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'Conspiring Together': Woolf's Investigations on 'Party Consciousness' and Interwar Instability in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*

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‘CONSPIRING TOGETHER’: WOOLF’S INVESTIGATIONS ON ‘PARTY
CONSCIOUSNESS’ AND INTERWAR INSTABILITY IN *MRS. DALLOWAY* AND *TO THE
LIGHTHOUSE*

by

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ABSTRACT

Woolf has been generalized popularly as enthusiastic about parties, relishing their effervescence and conversation, and she had a particular bent for imagining a party's vivacity while often remaining distanced from it. This imagination and duality would mark Woolf's thoughts as is recorded in her diary entries, and they became especially apparent in her fiction. In an entry on April 27th, 1925, less than one month from *Mrs. Dalloway*'s May 14th publication, she declares that "people have any number of states of consciousness" and reports that she "should like to investigate the party consciousness" (*A Writer's Diary* 74). In conjunction with her vivacious social life, Woolf indeed investigates 'party consciousness' many times over, as evidenced by her bountiful party depictions spread throughout her fiction. In the wake of the paradigm shifts set in motion by WWI, much of Woolf's writing acknowledges the new consciousnesses that have been created and also identifies the uncertainty that accompanies these changes. Parties become an opportune experience for Woolf to investigate these shifts as they operate as centers of both observation of and participation in the ever-changing systems and culture. There is, however, a delicate nature attributed to this party consciousness. In studying it Woolf feels that it is potentially fragile as she remarks, "You must not break it. It is something real. You must keep it up—conspire together" (74). I seek to illuminate where we locate this instability in Woolf's parties, specifically Clarissa's in *Mrs. Dalloway*, which takes place after the war, and Mrs. Ramsay's in *To the Lighthouse*, which takes place before the war, and to suggest that though these structures, specifically parties, become more fragile post-war, they also become ever more important.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: ESTABLISHING THE EFFECT OF INTERWAR DESTRUCTURING ON WOOLF'S 'PARTY CONSCIOUSNESS'

Parties, as with many other subjects, established an emotional and ideological polarity in Virginia Woolf and her fiction. Woolf has been generalized popularly as enthusiastic about parties, relishing their effervescence and conversation. There is little in her early years to suggest that she initially enjoyed parties as they were often sites of humiliation and disappointment, in part because she had to be chaperoned by her half-brother George after Woolf's mother died when she was thirteen (Randall 95). Makiko Minow-Pinkney contends that, with a lack of dance partners or anyone with whom to hold conversation, Woolf was left to yearn for sociability and its excitement (231). She also cared more about becoming a writer than she did entering society, yet she maintained a fascination with parties as they were a tie to her mother, who was the "[center] of sociality" (230). She would find party glamor as she aged, but, as Bryony Randall acknowledges, she vacillated between enchantment and disdain for gatherings (96). Importantly, Woolf had a particular bent for imagining a party's vivacity while often remaining distanced from it.

This imagination and duality would mark Woolf's thoughts as is recorded in her diary entries, and they became especially apparent in her fiction. In an entry on April 27th, 1925, less than one month from *Mrs. Dalloway's* May 14th publication, she declares that "people have any number of states of consciousness" and reports that she "should

like to investigate the party consciousness” (*A Writer’s Diary* 74). Though she acknowledges that these states are “very difficult” for her to parse, she is “always coming back to [the idea]” (74). In conjunction with her vivacious social life, Woolf indeed investigates ‘party consciousness’ many times over, as evidenced by her bountiful party depictions spread throughout her fiction. *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is the most critically analyzed and popular Woolfian party, but such party scenes are present throughout her entire collection of writing. The “picnic and river parties” in *The Voyage Out* (1915) accompany “the most boisterous party scene in all her work” in which “dancing [features] ... explicitly ... and in a celebratory fashion” (Randall 97). *Jacob’s Room* (1922) and *The Years* (1937) highlight evening parties while *Night and Day* (1919) has many tea parties (97-98). The dinner parties in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931) “carry highly significant thematic and structural weight” (97). Woolf’s oeuvre abounds with parties, and each maintains its singular importance while presenting the possibility of communication across texts.

World War I was one of the most prominent driving forces of the uncertainty that marks the early 20th century, and the interwar period was fraught with the instability and anxiety that is often found in Woolf’s fictitious parties. Though parties clearly feature most strongly in her fiction, she also mentions them briefly in her non-fiction *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). As she recalls a lunch party she had attended pre-war, she notes that “something seemed lacking, something seemed different” (*ARoOO* 11). So distracted by this unnamed difference, Woolf “had to think [herself] out of the room, back into the past, before the war indeed” (12). The change, she concludes, is that party goers of the past would have been saying the same things, but they “were accompanied by a sort of

humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which changed the value of the words themselves” (12). She wonders, “Shall we lay the blame on the war?” (15). The underlying humming of the past was romantic and mirrored the sense of potentiality that party guests experienced. The poetry, conversations, and parties pre-war held a hopefulness that is simply no longer possible post-war. Moreover, the freshness of these new post-war feelings makes post-war art and conversation difficult to navigate. These musings suggest that Woolf had long contemplated ‘party consciousness’ since her 1925 diary entry.

In the wake of the paradigm shifts set in motion by WWI, much of Woolf’s writing acknowledges the new consciousnesses that were created and also identifies the uncertainty that accompanies such change. Parties become an opportune experience for Woolf to investigate these shifts as they operate as centers of both observation of and participation in the ever-changing systems and culture. There is, however, a delicate nature attributed to this party consciousness. In studying it Woolf feels that it is potentially fragile as she remarks, “You must not break it. It is something real. You must keep it up—conspire together” (74). I seek to illuminate where we locate this instability in Woolf’s parties, specifically Clarissa’s in *Mrs. Dalloway*, which takes place after the war, and Mrs. Ramsay’s in *To the Lighthouse*, which takes place before the war, and to suggest that though these structures, specifically parties, become more fragile post-war, they also become ever more important.

