes Woolf feel that surrender to her illness seemed to be her inevitable end. The horror of the war, the fear of being occupied by the Germans that led her to be incapable of not thinking of committing suicide and the stress of the air raids—all these things stimulated the symptoms of Woolf’s illness, and ultimately led to her tragic end. On 24 March, her final diary entry shows to what extent Woolf was depressed; she longs for death, which seemed to be the only alternative for her: “I am imagining how it w[oul]d be if we could infuse souls” (*DV*, 359). On 28 March, Woolf ‘infused’ her soul by drowning herself in the River Ouse. Clearly that Woolf died suffering from the psychological trauma that had attacked her again and again over the years. This time the inexorable presence of the destructiveness of the war, the seemingly inevitable end of the places and the values she held so dear finally overwhelmed her. War had been, as we have seen, a presence through much of her life. Finally, we might argue, she became its victim.

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 90-91.



## Conclusion

War is a constant presence in the life and the imagination of Virginia Woolf, to a degree that has not till now been fully considered. Ultimately Virginia Woolf is, inescapably a war writer. She is not of course a “war writer” in the sense of one who had a direct experience of fighting, like her friend Siegfried Sassoon, but she vividly captures the way in which many, indeed the majority, of British people experienced both world wars: as a civilian, on the ‘Home Front’, albeit that home front was very much a battle zone in the Second World War, especially for Londoners like Woolf. However she is not a war writer just because it is present in the foreground of the fiction written in the immediate aftermath of the First War, embodied in the haunting figure of Septimus Warren Smith; the ways in which the First World War casts a deep shadow across the works of the 1920s has been noted and considered by critics, though the link between her experience of war on the Home Front and her vision of human life as vulnerable in the wider flow of (Godless) existence has been much less fully explored. But the effects of war are ultimately far more profound and all-pervasive. As the present study has demonstrated, the stress, the sense of vulnerability, occasioned by the First War never really disappeared. As she experiences, urgently and personally, the political stresses of the 1930s and the Spanish Civil War and then the long descent to Munich and the second catastrophic conflict, war conditions the way in which Woolf engages the world around her, the way she *imagines* the nature of human existence.

As war conditions Woolf’s creative life, it is inevitably implicated—in ways which have not been fully considered previously—in central aspects of her fictional work. For instance, while the struggle for women’s rights had gone on in British society as Woolf had grown to maturity, a struggle of which she was of course acutely aware, the continuing gender conflicts in her culture, beyond the granting of the vote, are profoundly coloured by her response to what had happened in 1914-18, the ways in which the War had been the result of, and undertaken by, the ‘Great Men’ who still ruled British society and manifested patriarchal attitudes that she saw as likely to lead to another conflict. While the external threat, from Hitler, Franco and Mussolini was real and inexorable, for Woolf the ‘subconscious Hitlerism’, the aggressive masculinity, which she saw as still being dominant in English life, was itself a continued threat to what for her was most valuable in Civilization. In other words Woolf’s ongoing and far-sighted discussion of gender

relations in her writing is itself affected by attitudes which she associated with the forces which were responsible for war.

Equally, the First War and the shifts in perception, social and existential, which it brought, had a profound effect on the formal aspects of Woolf's fiction. If the external world, bereft of spiritual meaning and shared values, yielded no sense of a secure reality, seemed indeed to be defamiliarized and 'unreal', then a fictional mode had to be constructed which engaged that reality where it existed most potently: in the inner consciousness of the individual. Reality was less what was 'out there' but in the way in which the individual consciousness *perceived* what was 'out there'. The period from *Jacob's Room* onwards, in other words the fiction created after the first impact of war upon her, is a period in which Woolf shows herself to be *English* fiction's most profound and unrelenting Modernist experimenter. It is Woolf of all the major modernist writers of fiction who responds most fully and most originally to the implications of the world of war in which she was forced to live.

As we have seen, even though she experienced the First World War as a non-combatant, Woolf was acutely aware—and earlier than many—of the suffering of combatants and the misery of life at the Front, through her direct contact and discussions with combatants like her brothers-in-law Cecil and Philip Woolf, and Sassoon, who were traumatised by the war and in the case of Cecil paid the ultimate price, as did other of her acquaintances and relatives of some of her friends. These contacts and experiences, of course, colour her portrayal of the young men, victimised by the war, which they join following their sense of patriotism. It is a gallery which is in many ways at the heart of her fiction: those who died like Jacob Flanders and Andrew Ramsey, or whose lives are wrecked and who are essentially post-War victims of the conflict like Septimus Warren Smith. Alongside them, in this gallery of lost young men, are other young men who arbitrarily meet their death before they have the chance to fulfil themselves: Percival in *The Waves* and, in her letters and diaries, her brother Thoby, whose death pervades the tragedy of these other young men. The loss of Thoby also sensitizes Virginia Woolf to the pain of those who suffer their loss and are left behind to try to carry on with their lives, an experience shared by such characters as Jacob's mother—the anguish of that last scene in the room in some ways stands for the loss of all of these bereft relatives—Septimus's wife, the Ramsays and even Percival's friends, as well as minor characters such as Lady Bexborough who, in *Mrs Dalloway*, clasps the telegram

informing her of her son's death even as she sternly seeks to struggle on. Ultimately, such characters are themselves portrayed as victims of the war like their dead and traumatised relatives and friends.

