

4-1-2011

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**“The Stuff of Thought”
Virginia Woolf’s Object Lessons**

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Honors Thesis

in

English
University of Richmond
Richmond, VA

21 April 2011

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“The Stuff of Thought”: Virginia Woolf’s Object Lessons

At the close of the Great War in 1918, Virginia Woolf began writing a short story titled “Solid Objects” in which an English politician becomes quietly obsessed with his hobby of collecting mundane detritus. After he finds a smooth piece of sea glass, Woolf writes, “It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore” (103). In many of her texts, this “concentrated,” “definite” nature of objects seems instinctively appealing to her characters. Perhaps due to the abstract and shifting nature of Woolf’s fiction, there is something in the object’s very solidity, its permanence and delineated boundaries, that is comforting. Indeed, within Woolf’s texts, so often riddled with the fragmentation of the post-war period and the confusion of death, the solid object seems to offer the tantalizing promise of durability and normality.

But contrary to its title, “Solid Objects” actually concerns itself with the non-solidity of the material world, with the immense fluidity of objects and their curious ability to break down and recompose themselves. As in many of Woolf’s texts, the “solid” objects here lose their solidity when intermingled with the consciousnesses of her characters, mixing themselves “so profoundly with the stuff of thought” that their borders are blurred (104). In essence, the objects become indistinguishable from “the vague sea and the hazy shore.” Interestingly, this imagery of the sea may be more appropriate in understanding the nature of Woolf’s “solid” objects than one might first intuit. Water seems to be the quintessential Woolfian (non)object, a physical material, but a flowing, indefinite one. In both form and content, it is ubiquitous throughout Woolf’s body of work. Thus, it provides a fitting

language through which we may consider even “solid” objects, a language that allows the physical world of the characters’ outer reality and the abstract realm of their inner consciousnesses and memories to flow into one.

In my first section, I examine Woolf’s view on the physical properties of objects. Throughout her texts, characters often find the solid object reassuring. Yet the object’s solidity is just as frequently compromised by the subjectivity Woolf creates around it. The durability and permanence of the object becomes interwoven with the abstract. Furthermore, I argue that contemporaneous scientific discoveries at the time of Woolf’s writing shaped her understanding of the object world and how it could best be represented. In particular, the discovery that the atom was mostly hollow space seems to have convinced Woolf that physical material was insufficiently described in objective, empirical terms. She addresses this issue in her 1931 novel, *The Waves*, asking, “But what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?” (118). This question suggests that the outer appearance of an object and its physical tangibility are illusions and that an intrinsic substance lies beneath the specious physicality of “the thing.” A certain thingliness of things emerges, some core quality more elemental than the physical “semblance” of material reality. It is an elusive quality, one that is both vaguely perceivable yet hopelessly unreachable, and it lies at the intersection between subjective thought and the object, where each blends into the other.

In section two, I explore this nexus between subjective thought and the object by focusing on the ways Woolf’s objects morph their shapes within the consciousnesses of her characters. Woolf repeatedly examines the vast subjectivity of the object, questioning how we use objects—how we deposit memories, personal histories, and collective experiences

into everyday things, granting each object its own atmosphere of subjectivity. In this manner, physical items often act as unifying structures, pulling together disparate characters through a common experience of the object. Like waves drawing together, then crashing apart, unthinking “things”—from a fruit bowl at a dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*, to the booming Big Ben that permeates *Mrs. Dalloway*—operate as a kind of communal consciousness among many characters, creating the delicate, fleeting illusion of a collective omniscience.

Given this co-dependence Woolf creates between the object and subject, in the third section I examine what happens to Woolf’s objects after the death of certain characters—or in other words, what happens to objects that have been rid of their subjects. One prominent tension emerges from this examination: the contradiction of the characters’ transient lives with the relative permanence of physical matter. Even the most mundane physical object has the capacity to confront Woolf’s characters with the futility of human existence. At the same time, Woolf questions the possibility of immortality through the object’s durability. She navigates these conflicting concepts in her passages regarding the poet’s relic room in *Night and Day*, a room in which the living presence of the deceased is both eerily recaptured and muted by the preservation of the possessions he left behind.

But into these tensions of permanence and transience erupts the Great War, which Woolf refers to as the “vast upheaval of matter” (89). With parcels of clothing, personal effects, and even flimsy telegrams returning from the war fronts as substitutes for a deceased loved one, the object’s symbolic weight was transformed during the war years. At once objects seemed more important (in their connections to an extinguished life) and less important (in their dumb futility). The fact that objects endure longer than humans was

intensified, and this haunting endurance is played out most artfully in “Time Passes,” Woolf’s interim section of *To The Lighthouse* that metaphorically depicts the ravages of time and war on the domestic objects within a summer home. Meanwhile, other items, such as Jacob Flanders’ shoes in *Jacob’s Room*, refute any denial of the once-living person and deny post-war consolation. These objects serve as physical leftovers from human lives, inextricably tangled in memory, yet devastatingly incapable of successfully immortalizing their deceased owners.

And even the objectifying processes of fame and iconicity cannot preserve and fully represent a human life, as I examine in my final section. Though the famous face in *Mrs. Dalloway’s* motorcar will endure, what good will such fame do in a London overgrown with weeds and grass? Virginia Woolf, whose own iconic profile adorns posters and coffee mugs, would likely find little comfort in these physical objects that, under the correct circumstances, could preserve her image for the ages. Despite the desire for permanence, for a stone upon which to write one’s legacy, Woolf confronts us with the sobering fact that one’s life is always written in water.

Section I:

What's the matter with matter? The Questionable Solidity of Objects

In some of Woolf's earliest experimental work, her characters revel in the solidity and inanimacy of the object world. This is particularly apparent in her 1917 story, "The Mark on the Wall" where we find an unidentified narrator in a sitting room, "surrounded by solid furniture," and musing over the various items she sees. The story consists exclusively of the immobile narrator's impressions of these objects—a book in her lap, coals in the fire, a vase of chrysanthemums, and particularly a small, unidentified mark on the wall, which is eventually revealed to be a snail. As I will later explore in section two, this story is less about the solidity of objects and more about the fluidity of them—how material things "decompose and recompose themselves" continuously within the minds of subjective characters (B. Brown 3). Nevertheless, Woolf's narrator repeatedly stresses the importance of the mark's solidity. When the narrator looks at the mark, its substantiality is reassuring to her:

Now that I have fixed my eyes upon [the mark], I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality [. . .] Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours [. . .]

Wood is a pleasant thing to think about. It comes from a tree; and trees grow, and we don't know how they grow. For years and years they grow, without paying any attention to us. (88)

At this point the narrator does not even know what the mark on the wall is, yet the simple fact of its presence relieves her. The mark seems to serve as an anchor to an objective form of existence as her mind races through abstract thought and memory. It becomes a “plank” that supports her in a vast “sea” of subjectivity, defining a visible “reality” (“I have fixed my eyes upon it”) and exhibiting what Douglas Mao might call “the brute facticity of the object world” (48). This “facticity” saves the narrator from what seems to be a kind of existential nightmare, a “midnight dream of horror” and meaninglessness in which objects like a chest of drawers may render the only “solidity” and “reality” available to the conscious mind. The inanimate object is so strongly satisfying that it must be “worshipped” for giving an irrefutable substance to life.