CHAPTER 2

‘TO KINDLE AND ILLUMINATE’: CREATING A NEW POST-WAR STABILITY THROUGH PARTY HOSTING IN *MRS. DALLOWAY*

Perhaps the most reviewed of Woolf’s ‘party consciousness’ investigations, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) examines the effect that interwar anxiety has on parties. Though *Mrs. Dalloway* is temporally distanced from World War I, its morbid aftereffects pervade the London of the interwar period and follow Clarissa Dalloway as she searches for stability within ever-shifting social structures. Taking place nearly five years after The Armistice, the novel remains rooted in juxtaposing what Karen DeMeester calls “pre- and post-traumatic worlds” (652). Much critical attention has been paid to war veteran Septimus Smith because his psychological state as a trauma victim and his ultimate suicide contrast with the intended vivacity of Clarissa’s party. Septimus’s trauma arrives as a natural consequence of the Great War, and much as he remains unable to successfully reintegrate into society, it appears that *Mrs. Dalloway*’s London scene is equally as irrevocably affected. A considerable amount of modernist literature is dedicated to capturing “war memory” (Beidler 2), and *Mrs. Dalloway* centers on war’s sociological and psychological impacts on both those who were in combat and those who remained on the domestic front. When death arrives “in the middle of [her] party,” Clarissa acknowledges that this gathering is different from those of her past (*Dalloway* 129). The party structure ultimately must change, but Clarissa’s need to forge connections remains; throwing parties creates a bridge between her pre- and post-war lives. Clarissa’s party, meant to be

a celebration of life and a distraction from WWI's lasting cultural effects, becomes the space through which she finally confronts the loss of her pre-war life and finds new personal stability.

Woolf chooses to distance the novel from WWI by having it take place in 1923, but in this separation, she demonstrates the war's permeating effects in London. Inescapable reminders of death and destruction, such as Big Ben's tolling and war memorials, are highlighted, but it becomes quickly apparent that the social structure of Clarissa's London has changed and not returned to a much-desired normalcy. Jane Lilienfeld contends that though Woolf "knew a great deal about World War I ... she decided against an explicit discourse of the Great War" as evidenced by the inclusion of historical details about the war in Woolf's earlier drafts of the novel that would later be removed (1). By withholding her knowledge, Lilienfeld continues, Woolf would "[create] continuous and powerful metaphors" that "[convey] the pervasive social trauma of World War I" more effectively than depicting "direct representation" of its horrors (125). In removing explicit war discourse, Woolf more clearly illuminates the rupture of an established social fabric as a result of WWI. She prominently features war-traumatized Septimus Smith but lends most of her attention to a specific unsettled social structure: parties. Temporally (moving the novel five years after The Armistice) and spatially (focusing the novel on Clarissa, who has not experienced the war first-hand) distancing *Mrs. Dalloway* from World War I only reinforces the sense that the war's impact spreads out indefinitely. In creating separation, Woolf establishes that the London and characters of the novel cannot evade the war's persistent, overwhelming, and morbid presence, even in the midst of celebrations of life, such as Clarissa's party.

This rupture of London's social fabric is keenly felt by those, like Clarissa, of the upper echelons of society, who fear the change that the war has set in motion. Clarissa's lack of stability due to the cultural shifts around her urges her to look towards structures that she recognizes. As Philip Beidler acknowledges, "Presiding over the world of the novel, within and without, is an England undergoing an extended period of mourning and chastened remembrance" (5). In the face of the melancholy of London's war memory and culture, there is a fear of the loss of the traditional and of hierarchy. Thus, the novel's "culminating event[,] ... a single, very English party" (4), is born from Clarissa Dalloway, who, as Beidler describes, is

[o]f the ruling class generation of the war [and] now lives out a memory of prewar hopes and enjoyments, of country-house life with romantic dalliances, male and female, mixed with reflection on present disappointments: an old suitor returned; a caregiver husband, affectionate but remote; amidst the absences of the sons of old friends lost to the war, a grown daughter given over to the company of a dour female religionist. She feels old, tired, invalided at age 53—in fact barely removed from her own legacy of the war, the great influenza pandemic that in 1918-1919 alone killed between 20 and 40 million inhabitants of the globe. (5)

Her attempts to return to these "prewar hopes and enjoyments," particularly through throwing parties, which, by necessity, require the liveliness of their participants to function, pose challenges for Clarissa. She must try to learn how this new London coheres, but "the war itself intrudes upon the scene like the most unwanted of unwanted guests" as it "becomes the great party crasher" (7) when news of Septimus's death arrives. Clarissa's instability as a result of the war's legacy in the form of crumbling

social structures, aging, and death pulls her towards a search for the comfort of the life she knew pre-1914.

Clarissa desires to create or maintain separation between pre- and post-war through her insistence on continuing her life as it was pre-1914, but WWI and its aftereffects are permeating and omnipresent, especially in how she connects with others. Though she “slice[s] like a knife through everything,” simultaneously she is “outside, looking on” with a “perpetual sense ... of being out, out, far out to sea and alone” (*Dalloway* 7). She works tirelessly to gather people together, yet she often feels on the outside of the connections she tries to forge. This isolation follows her from the start of the book as she decides to buy the flowers herself, alone, to the end of the novel as she retreats, alone, to her room during her party. Perhaps Clarissa believes that if she can separate herself from all, including people, that has been touched by war, she will be able to ignore it; however, these despairing thoughts prove ultimately impossible to push aside as she must learn how to live in this “post-traumatic world” (DeMeester 652). Her party proves that even if she does not want to acknowledge change within herself, she is unable to separate herself as she chooses to host a party and therefore must invite those of a London now permanently affected by war.