However, the mental stress evident in the fictional and non-fictional works that are written by Woolf in the turmoil of the Thirties is not less than those which manifest the First World War. The tension and stress of the Thirties that witnessed the rise of Hitler to power and the Fascist violence in Spain that led to the death of Julian Bell, Virginia Woolf's nephew, are mainly portrayed by Woolf in her diaries, letters and essays. As the decade drew towards its dark climax, Woolf devotes her non-fictional book *Three Guineas* to discussing the whole issue of war and how to prevent it. Even in *The Years*, her novel written in the Thirties, Woolf continues to draw her reader's attention to the theme of war through presenting the tensions of the political stage, which she herself lived. Like Woolf herself, the characters in this novel are aware of the danger that threatens their lives and leads them again to suffer what they experienced in the First World War.

For Virginia Woolf the acute anxiety invoked by the Spanish War, and the personal pain of losing Julian, merged continuously with the darkening mood of the late 1930s; for her the Second War effectively began as early as 1938, in which as she herself wrote "the feeling of despair and coming death was very genuine in London"; she was intensively drawn into the atmosphere of tension and uneasiness of this war.<sup>1</sup> Woolf's non-fictional works written in the war itself show her vividly registering daily events of the war, the air raids attacks, and she traces details of battles through the media and newspapers. And the diaries show the toll which these external events took of her mental condition. The danger and insecure atmosphere that Woolf's suffered during this war are all reflected in her final novel *Between the Acts*, which is written during the war itself. Accordingly, the atmosphere of the daily lives of the characters of this novel is enveloped by fear and anxiety caused by their anticipations of the unavoidable danger of the Second World War. This novel seems somewhat different in dealing with the theme of war, since no specific victim of war is presented here, but the whole cast of characters—the

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Leave the Letters till We're dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. VI: 1936-1941*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth, 1980), 280.

population of the area around Pointz Hall—seem to be victims of the pressure of the impending of the war that will disturb their peaceful lives.

Each war that Virginia Woolf suffered differently marks her own life. Woolf lived the danger of the First World War through the sounds of guns of the Western front of Flanders that she heard in her Asheham house, and also, like most of her characters, through the bombing of the Zeppelins, in London and in the countryside in which the Woolfs lived. Ultimately, taking into account her diaries (written between 1915-1919), one can say that the direct effect of the First World War on Woolf's life was not as significant compared with that of the Second World War, although some comments are shadowed by what had happened to relatives and friends. More than that most of the comments written in her diaries during the First World War are about the economic problems that faced the mass during this catastrophe. In spite of the difficulties of this war and the threat of the air raids, the war did not prevent Woolf from practising her own daily life or going "[t]o picnic near Firle" several times in 1917.<sup>2</sup> We have also seen her engaged in her social activities as a writer and a member of Bloomsbury; she did not stop receiving and visiting her friends and relatives during the First World War, even though there were difficulties in travelling. Obviously, this war did not personally affect Woolf or directly threaten her private world with the urgency of what was to come. The dangers of the Second World War, were, as we have seen, more acute. Woolf, spent most of the war seeking shelter, whether in London or at Asheham, struggling to write and to ensure the continuity of her publishing business. And all the time there was the awareness of what might happen to her and her Jewish husband were the unthinkable to happen and the Nazis were to invade, probably just a few miles away. It was a threat so acute as to make Woolf and her husband plan their suicide as the only means of escape; there is an awful irony in the fact that Woolf, her mind finally giving way to the stress, exacerbated by the instability which almost always accompanied the completion of a book, took this way out.

Ultimately Virginia Woolf is a war writer in more subtle ways than simply as a portrayer of the overt effects of the war on English society and on her own day-to-day life. It is Woolf more than almost anyone who registers the shift of consciousness in British, indeed human, society which

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume. I: 1915-1919*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1977), 41.

was brought about by the First World War. As we have seen, it is registered in terms of the characters' repeated sense of the unreality of the world around them, a world from which they had, in Freud's terms, been "unhomed". It is a post-War consciousness which is captured most resonantly and movingly perhaps, in *Mrs. Dalloway* when reference is made to the fact that: "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows, courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing".<sup>3</sup>

Above all, war was the confirmation of her sense of the vulnerability of human life itself. At one level, it threatened the existence of all the values which she held dear and by which she sought to live her life—tolerance, sensitivity, personal relationships, the importance of beauty in art and the natural world—those qualities which she and her Bloomsbury friends saw as the essence of human Civilisation that she considers even while she was writing Roger Fry's biography, published in 1940 as German bombs rained down on London, in which she appreciates his vision of the First World War: "He had come to believe that a more civilized period in human life was beginning; now that hope seemed ended".<sup>4</sup> Even more profoundly it confirmed her sense of the human situation in a universe in which there seemed to be no spiritual reality beyond the material, that humanity existed in a world not subject to any divine order but only to the arbitrary unpredictable flow of a post-Darwinian Nature, which she almost obsessively indicates in her imagery of the sea and the flow of water. The indifferent violence of war endorsed her intuitions that her Civilisation was merely a still-vulnerable evolution from the primitive world of pre-civilised savagery, a world repeatedly referred to in the novels usually in the English landscape; it was an intuition which seems to deepen in the later novels. It is a bleak Modernist vision, stimulated not only by the post-Christian culture of her times but by her own hyper-sensitive temperament, a temperament which, while manifesting itself in the magnificent achievement of her art, could finally cope no longer with the surrounding chaos. Ultimately, after a lifetime in war's shadow, Virginia Woolf herself became its victim.

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<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Hogarth, 1990), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London: Hogarth, 1991), 200.

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