This comfort seems to be based in the object’s disconnection from the subject, a disconnection created by the “impersonal world” of the object. Wood becomes a “pleasant thing to think about,” perhaps due to the aloofness of its source—trees. Trees are independent from the human subject (“they grow without paying any attention to us”). Indeed, the living trees that produce the wooden objects the narrator mentions are particularly useful for understanding the counterintuitive comfort objects provide. Trees are living beings, yet they are inanimate, as close to the object as the living world gets. Their similarities with the object are particularly apparent once they are torn down, made into furniture, and become more “wooden” in the lifeless sense of the word. Thus, wooden objects have an “uncanny air of death-in-life, of being nearly but not quite sentient” (Mao 48). More than almost any other object, they draw attention to the absence of feeling in the object world, emphasizing the foreignness of the object from the subject. Furthermore, the object’s intangible mystique (“we don’t know how they grow”) mixes with its very tangible

physicality, creating something that is both mysterious yet delineated. The object is alienated from the subject, and in this alienation comes a certain pleasure in the assurance that a physical, objective reality might exist outside of the consciousness.

But to complicate matters, Woolf calls into question the object's objectivity by contemplating the unknowable history of objects. Aside from the mark on the wall, the narrator's thoughts frequently include other objects, most interestingly the contents of a local museum: "a handful of Elizabethan nails, a great many Tudor clay pipes, a piece of Roman pottery, the wine glass that Nelson drank out of" (87). These references to antiquary items draw our attention to the fact that an object has its own history. Indeed, the narrator's fascination with the history of objects stimulates some deep anxieties of the subjectivity ("midnight dream of horror") she tries to resist. She often alludes to the fluid nature of existence—"the mystery of life," the "inaccuracy of thought," the "very little control" we have over our "possessions" (84). But pursuing the idea of the object's history only leads to further complications. The narrator doubts the possibility of such history, for "nothing is certain, [and] once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened" (84). Given this logic, it seems an object's history cannot be known; it possesses its own atmosphere of subjectivity. "And if I were to get up," the narrator goes on, "and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really—what shall I say?—the head of a gigantic old nail, driven in two hundred years ago [. . .] what should I gain? Knowledge? Matter for further speculation?" (87). The narrator's experience of the object (simply looking at it) cannot reveal its history, and the mark on the wall only provides more "matter" for the narrator's winding thoughts—an interesting word choice, indeed. The object and the mind have

become entangled, for neither one can unequivocally define the other, and consciousness itself emerges as a blend of both reality and the imagination.

In her 1920 story "Solid Objects," Woolf scrutinizes the question of an object's history in an even more obsessive fashion. In this story, the primary character John is infatuated with fragments of things he finds while walking outdoors. He becomes consumed with a desire to "possess objects" (106). His obsession begins while walking on a beach, when he comes upon a piece of sea glass:

It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been a bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass [. . .] It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore. (103)

As with the mark on the wall, this piece of sea glass has no identifiable origin. In John's mind, it has been reduced to a base material ("nothing but glass"). Nothing remains of the object save for its undeniable existence in the physical world. Thus the piece of glass is reduced to a status of pure object, with as little subjective history as possible. It is completely dependent on its physical features for definition. Unlike the "vague" and "hazy" sea, one of Woolf's most common images for the overwhelming subjectivity in life, it is "hard" and "concentrated." The simplicity of the glass's definition "pleases" John at the same time that it "puzzles" him. In his analysis of this short story, critic Bill Brown suggests that "John's obsession with inorganic objects" may be connected to what Freud described as a "postwar . . . drive toward the inorganic, that is the drive toward death" (B. Brown 7). Yet it seems John's fascination with the object is not so much situated in the object's

inanimacy and inorganic nature. Rather, John seems to be attracted to the object for its mystery, the tensions of its proximity and distance. The sea glass is simultaneously mysterious and unknowable due to its ambiguous history, yet tantalizingly close in its physical availability as John plucks it from the beach and pockets it.

While John continues to collect other objects, this uncanny nature of the object compels his interest. He describes a fragment of iron he has picked up as “so cold and heavy, so black and metallic, that it was evidently alien to the earth and had its origins in one of the dead stars or was itself the cinder of a moon” (106). Again, the object’s intrigue seems to come from its remove from any recognizable subject as well as the fact that he can physically possess it. He displays this piece of iron on his mantelpiece, domesticating the foreign object, allowing the exotic to become absorbed into the mundane. Despite its uncanny nature, the object is satisfying in its simple solidity, its ability to be collected and mastered.

But even in this early story, Woolf begins to deconstruct the solid object by blurring its boundaries. For instance, human beings are described in terms of the object. In the opening of the story, as John and his friend Charles walk along the hazy sea shore, Woolf writes: “Nothing was so solid, so living, so hard, red, hirsute and virile as these two bodies for miles and miles of sea and sandhill” (103). Here the living and the object coalesce. Bodies are described in typical object terms—“solid” and “hard”—yet mixed with the organic terms of the living— “hirsute” and “virile” (102). When John first picks up the piece of glass in the sea, Woolf describes it as a “full drop of solid matter,” lending the glass a watery quality along with its solidity (103). And as John continues to collect objects and becomes increasingly obsessed with them, he searches the grounds of his neighborhood

and notes that “objects often occurred there” (104). Woolf’s use of the word “occurred” is a strange one; it decreases the object’s substance slightly, suggesting a certain temporality in the object. As Bill Brown notes of this story, objects “don’t just happen to be there so much as they happen” (B. Brown 9). Thus, “Solid Objects” presents subtle tensions surrounding the object and what constitutes solidity. With objects “happening,” and human beings becoming mixed into the language of the solid, inanimate object, Woolf challenges the object’s objectivity by exposing the overlaps between the subject and object in their physicality.

Given the number of references to atoms and the makeup of matter in Woolf’s later works, it seems the de-construction of the object’s objectivity may have largely been a product of growing scientific knowledge. At the beginning of the twentieth century, revolutions in atomic theory revealed an extravagantly bizarre concept: the atom—the fundamental building block of the “solid” material world—was, in fact, not solid. With the discovery of electrons, neutrons, and protons, the atom was revealed to be mostly empty space, a sort of “mini solar system” containing “vast gaps” between tiny bits of actual material (Whitworth 178). Before this time, the atom had been understood to be an infinitesimally minute but ultimately solid piece of matter. But by the time Woolf was composing her short stories and novels, the atom’s insubstantiality was finally revealed with the help of X-ray photography (of which Woolf herself had become familiar through an 1898 demonstration) (178).