This inability to truly separate herself from a post-war existence leaves Clarissa to entertain ruminations of her own death. She wonders if “it matter[s] that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her” (*Dalloway* 8). These despairing thoughts on death follow energetic descriptions in which it is revealed that “in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and uproar” there was “what she loved; life; London; this moment of June” (4). London’s liveliness and motion “create[s] every

moment afresh” (4) as Clarissa relishes the scene around her. The fifth paragraph of the book, in which this description appears, is “mostly taken up with a long sentence describing the varied, kaleidoscopic activity both seen and imagined in and around London in June” (Randall 108). The first use of word ‘party’ arrives at the very end of the lengthy sentence:

And everywhere, though it was still so early, there was a beating, a stirring[,] ... and laughing girls in their transparent muslins who, even now, after dancing all night, were taking their absurd wooly dogs for a run; ... and the shopkeepers were fidgeting in their windows with their brooches in eighteenth-century settings to tempt Americans, ... and she, too, loving it as she did with an absurd and faithful passion, being part of it, since her people were courtiers once in the time of the Georges, she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party. (*Dalloway* 5)

The repetition of ‘even now’ and ‘she, too’ emphasizes the importance of Clarissa’s involvement in the effervescence of that very moment (Randall 108). These “refrains, and the breathless syntax, intensify the climatic release of the final clause—‘to give her party’” (108). Bryony Beidler explains,

This, from now on, is the dynamic which drives the novel; it is set up, from the very beginning, as an activity which puts Clarissa on par with dancing boys and girls, dowagers, shopkeepers, even ponies and cricket-players, with all those who ‘kindle and illuminate’ London. Her party will be her creative contribution to the life of the city. (108)

Clarissa feels increasingly dependent on her parties and what she perceives to be their antithetical nature to death to create and live through particular “moments.” In her love for London, she feels compelled to artistically contribute to the city for the moments it has created for her. Parties are an instance in which she can participate and give back socially. Forced to contend with the idea that her pre-war life is, nor has it been for a long time, available to her, Clarissa clings desperately to the communal, jovial ideals she believes her parties can still generate.

Though Clarissa's party takes up only fifteen percent of the book (Randall 99), *Mrs. Dalloway* functions, from its first sentence through its final one, as an exploration of all aspects of a party's machinations. The literal party scene may be only fifteen percent of the novel, but *Mrs. Dalloway* in its entirety is the party because the preparation and lead-up are as important and just as much of its process to Clarissa as the party itself. From the cut flowers that Clarissa brings into her home, to the news of Septimus's suicide, death is the guiding force of this party and therefore of the book. At the beginning, as she is “standing there at the open window, [she feels] that something awful [is] about to happen” (*Dalloway* 3), and this premonition and its negative sentiment follow Clarissa through all her preparations and through the party itself. It is Clarissa's party—what she dedicates to celebrating life—that, just as everything else, is pervaded by death and the memories of war. That which she has done to continue to cope with the war becomes infected by the morbid feelings she tries, and ultimately fails, desperately to push away.

From the novel's opening line, which has been the topic of much analysis, we are confronted with death as an inextricable aspect of Clarissa's party, and this morbidity

instills a nervousness in her. Merve Emre asserts that, for Clarissa, “the pleasure of life is always mingled with the inevitability of death” (3n1). The simplicity of “buy[ing] the flowers herself” is “a lark” and “a plunge,” but it is interrupted by the overwhelmingly negative feeling she has while standing at the window (*Dalloway* 3). Because “the flowers Clarissa shops for are no longer rooted in nature,” she “invites death into the house,” and therefore her party, “from the novel’s first sentence” (Emre 3n1). This macabre sentiment, hidden underneath the blissful activity of buying flowers oneself for a party and demonstrating a sincere devotion to the gathering’s functioning, appropriately mimics the undertones of death that follow Clarissa through her day in London until she can no longer outwardly ignore them when they arrive ostentatiously at her party. As Clarissa makes her preparations for the party, she still reverts to her thoughts that reflect her innermost fears about death, oblivion, and transience. She interrupts her own ruminations on her “hatred [for Miss Kilman], which ... made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home a delightful rock, quiver and bend as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots” by exclaiming, “Nonsense, nonsense!” as she walks into the florist’s shop (*Dalloway* 10). Though Clarissa takes any opportunity to mention that she will host a party that evening, she also relies on her responsibilities as hostess to pull her back from her spiraling thoughts and shelter her from her emotions that she might consider too strong to regulate in the moment. The party preparations necessitate this constant opposition between life and death.

This opposition can be most strongly located in the connection between Septimus and Clarissa; though his existence is unbeknownst to her until the end of the novel,

Septimus's parallel to Clarissa epitomizes her inability to evade thoughts and representations of war. Lilienfeld acknowledges that "[b]oth are risk averse and both startle easily. Fear motivates their marriages. Septimus become numbed, unable to grieve, feel, or love. Clarissa acknowledges that she 'lacks' warmth and physical passion" (*Dalloway* 32 qtd. in Lilienfeld 124). However, Septimus's interiority juxtaposed with Clarissa's concern with externality demonstrate each of them picking up where the other lacks. Whereas Clarissa attempts to keep herself in her pre-war domain by maintaining familiar structures such as parties, Septimus has no choice but to acknowledge what the war has done to him. Therefore, though their similarities link them, these key differences in their existences within this post-WWI world further illuminate that Clarissa's perceived distance from the war is shorter than she imagines.

Though Clarissa and Septimus are both trauma victims, far more critical attention has been given to Septimus's shell shock than Clarissa's witnessing her sister's death. Clarissa is rarely conceptualized as 'traumatized' in *Mrs. Dalloway*, especially when posed against Septimus, whose trauma is more obviously central to his story than Clarissa's is to hers. However, Clarissa's appears significantly stunted, whether from her sister's death, the war, or both, leaving her unable to exist meaningfully in her post-traumatic world and in search of a tether to her past life. This inability in conjunction with her recurrent thoughts about death demonstrate that her experiences have limited her severely and left her hyper-focused on that which she can control and ultimately find meaning within, such as her parties.

Clarissa's actions and thoughts indicate that she may feel unable to cope with the trauma of her sister's death as well as the strain of WWI, and she turns to hosting parties

as a means of trying to forge ahead. She feels lost in a post-war world that has destabilized the structures she understood and lived within. DeMeester claims that while “Woolf’s form [of “the trauma survivor ... structuring [her] life around a single traumatic event that [she] constantly relives”] is particularly well-suited for depicting trauma, ... it is ill-suited to depicting recovery” (651-52). She continues,

Meaningful recovery from the “madness” suffered by a trauma survivor requires an escape from the private, self-reflexive view of the traumatic event, because the traumatic event and the debilitating emotions associated with it retain their power when they remain encapsulated and dissociated from the social discourse of the time, the reality of the experience, and the social function the suffering may serve. To recover, the survivor must escape the debilitating repetition and the isolation of his own consciousness and reestablish a connection between his pre- and post-traumatic worlds. (652)

For Clarissa, if the “traumatic event” is exacerbated by her everyday activities as a London socialite in which she cannot make sense of the war’s tragedies, she remains in search of that bridge between her life pre- and post-WWI. Arguably, Clarissa uses parties and takes on the responsibilities of a hostess as a trauma response. In the face of tragic senselessness post-1918, Clarissa turns to the parties that maintain the structures she has known and trusted. When all has been changing around her, it would seem that parties provide stability to which Clarissa can anchor herself.

Clarissa’s party responsibilities protect her from ruminating too much, but she feels a great pressure to host these gatherings, and this charge carries an emotional burden. Richard perceives this stress as he thinks, “[It] was a very odd thing how much

Clarissa minded about her parties” (*Dalloway* 85). If throwing the parties are part of Clarissa’s personal trauma response, she also feels tasked with maintaining for other people this same structure she seeks in this post-traumatic world. Upon opening *Mrs. Dalloway* with death in floral form, Clarissa spends her time trying to counteract this particular war legacy. However, “[t]he War was over, except” for all of the ways in which it was not (*Dalloway* 4): Mrs. Foxcroft remains unable to cope “because that nice boy was killed,” and the death of Lady Bexborough’s favorite child leads her to open a bazaar (4). The overstated declaration of the war being “over” is “breached by the exceptions the narrator makes for those bereaved civilians whose grief recognizes no Armistice” (Saint-Armour qtd. in Emre 10n16). In its various ways, death—its cultural affect and memorialization—remains despite Clarissa’s attempts to revert post-war devastation to pre-war reverie, as evidence by Septimus’s suicide and how news of it travels to her party.

Clarissa turns to creating moments, namely through gatherings, to oppose this overwhelming grief. Part of such creation entails the possibility of helping people not only acknowledge loss but also work through it by generating new forms of joy. In an attempt to take in “the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings,” she examines herself in the mirror and “[sees] the delicate face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself” (*Dalloway* 27). In a Prufrockian manner, Clarissa envisions the versions of herself she composes for her guests. Despite her many facades, she “had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her” (27-28). Part of the luminosity of Clarissa’s parties lies in the dimensions of herself as hostess she puts on display. More

important than Clarissa as hostess is her intention of forging connections; it “is a public gesture that appeals to communal understanding” (Webb 284). For Clarissa, “it was an offering; to combine, to create; but [she wonders] to whom?” (*Dalloway* 87). Her driving force is connection for the sake of connection (87), and she considers it what she does most well in the world. Moreover, she does it all for “life,” for the act of building a relationship that would not have existed without her (86).

In creating moments and connection as a distraction, Clarissa creates a connection with someone, Septimus, she has never met. Her chance encounter with a dirge from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* flows through both her and Septimus’s heads that day:

Fear no more the heat o’th’ sun,

Nor the furious winter’s rages. (4.2.257-58)

The funeral song “offers some small comfort in the idea that a dead youth has now passed beyond fear, and will never again be either too cold or too hot” (Fernald 232n1). Much as death is a guiding theme in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Jean M. Wyatt asserts that this “Shakespearean quotation ... unites the ideas of life and death ... [as] the theme of death and rebirth radiates from the experiences of various characters to converge on a last scene of rebirth” (442). Both Septimus and Clarissa bounce between visions of life and death, but Septimus’s suicide foregrounds “Clarissa’s reconsecration to life” (444). Septimus’s suicide causes Clarissa to finally confront her own death she has experienced, the loss of her past life. This acknowledgement finally pulls Clarissa into her new life and frees her from the burden of seeking a pre-war daydream.

Much criticism has claimed that Clarissa acts aloof or remains unphased by the news of Septimus’s suicide. DeMeester argues that “[i]nstead of presenting in Clarissa a

positive alternative to Septimus's failure to recover from his war trauma, Woolf presents another inappropriate method of dealing with trauma" as Clarissa still holds "faith in social convention as a means of ordering a post-traumatic world" (663). Guth contends that this end "allows [Clarissa] to hate Conversion and convert, to be both Septimus and part of the world that sacrifices him, to die and continue her life unchanged" (22-23). Nonetheless, Clarissa's response to this news proves more complex than being a poor reaction to unfavorable news. Wyatt elucidates, "The heat-cold imagery originating in the lines from *Cymbeline* and elaborated to symbolize the opposition between passion and frigidity, life and death, culminates in the party scene. The rebirth Clarissa experiences there begins with a transformation of her emotional nature" (447). Thus, though many argue that Clarissa's reception of Septimus's suicide is unfulfilling or improper, her reaction is instead the first time we see her acknowledge and accept death, and this recognition brings her forward into the present.