It may be that Woolf’s early focus on the object’s solidity in “The Mark on the Wall” and “Solid Objects” was done to mock earlier conventions and to promote a deeper contemplation of the revolutionary scientific discoveries. This notion is supported in her

1919 essay “Modern Novels,” when Woolf derides novelists Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells, labeling them “materialists” (33). She explicitly condemns such novelists who seek to provide solidity in stories by offering ample details of physical surroundings. As Michael Whitworth notes in his study of Woolf, the materialist’s technique “is misdirected because scientific materialism has been overthrown, and science has shown that even the most solid things in the world are not what they seem” (179). Indeed, each of those early stories pay far more attention to the subjective minds of the characters than to the objects with which they are obsessed. By the end of “The Mark on the Wall” the revelation that the mark is in fact a snail even seems anti-climactic. When the mark is filtered through the subjective consciousness of the narrator, it is interesting, even enthralling. Once it is defined as a snail, the mark loses its intrigue; it is merely a boring piece of solidity, and somehow the object has been reduced. Overall, the physical world seems less interesting than the world of thought, despite any comforts the object provides in its solidity.

The growing scientific knowledge of what the physical world was made of may have prompted Woolf to de-construct the object with more empirical thoroughness in her later novels, such as *The Years*. The novel covers nearly fifty years in the lives of the Pargiter family, from 1880 to 1937, the year of its publication. In the 1908 episode of the novel, Eleanor Pargiter questions the makeup of an object directly. While enjoying a cup of tea, she thinks:

But what vast gaps there were, what blank spaces, she thought, leaning back in her chair, in her knowledge! How little she knew about anything. Take this cup for instance; she held it out in front her. What was it made of? Atoms?

And what are atoms, and how did they stick together? The smooth hard surface of the china with its red flowers seemed to her for a second a marvellous mystery. (147)

Eleanor Pargiter's thoughts on the tea cup demonstrate the uncertainty with which Woolf was contemplating physical matter. Not incidentally, this episode is set in a period when the most radical revelations of the atom's hollow physicality were coming to light. Here Woolf casts doubt upon the solidity of objects most pointedly. The "smooth hard surface" of the tea cup seems just that—a mere "surface." Beneath this façade of material is the mysterious atom, mostly hollow space that somehow "stick[s] together" in unfathomable ways. Interestingly, Eleanor's own thoughts here, with their "blank spaces" and "vast gaps," mimic the newfound insubstantiality of the material world.

Furthermore, the fact that the tea cup is the object under consideration seems hardly coincidental. The "ceremony of tea-drinking" is a frequent theme in the novel, and the Pargiters' lives are often depicted through tea time conversations. Woolf's deconstructive questioning—literally at the atomic level—of the tea cup, a vestige of Victorian British heritage and imperial accumulation, betrays a restlessness and mistrust regarding the pseudo-comfort and -solidity that objects provide. The tea rituals take place in stuffy rooms filled with solid objects, rooms that seem restless under the burdensome weight of an outdated Victorian overabundance of things. As Douglas Mao observes, "We might recognize in *The Years* Woolf's most formidable attempt to subdue the Victorian" (80). Indeed, even in the 1880 section of the novel, Colonel Pargiter feels encumbered by the wealth of objects surrounding him in his mistress's sitting room: "He looked round the room with distaste. There were too many little objects about" (6). Thus, in these later

works, it seems objects take on an aura of oppression and mystery instead of comfort and mystery. Their soothing effects in “Solid Objects” and “The Mark on the Wall” have vanished, for the object can no longer be assumed to be solid.

With this lack of solidity comes numerous moments when the characters question an objective reality. As Mrs. Pargiter lies dying in her bed, her daughters have moments of intense anxiety. These episodes share elements of an existential crisis similar to the “midnight dream of horror” experienced by the narrator in “The Mark on the Wall,” but this time physical objects are not able to anchor the subject into a secure reality. Take for example the moment when Delia Pargiter steps out of the room in which her mother lies dying: “Where am I? she asked herself, staring at a white jug stained pink by the setting sun. For a moment she seemed to be in some borderland between life and death. Where am I? she repeated, looking at the pink jug, for it all looked strange” (24). In the emotional flux of witnessing her mother die, Delia seems trapped here in a “borderland” that is not quite living (subject) and not quite dead (object). The jug is unable to stabilize her into a reality, so she cannot recognize her physical surroundings (“Where am I?”). Instead, everything looks “strange” to Delia. Additionally, her sister Eleanor experiences a similar feeling of dislocation that objects cannot remedy. “Where am I? she asked herself, staring at a heavy frame. What is that? She seemed to be in the midst of nothingness . . .” (41). Objects seem to have lost their flair for definition, and much like the atom itself, they have been reduced to a vague “nothingness.” Increasingly, as we shall see in the next section, this chasm must be filled by subjective thought.

The emptiness of definition in objects informs Woolf’s thinking in her final novel, *Between the Acts*. Here the “old cronies” leaving the village pageant chatter about the

rapidly changing world of 1941: “It’s odd that science, so they tell me, is making things (so to speak) more spiritual . . . The very latest notion, so I’m told is, nothing’s solid . . . There, you can get a glimpse of the church through the trees . . . (135, Woolf’s ellipses). Here “things” have lost the substance that defines their very “thingness”; they have emerged as things only as a figure of speech (“so to speak”). The church seen through the trees evokes both an older form of spirituality but also the “latest notion” of the spiritual, one that is obscured, not fully visible. Essentially, the world has lost the ability to categorize the object as the one reliable definite feature in our confused, subjective world of spirituality and philosophy. “Science” has revealed the mysteries of matter and made the object just as slippery, indefinite, and insubstantial as the most vague philosophical concepts.

The paradox of the atom—being the most basic part of matter, yet a hollow one—gives voice to the overarching tensions Woolf works with in objects. Objects are portrayed as both solid and fluid, opaque and transparent, defined and unknown. In essence, Woolf creates a twentieth-century realism through her objects, one that is best suited for a world in which nothing seems stable. Most crucially, this ambiguous nature of the object also matches Woolf’s depictions of the nature of thought and human consciousness. In her essay “Modern Novels,” she describes the influx of sensory information on the human brain as an “incessant shower of innumerable atoms” which surrounds us “from the beginning of consciousness to the end” as a kind of “semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo” (33). This description has connotations of both the solid and the fluid. The “innumerable atoms” are not, in fact, solid, and there is infinite room for flexibility. Thoughts become only semi-tangible, and the mind is a place where objects go to become less solid, more flexible in the minds of characters.

With this recognition of matter's true texture and its relevance to the amorphous substance of thought, Woolf demonstrates that modern novelists should move beyond the world of physical appearance and the limiting realm of solid matter. They should show the restless, amorphous nature of reality. But at the same time, Woolf has not completely abandoned the object world or rid it of meaning. Instead, she recognizes that the object plays a crucial role in facilitating the subjective consciousnesses of her characters. As we will see in the next section, objects act as fulcrums around which the disparate characters revolve and coalesce. Objects essentially become "the stuff of thought" that makes up the "semi-transparent envelope" of human consciousness.