The universality of tragedy and death that recur through *Mrs. Dalloway* cause Clarissa to shy away from life as she puts on a facade of geniality and connection for her party guests. Peter internally chides her for assuming her to be insincere as she greets her guests; Clarissa too eventually tires and acknowledges that "these triumphs ... had a hollowness," yet her hatred for Miss Kilman was "satisfying" and "real" (*Dalloway* 123). When she hears of Septimus's suicide, therefore, her thoughts are not steeped in superficiality, but rather she searches for something "real" amongst what she now knows. Whereas before thoughts of the party pulled her out of her morbid thoughts, now she lets them consume her despite being in the midst of the gathering for which she has spent all day preparing. She ruminates on Septimus's suicide, angered that the Bradshaws would

discuss such a death at her party as if it were any other bit of gossip. In Septimus's suicide, "[a] thing there was that mattered" (130). Though her gatherings had been her escape from the post-traumatic world, death "in the middle of [her] party" forces her to confront squarely the pre-war life that she will never experience again (129). She has been plagued by thoughts of death through her entire day, but Septimus's death ushers in the change that Clarissa has postponed acknowledging. The party, once her means of deflection, becomes a solidifying force against the uncertainty of Clarissa's post-traumatic world.

CHAPTER 3

THE PERSEVERANCE OF A MOMENT AND THE UNITY OF CONNECTION FOR CONNECTION'S SAKE IN MRS. RAMSAY'S DINNER PARTY

Whereas *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place after World War I, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is interrupted by it as it occurs after the novel's most luminous scene, Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party. In this novel with few plot points, the characters experience time erratically, especially during this dinner in which it appears to stand still. The first section, 'The Window,' spreads one afternoon and evening over one hundred and twenty-four pages and is followed by 'Time Passes,' during which ten years pass within twenty pages. Notably, the first section contains that unforgettable dinner party scene while the following chapter, short and disconnected, mentions only briefly Mrs. Ramsay's death. Though she is already in the midst of social change, Mrs. Ramsay is stuck in time, preoccupied with upholding the structures of the past. Lily Briscoe, however, focuses on pushing ahead as she attempts to make sense of a shifting social fabric. Both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily fear oblivion and both search for stability, but whereas Mrs. Ramsay has formed her identity around these crumbling standards, Lily is willing to use art to create a new meaningfulness for herself. Mrs. Ramsay turns to parties as a means of achieving unity and ultimately permanence, and Lily takes charge following Mrs. Ramsay's death as she, too, challenges transience. Mrs. Ramsay's party is her own artistic attempt at the stability that both she and Lily seek. While Mrs. Ramsay's party

does achieve this sense of timelessness and endurance, her reasons for hosting such gatherings in the first place are dated. Nonetheless, although the dinner party ultimately begins to recede in memory, Lily is forever altered by the moment that Mrs. Ramsay was able to create within her gathering. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf elucidates that the feminine standard had been changing while Mrs. Ramsay did not modernize herself; nonetheless, the need to connect still needed to be realized, and Mrs. Ramsay took up this charge. Through art, Lily mimics the intended fixity of Mrs. Ramsay's party moment, but she does so in a way that has confronted the social change that Mrs. Ramsay ignored.

Determined to uphold tradition and conventional gender roles, Mrs. Ramsay is a kind mother as well as a generous hostess. Along with her beauty, Mrs. Ramsay's party-throwing capabilities generate her persona. She has a bent for bringing people together, and "she had not generally any difficulty in making people like her" (*TtL* 41). As Sharon Worley powerfully asserts, "[i]t is only within traditional gendered roles that Mrs. Ramsay is able to take on an authoritative role" (36). Hosting the gathering is her most important responsibility as she "must go down and begin dinner" as "some queen" who walks before her court (*TtL* 82). By 1910, women's suffrage was imminent (to arrive in 1918), and women were rapidly joining the workforce, but Mrs. Ramsay remains unmoving within capitalist and patriarchal structures. She has always hosted gatherings well, and it is not that dinner parties are no longer necessary but that the standards under which Mrs. Ramsay hosts her gatherings are quickly changing.

Mrs. Ramsay feels that the permanence that she can achieve is possible only through her parties. Though her husband chides her for her so-called pessimism regarding death and oblivion, he also fears them. He acknowledges that "[t]he very stone one kicks

with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare" (*TiL* 35). Mr. Ramsay can distract himself with his work, but Mrs. Ramsay must confront life—and its ultimate end—squarely as it is “terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance” (60). In the fleeting moments available only at her parties and during which she can explore her interests and discuss them with others, she “brandish[es] her sword at life” (60). Constrained by time and feeling that only “when [her children] were all at school” (58), she might have the opportunity to pursue her innermost desires. These parties allow Mrs. Ramsay moments in which she can display parts of herself that often remain hidden as they permit her to discuss the issues she finds important and therefore challenge her morbid fears.