Section II:

“For Nothing is Simply One Thing”: Consciousness and the Amorphous Object

In his cornerstone essay “The Brown Stocking,” Erich Auerbach observes that Woolf’s narrative in *To the Lighthouse* seems to possess virtually no omniscience. “The writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished,” he writes (534). New subjective voices constantly emerge as the narrative weaves in and out of various consciousnesses. As Auerbach notes, however, “The multiplicity of persons suggests that we are here after all confronted with an endeavor to investigate an objective reality” (536). Indeed, the question of an objective reality is at the heart of the novel. “Think of a kitchen table . . . when you’re not there,” says Andrew Ramsay, as he explains the philosophical quandaries his father considers (28). Andrew goes on to say that “Subject and object and the nature of reality” are the key issues that make up Mr. Ramsay’s realm of enquiry, issues that hold a certain autobiographical element for Woolf. Leslie Stephen, Woolf’s father, was himself invested in “topics of objectivity and the role of perception” (P. Brown 40). These philosophical questions evidently intrigued Woolf throughout her career. Do physical objects (like the aforementioned kitchen table) exist independent of the subject? Or do they cease to exist in absence of the consciousness considering them? In effect, is it possible for objects to be truly objective?

Woolf does not offer a concrete answer to this question. Instead, she exposes a complex intermingling of subject and object within the thoughts of her characters. Like the waves that swell, converge, and crash upon the shores of the Ramsay’s summer island, Woolf’s objects constantly shift, composing, decomposing and recomposing themselves in the minds of the characters. In this section, I will examine how objects become malleable in

this way. Often they become reflections of thought rather than separated solid objects. They act as repositories for memories, personal histories, and experiences. Just as Woolf writes in "Solid Objects," any object has the capability to "[mix] itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain...." (104). Woolf's use of the word "stuff" gives consciousness a materiality, allowing it to mix in what seems a physical way with the object. The characters' multitudinous impressions and memories that attach to objects create a group consciousness that is in constant flux. In this manner, Woolf does not deny the possibility of an objective reality. Rather, she redefines the meaning of reality, crafting a collective reality rather than an objective one.

The lighthouse itself stands as an excellent example for the ever-shifting "stuff of thought." It is less an object than a reflection of the characters that look at it. At the beginning of the novel, the lighthouse and its beam of light provide solemnity and create moments of self-reflection for Mrs. Ramsay. "It will end, it will end," she repeats to herself while staring at it (66). Meanwhile, the lighthouse tests Mr. Ramsay's patience; he snaps "irascibly" at the mention of visiting it (35). For James Ramsay, the lighthouse is a tantalizing end point for his younger self. It is much like the ungraspable letter 'R' that taunts his father and represents the limits of one's imaginative abilities. James yearns to reach the misty lighthouse across the bay, but he is prevented from doing so by weather and his father's unwillingness. By the end of the novel, when James finally visits the lighthouse, he describes it in conflicting terms. On the one hand, he still finds it to be the "silvery, misty-looking tower" of his childhood memories. On the other hand, he thinks it looks "stark and straight; barred with black and white" up close (189). So which lighthouse

is it? Woolf suggests that the answer is both, “For nothing is simply one thing” James thinks, and he realizes that both lighthouses—the distant, vague, misty one he has imagined since childhood, and the stark, solid one he finds up close—are equally essential in his perception of the lighthouse.

Woolf also seems to hint that the lighthouse can represent everything; there should be no definitive divisions regarding its meaning and its reality. After all, “What is reality? And who are the judges?” she writes in her essay “Character in Fiction” (426). In effect, the lighthouse serves as a vanishing point on the horizon in which everything converges and everything is reflected. With such an object, Woolf seems to be getting at the heart of a question she proposes in *The Waves*: “But what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?” (118). The lighthouse’s true thingliness is only seen through multiple viewpoints and in multiple temporalities. One cannot lock a concept like the lighthouse into one form because such classification loses some of the object’s inherent essence. Even the concept of a lighthouse seems particularly appropriate for Woolf to use in discussing these variations in perspective. A lighthouse is, after all, an object to be looked upon, one that may give spatial coordinates to people on ships, that may serve as a clarifying beacon capable of penetrating a confusing fog. It is a quintessential Woolfian object, one whose identity is inextricably tangled with the synthesis of the many consciousnesses that consider it over time.

Even in her earliest experimental short stories, Woolf demonstrates how “the contents of consciousness are as important as the external objects” (Whitworth 119). “The Mark on the Wall” does this by showing the constant transformations the object undergoes when filtered through the human mind. “How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new

object,” the narrator reflects when she first spies the strange object on the wall, “lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it” (*Stories* 87). This mental “lifting” of objects indicates how thoughts in Woolf’s fiction are able to transform physical things, to make solids malleable in the consciousness, where they are imbued with bits of personal history and associations.

Tracking the narrator’s thoughts as she muses on the origins of the mark on the wall, Woolf crafts a flowing consciousness that picks at the object and breaks down its solidity. All the description is a result of the narrator’s visual impressions, and it is unclear whether the object is merely a smudge or some sort of protrusion. In the narrator’s mind, the shape continuously melts into different forms, from a dent to a nail head to a snail. The mark’s inscrutability up until the final sentence of the story empties its identity of full importance, yet the entire narrative is focused on the mental search for the mark’s true identity. The narrator’s thought processes, however, are not what lead her to the discovery that the mark is a snail; instead, another person (“Someone is standing over me”) enters the room abruptly and happens to remark on the snail attached to the wall. It is only through this double-perception that a clarifying light is shed upon the object.

Woolf seems intensely interested in these moments when multiple characters are looking at the same object and thinking about it in different ways. From the motor car and sky-writing plane in *Mrs. Dalloway*, to the lighthouse and snail mentioned above, these objects form a kind of group consciousness. Big Ben is used in this way throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, but, interestingly, the landmark also seems to include the reader in its formation of a collective consciousness. It gives a rhythm to the form of the novel as one reads it, a pattern of temporal expectation. The clock tower’s bells boom out over London, encircling

its inhabitants and the novel's readers with its "leaden circles" which "dissolve" into the air (4). These juxtapositioned phrases — "leaden circles" that "dissolve" — give the impression that Big Ben's power as a connecting force is located at once in its definition and its intangibility. To Clarissa Dalloway, Big Ben seems to operate as a traditional symbol of British authority and order; she views it with reverence and peace, noting the "hush" and "solemnity" with which Londoners greet its chimes. The chimes hold a timely rhythm over the city and offer the novel's major sense of linear structure, as each hour is passed and accounted for throughout the June day. But these chimes seem almost cruel in their very insistence of time passing, of keeping to a strict order. They interrupt characters' thoughts and refute the flow of the individual's exposition with a burst of orderly noise. Even Woolf's repetitive way of describing the chimes throughout the text—"First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable"—affirms this proportioned perfection (4; 114).

Furthermore, the clock tower itself operates as a symbol of British social order and proportion as it stands over Westminster's houses of parliament, the governing body of not only Britain but her subordinate colonies. With its incessant chimes, the reader might imagine this symbol of order lording over the many individuals in London, if not all members of the British realm, drawing them together through its rhythms, serving as a reminder of the importance of social order as it hurries them from one errand to another. With its incessant interruptions into the thoughts of the characters, Big Ben serves as a temporal and physical leitmotif that blends the subjectivities of the characters and binds them in a collective suspension. Regardless of Big Ben's varying symbolic meanings, the characters are all unified in their anticipation in the seconds before the bell strikes.

Along with the object's ability to unite minds in a common moment comes the object's tendency to shift in its meaning repeatedly. Woolf demonstrates this by showing how characters deposit their knowledge and memories into the object, creating a layered symbol that means something different to each person. In this manner, objects often work as representations of certain characters, as with Peter Walsh's pocket-knife in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa Dalloway, Walsh's long-time friend, associates this knife with Walsh instantaneously; in the opening paragraphs of the novel, she cannot recall the date of his return from India, but she remembers his pocket-knife (*MD* 3). As a weapon, the knife represents Walsh's connections with the imperial oppressors in India and his membership in the civil service. Its phallic nature also links Walsh with the idea of masculinity. But Walsh constantly fiddles with the pocket-knife, particularly during his afternoon visit to Clarissa, where he keeps opening it and "shutting [it] with a snap" (40). This restlessness may represent Walsh's ambivalence with his own identity, his questionable stance on the war and empire, perhaps even his sexuality. To Clarissa, however, it seems to represent Walsh's aggression and disregard for her husband, Richard. In effect, the object as a symbol works on various layers—between text and reader, and between the characters themselves.

Though the object can mean different things to different characters, Woolf suggests that the act of contemplating the object at the same time, creating a collective consciousness, is of crucial importance. The object's ability to unite characters in a moment of group consciousness is found with the plate of fruit from Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*. The fruit, arranged by the Ramsays' aesthetically attentive daughter Rose, represents various things of beauty to different characters. Since the objects

here are food, the fruit is able to evoke a sense of nature and fecund replenishment, a vital communion shared among the characters that sit around the table. It reminds Mrs. Ramsay of a kind of trophy from “Neptune’s banquet,” lending it a mythical air while connecting it with the sea outside the dining room’s windows which threatens the solidity of Mrs. Ramsay’s existence throughout the novel (99). Mrs. Ramsay seems hesitant to disturb the fruit’s beauty and merely admires it. Augustus Carmichael, however, has more aggression towards the centerpiece: “[He] too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here.” But despite their disparate ways of looking at and enjoying the fruit, the centerpiece allows for a moment of “merging,” which Mrs. Ramsay considers to be the fundamental quality in creating a beautiful occasion (86). Indeed, Woolf is careful to note that what is most important is the mere fact that the fruit plate connects their consciousnesses: “That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them” (99). It is the object that solidifies the unity, and the importance of this solidification is clear in the following paragraph, when Mrs. Ramsay again looks out of the dining room windows toward the ocean. She finds it disturbing that “inside the room, [there] seemed to be order and dry land; [but] outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished waterily” (99). The common experience of the fruit plate, perhaps even its mere tangibility, creates a small defense against the fluidity outside the window.

As Lily Briscoe will later attempt with her painting, Mrs. Ramsay tries to “[make] of the moment something permanent” with her dinner scene (165). Through the objects at the center of the table, Mrs. Ramsay is successful in creating a moment of connection among the dinner guests:

[...] there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change [...] 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. (107)

It is not the physical object that creates an enduring item. Instead, it seems the confluence of perspectives around the table, all focused on the same centerpiece and the rituals of the meal, are able to create an enduring moment. The objects and subjects have coalesced, and only through this mixture does Woolf offer a true stability and sense of solidity. Though the objects play an important role as mediators among the consciousnesses, it is the “looking together” that “unites” them, not the objects themselves (99).

We now see that two important tables are at play in *To the Lighthouse*—Mr. Ramsay’s hypothetical kitchen table and Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner table. As Paul Tolliver Brown points out, “the dinner table that acts as Mrs. Ramsay’s primary domain of influence and unification is juxtaposed in the novel with Mr. Ramsay’s kitchen table that represents the isolated and unperceived object” (47). It seems Mrs. Ramsay enjoys a holistic relationship with the world that surrounds her, one which defies any notion that subjects and objects are divided and specifically located apart from one another. This connectivity Mrs. Ramsay has with objects is apparent at many points in the novel. While sitting alone, watching a beam of light from the lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsey falls into a sentimental reverie: “It was, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one” (66). Here we see that objects make up Mrs. Ramsay’s existence, that her “identity is

knit together with her environment” (P. Brown 49). They are not estranged, alienated kitchen tables in absence of subjects, but fellow embodiments of herself.

Thus, Woolf does not seem to be refuting the possibility of an objective reality, one in which a physical lighthouse (or kitchen table) may exist independent of subjects. Indeed, Woolf is very much interested in the items of the purely physical, objective world. But Woolf locates that interest at the place where physical objects and the subjective mind collide. As a result, the physical collection of atoms that make up the delineated lighthouse is only one aspect of the lighthouse. Arriving at the complete Woolfian object (“the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing”) means understanding the layers of subjectivity—the memories, fleeting thoughts, and identifications—that the characters attach to the object. Things and people are able to “become one” Woolf insists. Therefore, the object in purely physical terms is only a fragment of the thing in its entirety, a physical “semblance” as empty and hollow as the atoms that make it up. Perhaps most intriguing of all, as I will explore in the next section, is that this interdependence between subject and object means the death of a person (the subject) would inherently affect the object in Woolf’s fictional world.

Section III

The “Borderland Between Life and Death”: Objects in the Absence of Subjects

As we have seen so far, objects are intimately mixed with people and their personal histories in Woolf’s fiction. Memories attach themselves to objects, from Peter Walsh’s pocket-knife to the Ramsays’ lighthouse. Entire lives may even be condensed in objects, as when *Between the Acts*’ Lucy Swithin remarks on the continuity of her existence represented by the bed on which she was born: “We live in things,” she says, as she places her hand on the bed (49). In this manner, objects come to life as parts of the human being they represent. But a problem arises with the death of a character. The living person ceases to exist, but the objects he or she was connected with are left behind. Suddenly the object is assigned a different role. Now it must substitute for the living person entirely because it is the only thing left. The object is incapable, however, of recalling the deceased adequately. Instead, the object becomes a mere relic of the dead, a hollow reminder of what is gone and irreplaceable.

These relics of the dead haunt Woolf’s fiction, in large part due to the ubiquity of death during the Great War—a period that irrevocably altered Woolf’s perceptions and art. The sudden death of nearly a quarter of England’s young men brought a new definition of death (Fussell 18). The fact that objects survive death was more visible than ever as families all across Britain received boxes of objects—often instead of bodies—from slain soldiers. The importance of tangible items grew immensely as a result. The soldier’s personal effects were revered; they were the only physical things left to connect families with the dead. A desire and hope persisted that perhaps something of the deceased, both physical—a smell, a residue, even particles of their body— or intangible, was still present.