Mrs. Ramsay places so much importance on these parties because they perhaps provide an opportunity for her to achieve something worthy of recognition, whereas the men in her life can lean on their academic accomplishments for this purpose. Her husband, a metaphysical philosopher, has his own academic guests that she entertains, but “she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband” (*TiL* 39). She has difficulty “follow[ing] the ugly academic jargon” (12) that her husband and his guests use, yet she wishes desperately that he would contribute to the dinner conversation because he tends to “[go] to the heart of things” (95). Just as Mr. Ramsay “cared about fishermen and their wages” and “could not sleep for thinking of them” (95), Mrs. Ramsay “feels passionately” about “hospitals and drains and the dairy” (57). Unlike her husband, though, Mrs. Ramsay cannot “take people by the scruff of their necks and make them see” the injustice (57) by speaking publicly or acting. She would like to create a “model dairy and hospital” (58), but her motherly responsibilities prevent her from doing so. During her dinner party, however, “[s]peaking with warmth and eloquence, she described

the iniquity of the English dairy system” (103). Her party provides a space where she can openly discuss the social issues she cares about but to which she cannot personally attend. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay participates fleetingly outside of patriarchal standards, but she simultaneously maintains them during her party.

Mrs. Ramsay strives for connection as she gathers this disparate group of people together, but in doing so she ignores some of her innermost needs. She feels a great responsibility to unite others: she envisions William and Lily marrying, she encourages Minta and Paul to marry, and she consistently feels the weight of bringing people together, encouraging her to host dinner parties. Despite this fiery vocation Mrs. Ramsay has for joining others together, she feels the greatest sense of possibility when alone.

Once the children are put to bed, she ponders,

For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. ... [I]t was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. ... [T]he range of experience seemed limitless. ... Her horizon seemed to her limitless. ... This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it. ... There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. (*TiL* 62-63)

She desperately wants the solitude in which she finds “peace [and] ... a platform of stability,” where the “range of possibility seemed limitless” (62-63), but she chooses to uphold patriarchal standards instead of seeking the separation she desires. Under patriarchy, Mrs. Ramsay submits to the sentiment that her contributions are limited and measured. She takes opportunity where it has been granted with the hope of making an impact. Mrs. Ramsay’s gift of gathering is juxtaposed with her admission that she yearns for solitude because it allows her the opportunity to “triumph over life [as] things came together” (63). Such contrast foregrounds the disunity that arises during the dinner party and then lurks throughout the book.

To the Lighthouse centers around interconnection, and Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party examines the stability of moments created by human connection. Whereas Clarissa Dalloway throws her party to distract herself from the lasting effects of WWI, Mrs. Ramsay seeks permanence within the patriarchal standards that perpetuate the erasure of women’s work, personal histories, and achievements. Similar to Mrs. Ramsay, for Lily, “it was not knowledge but unity that she desired” (*TtL* 51), and she sees “how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave” (47). In her intention to gather people together Mrs. Ramsay acknowledges that the mere act of joining, or creating “little separate incidents” (47), will not suffice. She has to create moments that exist outside of time, ones so memorable that those who are in the moment will carry it with them for the rest of their lives. Much criticism has been devoted to identifying Woolf’s success in portraying the power of unity as it creates and strengthens bonds during the dinner party. Lynn Bloom contends that “unanimity among diners of diverse ages, interests, stages of life as those at Mrs.

Ramsay's party, is so rare as to be remarkable" (8). Moreover, popular readings of the book point towards the regenerative power that Mrs. Ramsay's gathering has as well as how the connections positively shape Lily's trajectory as an artist.

However, despite this strong criticism about unity, there also has been much written about the possibility that the party is more disruptive to its members than it is reparative. Lauren Rich argues that this scene "function[s] as [a] site of surprising alienation, fragmentation, and disunity, with characters more apt to turn against than to commune with each other" (54). She continues, "[T]he narration makes clear that whatever tenuous communion Mrs. Ramsay's party achieves is due to the fact that it, like Mrs. Ramsay herself, is anachronistic—a nostalgia-tinged remnant from a rapidly disappearing time" (64). Thus, Mrs. Ramsay's party may stop time, but the world continues to modernize outside of it, leaving Mrs. Ramsay and her guests momentarily trapped in the past. The party itself is not what creates the anachronistic sentiment; rather, it is the purpose with which Mrs. Ramsay gathers her guests that pulls everyone backward. The feminine standard has begun to change while Mrs. Ramsay has not. The need to gather and the ends that Mrs. Ramsay strives to achieve remain.

While Mrs. Ramsay's familiar structures have been crumbling, what she accomplishes as a result of her parties still holds much import. Thomas Matro contends in a nuanced manner that there has been much elaboration "on [the] conclusion that the novel's 'unity' is its aim," as many suggest that Woolf uses form and aesthetic to create "order out of confusion" (213). He notes that "Woolf's often-quoted remarks about the need to create form that incorporates and yet orders the disorder and haphazardness of life" (213) reflect Mrs. Ramsay's inability to tether herself to something secure in the

face of mutability. The dinner party and its resounding effects are both ordered and disordered; united and separate; ephemeral and fixed.

Mrs. Ramsay's oppositional needs for both gathering and solitude influence her dinner party's mood and aesthetic as it ebbs and flows from disunion to union and back again. She opens her party with self-doubt as she questions herself, "But what have I done with my life?" (*TtL* 83). Because she only holds authority in this gendered role (Worley 36), she doubts her contributions outside of those done for patriarchal demand. Her uncertainty immediately follows a description of the chaotic spirit surrounding the party preparations. Mrs. Ramsay's anxious energy as she urges her children to get dressed quickly matches her annoyance with Minta and Paul for their tardiness because it is not only "inconsiderate" of them to be late to dinner, but it also heightens her worries (79) and throws her hosting capabilities into question. Despite being greeted "like some queen, ... who accepts [her people's] devotion and prostration before her" (82) as she walks down to dinner, she is pulled from her regal thoughts by the incoherent mood of the party. These gatherings, apart from her beauty, are Mrs. Ramsay's shining accomplishment. Even the slightest tilt to her plans—late guests, burning Beouf en Daube, improper sitting arrangements—causes her to question whether she is as excellent a hostess as she hopes and therefore wonder whether her contribution will be the act of unity and stability for which she strives.