For these reasons, the war greatly shifted the object's meaning and importance in regard to immortality for Woolf. Indeed, it seems only too appropriate that Woolf would describe the war as a "vast upheaval of matter" in 1918 when she wrote "The Mark on the Wall" (89). The shifting meanings of objects in light of the war can be traced from her earlier novels, such as *Night and Day*, where objects were portrayed as cherished mementos, to her later works when they became emptied symbols of the dead.

Woolf published *Night and Day* in 1919, immediately after the war's end, and Katherine Mansfield notoriously criticized the novel for its "aloofness" in the face of global tragedy. "[It is] unaware of what has been happening" she wrote (Mansfield 1227). But the aloofness seems to be intentional on Woolf's part. With the story set in the pre-war Edwardian period, Woolf recaptures and gently mocks the era, particularly its reverence for material things. She ridicules the notion that objects may substitute for people in her humorous portrayal of Mrs. Hilbery, an upper-class woman who equates things with people. Of the furniture and knick-knacks in her drawing room, Mrs. Hilbery exclaims: "Dear things! [. . .] Dear chairs and tables! How like old friends they are—faithful, silent friends" (14). Importantly, Mrs. Hilbery represents the generation Virginia Woolf wished most strongly to detach herself from—a group of late Victorians who revered the past—and Mrs. Hilberry constantly mentions Shakespeare, Poet's Corner, and history in general. She reads as a caricature for obsolescence when she delivers her line, "After all, what *is* the present? Half of it's the past, and the better half, too, I should say" (7). She implores her daughter Katharine to show guests to a small room in their townhouse that holds the belongings of the late Richard Alardyce, a famous poet and member of the family.

The room is saturated with a feeling of the past interrupting the present through the objects of a deceased individual. It has the stuffy air of a museum display and it is crowded with relics: “a square mass of red-and-gold books, and then a long skirt in blue-and-white paint lustrous behind glass, and then a mahogany writing-table, with its orderly equipment, and, finally, a square picture above the table” (8). Elizabeth Outka, in her book *Consuming Traditions*, reads this shrine to the dead poet as a kind of “tableau of the authentic dead,” a display intended not only to preserve the deceased’s relics but to “invoke the poet himself” (133). Indeed, the Hilberys seems to have paid careful attention to the arrangement and lighting of the relic room. As Katharine shows off the room to Ralph Denham early in the novel, the artifice of the entire display is apparent. She switches on multiple lights to create a kind of glowing aura around the items, and apparently careful attention has been paid to the arrangement of the relics in order to give life to the dead poet:

Katherine waited as though for [Denham] to receive the full impression, and then she said: ‘This is his writing-table. He used this pen,’ and she lifted a quill pen and laid it down again. The writing-table was splashed with old ink, and the pen dishevelled in service. There lay the gigantic gold-rimmed spectacles, ready to his hand, and beneath the table was a pair of large, worn slippers [. . .] (8)

The arrangement evokes an intentional “impression” here, a sense that time has stopped in this room, that the poet’s past is ongoing. With the spectacles placed precisely where the poet’s hands would have rested, the table splashed with ink, etc., there is an illusion that perhaps Richard Alardyce has simply stepped out of the room, that he will return shortly, assume his position at the writing table, and begin another poem. Still, Katharine’s dialogue

in the past tense (“He used this pen”) reminds Denham and the reader that the past is not fully accessible, that a barrier still lies between Richard Alardyce and the present. But what remains important is the sense that this room of preserved artifacts somehow encapsulates the poet and preserves him for future generations of Hilberys. As Outka goes on to argue, the display “suggest[s] that all these relics might be enough, that objects could in fact hold some essential quality of the dead” (132). The death of a person, it seems, is tempered by the comforting endurance of the objects he leaves behind. Perhaps for this reason Mrs. Hilbery is able to equate objects with people (“How like friends they are”). Indeed, this equation assures readers of the notion that the poet’s relics are somehow capable of recalling his essence back to life.

But Woolf herself seems to have felt this notion was clumsy and outdated, and it would change dramatically with her next novel, *Jacob’s Room*. Published in 1922, this novel would finally confront the Great War and result in a “vast upheaval” of the ways Woolf represents the object. Curiously, for a novel so entrenched in the Great War period, the work offers surprisingly few mentions of the conflict. Jacob’s empty room and his leftover belongings are virtually the only nods to the War Woolf makes—save the undertones represented in Jacob Flanders’ surname. As Julia Briggs notes, “War remains a distant but unignorable presence” in *Jacob’s Room*, “like the sound of the guns from the Front, ‘strange volumes of sound’ that could be heard rolling over the Sussex Downs during the summer of 1916” (*N&D* xii). Of the few allusions to war Woolf gives, most of them come through physical objects linked to Jacob.

Like the poet Alardyce, Jacob is intimately associated with objects. The novel opens with a young Jacob at the seaside, and immediately Woolf connects him with a most

endurable object—a rock. Jacob clammers across this rock, preying on crabs. She describes the rock in ancient terms as “something primitive” (*JR* 5). The little boy Jacob feels “heroic” when he finally mounts the top, as if he is indestructible. But quickly Woolf shifts Jacob’s connections with this enduring rock to a much more transient symbol—a sheep’s skull. This transition from inorganic to organic foreshadows Jacob’s doom that arrives by the end of the novel. As Bill Brown notes in his essay “The Secret Life of Things,” the skull is “the quintessential *memento mori* that expresses the proximity between the animate and inanimate,” or, as we infer by the end of the novel, between Jacob and his death on the fields of war (B. Brown 13). Thus, as a remnant of a once living being, the skull both represents the transience of human life and the endurance of solid materials. In contrast to this permanence of the material object, Jacob’s life becomes evanescent.

Once Jacob is sent off to war, the objects he leaves behind become his only representation. Woolf dedicates a passage to his room and its belongings in his absence, narrating the scene from what seems to be an objective viewpoint:

Jacob’s room had a round table and two low chairs. There were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece; a photograph of his mother; cards from societies with little raised crescents, coats of arms, and initials; notes and pipes; on the table lay paper ruled with a red margin—an essay no doubt [. . .] a Greek dictionary with the petals of poppies pressed to silk between the pages [. . .] Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there. (31)

This passage exemplifies Woolf's ability to show what is invisible. She displays the absence of Jacob, with the "listless" air of the room, the flowers moving on their own, the chair creaking. It is as though a presence fills the room, the presence of Jacob's absence. The objects he has left behind hint at his personality, even foretell his war death (the poppies), but none of these objects is able to render Jacob himself. Unlike Richard Alardyce's shrine in *Night and Day*, this room and its relics of Jacob are patently unable to assemble Jacob and allow his presence to inhabit the space. Instead, as Tammy Clewell describes in her essay "Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, the Great War, and Modernist Mourning," objects of Jacob's "lingering male privilege," like his coat of arms, "no longer guarante[e] an elite young man's enduring presence among the living," but instead become "lifeless signifiers of his absence" (206). The objects only reflect the lack of Jacob, and Woolf stresses the importance of the subject's absence here by calling the room "empty." By definition, the room is not empty—it is cluttered with Jacob's personal effects. But without Jacob's actual presence, the room is inherently lacking. It is clear that this is a room without a subject—perhaps as close as Woolf gets in her fiction to creating an image of the "kitchen table when no one is there." Without Jacob, the objects are simply material things wallowing in a static objective reality.