The pressure she places on herself to "triumph over life" (*TtL* 63) and "brandish her sword" at it (60) encourages her to join people together, but it also causes her pick apart her own party in the middle of its occurrence. Merely gathering guests does not suffice for Mrs. Ramsay. Just as Clarissa Dalloway "slice[s] like a knife through

everything” and feels distanced from the connections she tries to forge (*Dalloway* 7), Mrs. Ramsay, at the beginning of the dinner party, feels “past everything, through everything, out of everything” (*TiL* 83), because though she has joined her guests, they have thus far failed to truly join or coalesce. In her worry that a party failure implies a personal failure, an anxiety sets in for Mrs. Ramsay. Blaming the room decor and poor word choices spoken to her guests, Mrs. Ramsay begins to feel an “eddy” (83) that causes her to acknowledge the aspects that may cause this lack of coherence. Without “beauty anywhere ... [n]othing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate,” and she senses a growing anxiety about “the whole efforts of merging and flowing and creating” (83). Because she has become so accustomed to this pressure and assumes all responsibility for it, she is machine-like as she “[gives] herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped” (83). This sense of isolation among her guests requires that the delicate gathering be monitored just as “one might guard a weak flame with a newspaper” (83).

Mrs. Ramsay considers it her sole responsibility to ensure that this flame of potential unity does not extinguish before it can be turned into a fire. As Ryan Carroll notes, Mrs. Ramsay’s “deep desolation” is palpable, but “[t]he atmosphere shifts, however, when the candles at the dinner table are lit” (23). After sitting in her “desolation and alienation” (23) created by late guests and poor conversation, Mrs. Ramsay knows it “indeed [is] time” (*TiL* 96) to light the candles. The candles usher in a progression of change and coherence as they allow the guests to see the table in its entirety along with the all the guests and food:

Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight and composed, as they had not been in the

twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily.

Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. Mrs. Ramsay ... now felt her uneasiness changed to expectation. (97)

Matro explains that this passage “suggests a meaning for the ‘journey’ to the lighthouse” where in these characters in their own sort of lighthouse at the dinner party “sit separated from the disorderly outside world, which they see only through the distorting panes of glass” (218). In the moments following, conversation begins to flow more organically, Mrs. Ramsay receives compliments on the food, and she is able to discuss the inequity she finds with the dairy distribution. She “put[s] a spell on them all, by wishing, so simply, so directly” (*TtL* 101) for connection. However, despite their “common cause against that fluidity out there” (97), “the characters are not brought together in any conventional social or intellectual communion” (Matro 218). Although Mrs. Ramsay acknowledges that this moment she is in the midst of creating “[can] not last” (*TtL* 106), she relishes it still as she “[hangs] suspended” above it, as if she were outside of her body watching it (107).

By remaining so connected to structures that are rapidly disappearing, Mrs. Ramsay realizes this moment, and ultimately her hopeful contribution to creating

meaning through the party, is transitory, yet she cannot help but appreciate its firmness and “stillness” (*TtL* 105):

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (105)

The peace she felt earlier in solitude after putting the children to bed is found once more when she is with other people. Nonetheless, this scene is ended with an insistent reminder to Mrs. Ramsay of the moment’s ephemerality:

With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta’s arm and left the room it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past. (111)

Carroll suggests that *To the Lighthouse* does not argue that one understanding of the scene—either ephemeral or transitory—holds more importance over the other. Rather, both “are constituted as equally meaningful” (23). Stefanie Heine, too, acknowledges this juxtaposition as she examines how “Woolf outlines both the possible endurance and perishability of art in her novels [and] challenge[s] clear-cut oppositions of persistence and transience, permanence and termination” (121). It is, nonetheless, undeniable that for

as quickly as Mrs. Ramsay creates her moment it is just as rapidly unraveled. The paradox between fixity and flux is inescapable for Mrs. Ramsay because she remains rooted in that which is fleeting while desiring so desperately to create unforgettable, permanent moments for her party guests.

Within this unraveling, Mrs. Ramsay takes solace in the fact that even though the moment is over, something remains still for all of the party guests. Upon looking back at the scene and realizing it was “already the past” (*TiL* 111), “a sort of disintegration set in” as everyone “wavered about, went different ways” (112). This disintegration traces Mrs. Ramsay’s subsequent death and eventual dissolution in a world that is leaving behind the structures that Mrs. Ramsay values. However, in the midst of the clutter, Mrs. Ramsay searches for “one particular thing; the thing that mattered” (112) about her party in the hope that she still might be able to hold onto it. As she realizes that “[her guests] would ... however long they lived, come back to this night; this moon; this wind; this house; and to her too. ... [H]owever long they lived she would be woven” (113). While “the order Mrs. Ramsay gives to things is hard-won, fragile, and temporary” (Milder 144), her party allows her to forever bind herself to her guests. Though the moment is gone, it is never truly in the past because it remains through the memories she has created, particularly for Lily Briscoe, who modernizes Mrs. Ramsay’s attempts at permanence.

In conjunction with memory, Lily Briscoe turns to art as a means of achieving permanence in the face of the fleeting. Consumed with concerns of unity and oneness, both Lily and Mrs. Ramsay search for what they can create to achieve such aims. For Mrs. Ramsay, it is her parties; for Lily, her painting. Lily, however, does what Mrs.