The novel concludes with a similar scene in Jacob's room, only this time Jacob's mother and a companion, Mr. Bonamy, are present to witness it. Jacob is dead by this point, having been killed in the war. Mr. Bonamy notices that Jacob "left everything just as it was [. . .] Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read" (155). The scene lacks the controlled arrangement of Richard Alardyce's shrine. It seems the "vast upheaval of matter" that was the Great War has disrupted any pretense of the object's power to

evoke the subject in any kind of arrangement. Here Woolf repeats the line from above, “Listless is the air in an empty room [. . .],” but this time it has far more damning implications. Jacob is not temporarily removed from the scene; he is dead and will never return. The objects that remain are the only things that connect the living with him. It seems the war has shifted the perception of the object and its ability to adequately comfort the living.

This situation would have been ubiquitous throughout England as the items recovered from the war fronts were shipped back to the fallen soldiers’ families. Appropriately, Woolf ends the novel with Jacob’s empty pair of shoes as his mother, Betty Flanders, holds them, asking, “What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?” (155). The shoes are particularly appropriate here because they are a highly individualized item, tailored to each person, worn on the body, and thus as intimately connected with the deceased as an object can be. As Tammy Clewell might argue, the shoes confront the characters and the reader with the finality of death, with the open wounds that war leaves which may never adequately heal (Clewell 198). Building off Clewell’s assessment, I would add that the objects manage to serve as these morbid reminders through their continued presence after their owner’s death, a presence that refutes any denial of the deceased person. Thus, Woolf warns us, as Betty Flanders stands holding her dead son’s shoes, wondering what she should do next, that the grief from war cannot be ignored and may never end. The objects provide no consolation or access to the deceased. The Victorian tendency to enshrine objects of the dead as a means of comfort no longer works properly in this period. Given the Great War’s brusque, mechanical methods of slaying soldiers, and its overwhelming, unprecedented number of casualties, the fallen soldier’s leftover objects only remind the

living of a certain futility in life and a senselessness in death. Instead of providing comfort, the objects Jacob Flanders leaves behind are mere burdens. They linger cruelly in the world with Betty Flanders, dumb things whose futile permanence mocks the transient human condition.

Woolf points out that, aside from its inability to represent a life fully, the object may eventually lose the ability to represent any meaning at all. With *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf suggests the unavoidable meaninglessness of everything—animate and inanimate—when rid of a subjective consciousness. Everything becomes transient when an unidentified famous figure rides through London in a motor car:

The face itself had been seen only once by three people for a few seconds. Even the sex was now in dispute. But there could be no doubt that greatness was seated within; greatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand's-breadth from ordinary people who might now, for the first and last time, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England, of the enduring symbol of the state which will be known to curious antiquaries, 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 stoppings of innumerable decayed teeth. The face in the motor car will then be known. (16)

At first, the object here—the mysterious “face” in the motor car—seems quite permanent. It is unidentified, even by its sex, but it is still known for its “greatness,” for the mere potential of all its possibilities. It could be the Prime Minister, or the “majesty of England,”

or any number of “enduring symbols of the state”; something in its elusive identity lends the face an intangibility. Like an object, it is separated from the many subjects that witness its passing on the London streets, allowing itself an aloofness from the subject as seen before with the pieces of wood in “The Mark on the Wall.” But what makes this face in the motor car the most object-like is its ability to endure. When nothing but the objects associated with the Londoners (their “wedding rings” and “gold stoppings”) remain, the greatness within the motor car will still be remembered.

But this durability of the object creates a number of paradoxes inherent to the problems of the object’s permanence. Firstly, despite its aura of grandeur, the face in the motor car is unknown. It is simply labeled as “greatness,” but its identity is unproven. Secondly, the face’s endurance into a post-civilization version of London immediately eradicates its use as a signifier of the human life it represented. Woolf encourages us to picture a London that is but a “grass-grown path,” in which nothing but rings and gold teeth remain of its long-dead inhabitants. How could a famous face endure in a place and time that is erased of the people who once knew it? In essence, Woolf forces us to imagine the object in absence of the subject, and to confront the inevitable futility of the object as any kind of substitute for the dead.

Again in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf picks up on this issue of the object’s impotency in the absence of subjects. As with *Jacob’s Room*, she returns here to an object-filled space emptied of people to illustrate the desolation and destruction of the war years. The middle section of the novel, “Time Passes” recounts a decade of change across Europe by depicting the deterioration and eventual renovation of the Ramsays’ summer home. Until the end of the section when the caretakers of the house return, the setting here is unobserved, like the

vision of Jacob's room from an intangible spectator with an omniscient narrative voice. The stillness of the scene, populated only by objects, signifies the war's overwhelming supply of death. Indeed, as Douglas Mao points out, it becomes challenging to "separate the inanimacy of the innocent object world from human death" (61). With the section's famously brusque brackets, Woolf discharges of key characters, including Mrs. Ramsay, in hurried sentences. Instead, the house itself and the objects within become the focal points, substitutes for the characters. A deep anxiety seems to be at play, one that was fueled by the war, when "objects seem to endure longer than humans do" (Olson 61). Yet these objects fail to come to life in any way. Like the unobserved kitchen table, consciousness is absent here. The objects remain only in the physical sense as Woolf describes the "eyeless" flowers and mute pieces of china that languish around the home.

Woolf luxuriates in lyrical language to describe the objects, emphasizing their solidity and texture, perhaps even the comforts in "the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers" that was stabilizing during the war (130). At moments the objects tantalizingly promise animation, as the flower petals "fumble" and the wallpaper "flaps." But it is soon evident that these lifeless objects are merely being teased by winds that enter the house. The winds, described as "great armies," symbolize the great changes and death that the war has brought. The wind invades the house and "nibbles" at the objects left behind. The entire scene is meant to emphasize the war's devastation and the absence death creates, as Woolf describes:

[T]hose stray airs [. . .] met nothing in bedroom or drawing-room that wholly resisted them but only hangings that flapped, wood that creaked, the bare legs of tables, saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked. What

people had shed and left—a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes—those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking-glass had held a face; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure turned, a hand flashed, the door opened, in came children rushing, tumbling; and went out again. (133)

As with *Jacob's Room*, Woolf takes care to heighten a sense of the immense loss the war had created through these abandoned objects. Jacob Flanders' shoes are echoed here in the clothing items which “kept the human shape” and remain as useless reminders of the deceased. These are objects of “emptiness,” deathly vacuums that Woolf uses to physically embody what has been lost. She strengthens the sense of loss by exposing some memories attached to the objects—the hands busy with buttons, the mirror with no one to reflect, the children that used to animate the home. With the contrast of such memories, the inanimacy of the objects is far more devastating. Unlike Jacob Flanders' shoes and the intense war connotations that came attached with them, these exceedingly common elements—the buttons, the children running—create a larger portrait of life. Unlike the specific grief evoked in *Jacob's Room*, here readers are reminded that what has been lost is not just a person in the war, but rather a fallen innocence. Indeed, the Ramsays' abandoned house and contents assemble a nostalgia for an extinguished vibrancy, a yearning for the entire pre-war era.