Ramsay cannot because Mrs. Ramsay aimed to live within the structures that Lily recognized were changing. Lily “dissects society ... in search of new modern alternatives” (Worley 30). By necessity, Mrs. Ramsay fades because the structures that kept legacies like hers alive were disappearing. Nonetheless, the party does have an undeniable impact on Lily as it becomes the impetus for finishing her painting. Mrs. Ramsay, as “the centripetal force of integration” (Minow-Pinkney 241), inspires Lily even after death to forge connections as she wonders “how [to] bring [the pieces] together” (*TtL* 147). If Mrs. Ramsay’s “most discussed triumph [is] the ‘unity’ achieved among her guests” (Matro 217), Lily’s is that of forging the connection between the two ends of her painting with one line “down the centre” (*TtL* 209). However, what Lily and Mrs. Ramsay capture or identify as “unity” is less important than their acts themselves. Matro explains,

Though Lily believes Mrs. Ramsay could make “of the moment something permanent” and hopes that her own painting might likewise capture life, what Mrs. Ramsay’s creation and Lily’s painting finally “capture” is the experience, the common process of thought as the two women worry over questions about instability and permanence, chaos and shape, knowledge of another or ignorance, and love or hate. (219)

Lily’s “attempt at something” is far more important than the painting itself, which “would be hung in attics” and “destroyed” (*TtL* 208). Lily’s painting “becomes symbolic of [the] act itself rather than some transcendent reality, unity, or special vision that it would achieve” (Matro 219). In the same instance that she relinquishes this desire for permanence she also acknowledges that Mrs. Ramsay will never return. She, therefore, “has redefined the terms” (222) of her definition of significance.

Lily's epiphany mirrors the same instability and fixity that Mrs. Ramsay herself vacillates between with her dinner parties. The parties serve Mrs. Ramsay as a comfort, a means of upholding traditional values, and an insistent feeling that demanding stability is futile. Though Mrs. Ramsay remained rooted in the past, Lily's painting and final "vision" (*TtL* 209) prove that Mrs. Ramsay did create something stable through her gathering; this stability, however, ultimately had to be carried forward under the new cultural and societal demands of the 20th century. The party itself can remain a means of unity and endurance, though not under the patriarchal standards to which Mrs. Ramsay clung. A changing social consciousness necessitates a new understanding of human connection, which Lily successfully ushers in. The need for unity that Mrs. Ramsay desired and once achieved remains fixed.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF ‘PARTY CONSCIOUSNESS’ INVESTIGATIONS

Virginia Woolf’s investigation of ‘party consciousness’ in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* elucidate that her type of party is one that exists as a means of stability to which one may anchor themselves in spite of uncertainty. In these novels, the world is shifting rapidly, and we observe two women who want to hold on to the systems that keep them grounded. For Clarissa, parties maintain hierarchical structure, and Mrs. Ramsay can host gatherings and adhere to patriarchal standards that bring her fulfillment. Though WWI is integral to both novels, Woolf strategically distances both stories from it while insisting that the war’s impact is inescapable. In the two books, Woolf establishes a clear distinction between pre- and post-war, with life before 1914 seeming full, vivacious, and hopeful, just as she illuminates in her brief ruminations on the war’s impact on parties in *A Room of One’s Own*. The war has greatly shifted the ideological value of parties for Clarissa Dalloway, and it alters Mrs. Ramsay’s legacy post-war. Both seek stable structures as they are forced to confront the range of possibilities that become available as the world continues to modernize. Parties ultimately usher these women forward when they wish to remain rooted in place. They provide a stable structure to stand within while the structure itself also forges ahead.

Stability becomes increasingly important as post-war culture in *Mrs. Dalloway* and shifting social structures in *To the Lighthouse* cause Clarissa and Mrs. Ramsay to

seek absolutes and polarity, only to be disappointed when they cannot reach them. They vacillate between unity and disunity; significance and insignificance; ephemerality and permanence; transience and immutability. Regarding the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf writes in her diary on June 19th, 1923, that she “want[s] to give life and death, sanity and insanity; [she] want[s] to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense” (*A Writer’s Diary* 56). This tension between opposites results from cultural uncertainty, but the parties operate as a counterbalance. They become a new system through which Woolf’s characters organize themselves and make sense of change. They also force Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway to accept range in place of absolutes as well as simultaneity. Death arrives at Clarissa’s party that is meant to celebrate life, yet it does not ruin the occasion. The unity created at Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party is both fixed and transitory. The party does not wait patiently for its participants to catch up. Despite a party’s rapidity and movement, they allow both Clarissa and Mrs. Ramsay to recuperate or at least imagine how they might move ahead even when they do not want to.

Much criticism has been devoted to attempts at decoding Virginia Woolf as a person and writer through her depictions of social life, particularly parties. Though we know about her ambivalence from her diaries and personal accounts, her fictional accounts offer varied interpretations. I intended to elucidate what Woolfian parties can illuminate about social convention and change rather than what they might inform us about Woolf herself. In her April 27, 1925, diary entry in which she first writes that she wants to explore ‘party consciousness,’ she notes that she “obviously ... grope[s] for words” and “cannot get at what [she] mean[s]” (*A Writer’s Diary* 74). I aimed not engage with Woolf as a person but to acknowledge that she, in fact, executed her intended

investigations on ‘party consciousness’ and the ideological purpose that parties serve. In Woolf’s interwar world, she used this cultural context to inform her explorations, but she also paved the way to insist that our ever-shifting societal conditions inform, in an ever-shifting manner, the ways in which we gather and converse. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* point to the sentiment that we turn to each other, the conversations we have, and the connections we forge as a means of being able to stand upright in the face of unpredictability. Woolf’s parties confirm that we are both individual and one; stable and unstable; fleeting and permanent. When all else is precarious, the need to gather remains.

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