Above all, the tensions between permanence and transience are enormous here. No longer do objects promise any benefit of the preservation of a human life, for the house and

its contents are simply lifeless. The objects languish in neglect and decay, yet they endure the course of the war. Unlike the absent characters, Woolf promises that “whatever else may perish or disappear, what lies here is steadfast” (130). An anxiety over permanence is voiced by the bodiless narrator—“Will you fade? Will you perish?”— to which the objects answer “we remain” (133). But remaining is the only thing the object is capable of doing. It continues to exist, but this endurance is no longer any comfort. As with the face in the motor car that will not be remembered, the object has been emptied of meaning. Devoid of subjects, the object is worthless in every aspect that is important to Woolf’s fiction. The physical permanence is not nearly enough; indeed, the physical permanence only adds to the cruelty of death, haunting the present with a past that can never be reached.

With her final novels, Woolf continues to emphasize the object’s limitations with a subtle, almost resigned kind of anxiety. In *Between the Acts*, Mrs. Manresa’s extravagant accessories help represent her superficially, but they fail to encapsulate her in any meaningful way: “Her hat, her rings, her finger nails red as roses, smooth as shells, were there for all to see. But not her life history” (27). Thus, objects have the potential only to act as signifiers, but not as full embodiments of the person. Meanwhile, *The Years* exhibits the frustration with objects and their useless endurance in the face of human death. Eleanor Pargiter thinks of the items on her writing desk and marvels over the fact that “[the] solid object might survive them all” (86). The thought seems neither menacing nor comforting to Eleanor; rather, it lends a sense of resignation to the notion that the solid world will continue after death.

So it seems that throughout Woolf’s work the object straddles a No Man’s Land (to borrow a prevalent term from the Great War) between the living and the dead. Permanent

in its physicality, lifeless in its consciousness, it occupies a fascinating place for Woolf, one that she keeps revisiting, one with which she never seems settled. She does not disregard the power of objects and their force as tangible reminders after death. But at the same time, she insists on the importance of the subjective in understanding the object. Only when such a consciousness is unavailable (as with the empty rooms in *To the Lighthouse* and *Jacob's Room*) do the objects revert to pure objectivity. Thus the Woolfian object is essentially subjective. It is moulded by conscious thought, constantly re-shaped by the interpretations, memories, and emotions humans apply to it. In this manner, death changes the object in many ways: it is viewed as a reminder, a symbol of loss, to the survivors who are still capable of consciously considering it; it can even be comforting and lend a sense of preservation, as with the shrine to Richard Alardyce. But most importantly, it can never fully recall the deceased person it represents.

Conclusion: Woolf, Iconicity, and the Impossibility of Summing Up

In her first published essay, “Haworth, November 1904” Woolf chronicles her pilgrimage to a small Yorkshire village that was once home to the Brontë sisters. There in Haworth, Woolf visits the Brontë Museum, where she finds a “rather pallid and inanimate collection of objects” that once belonged to Charlotte Brontë (*E* 123). Among the paraphernalia are “autograph letters, pencil drawings, and other documents” which all lie in cases and initially appear to be limp with lifelessness. But the case containing Brontë’s more personal belongings—particularly her shoes and a “thin muslin dress”—is what truly entralls Woolf. She describes these items as “touching [. . .] little personal relics of the dead woman” that give her a “thrill” and bring “Charlotte Brontë the woman,” not the writer, to life. These objects, “trifling and transient though they are, have survived,” Woolf explains (*E* 123). They have endured into the present moment with Woolf, nearly fifty years since the death of Charlotte Brontë, and though they cannot recapture Brontë, they at least prove that she once existed. The thrill Woolf gets from these objects is in the proximity they give not only to the greatness of Charlotte Brontë as a writer, but to the simple fact of her existence as a living being.

Today, standing in the dimly lit, low-ceilinged Sir John Ritblat Gallery of the British Library in London, one may find a similar experience with Woolf’s own objects left behind after her death. There in the gallery, only a piece of glass separates the visitor from one of Woolf’s composition books, her pen, and some ragged pieces of notepaper. The composition book rests in a nearly invisible clear plastic holder. It is opened to the middle section of the book, its pages held down by discreet clear bands. The book almost appears to be hovering in midair in the case, with golden lights trained down on the yellowing page

displayed. The page shows a hand-written draft of the opening paragraphs to *Mrs. Dalloway*. The top of the page is marked with the novel's original title, *The Hours*, lending a sense of authenticity, a feeling that one is peeking behind the curtain of Woolf's creative process. The hurried, nearly illegible handwriting hints at some urgency in the artist to convey her ideas. Some words and phrases are familiar ("buy the flowers herself"; "for Rumpelmeyer's men had their work cut out for them"), and the visitors feel an uncanny spark of joy to see them there on the handwritten page, in their original form, like finally meeting relatives or acquaintances with whom they have only conversed with by phone. Meanwhile, other strings of words on the page are strange or nearly illegible. The pen looks relatively fresh, strangely contemporary. The note pages, arranged meticulously in a fan pattern, heighten the artifice of the display.

Staring at these objects in their very deliberate arrangement, Woolf readers may sense a myriad of emotions. Here before them is the authentic material origin of a celebrated work of art, a physical thing once grazed by Woolf's hand, stared at by her eyes as she thought up the words that had the power transcend time and space, to arrive in other readers' heads decades away, continents away. Yet there is something vaguely disappointing in these objects. They seem too normal, too standard in their scale, to represent the reputation and humanity, let alone the artistry, of Virginia Woolf. After a few moments of initial awe, the objects begin to look like just that—objects.

As Brenda Silver describes in her book *Virginia Woolf Icon*, Woolf has become a modern icon. Her famous profile graces everything from Barnes and Noble canvas bags to beer advertisements. In the British Library's bookshop, Virginia Woolf t-shirts, posters, mugs, and mouse pads may be purchased. Indeed, her picture postcard is the bestselling

item in the National Portrait Gallery in London (Silver xi). Silver attributes this iconicity to a number of factors. For one, Leonard Woolf's "carefully planned posthumous publication of her works" helped to "promote" and "market" Virginia Woolf to the world in the years following her death. Secondly, the popularity of Edward Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, made Woolf famous as a person "known for her well-knownness" (Silver 9). As such, her image and name appear in a broad number of places, often without any explanatory identification. One may see her image and instantly think of a writer, perhaps a modern philosopher, a brooding artist, a turn-of-the-century Briton. Her reputation remains as many-faceted as her own "stuff of thought"; it constantly shifts over time, remaking itself in accordance with the period and its needs. She is the source material of contemporary literary fiction and Hollywood films, and part of her appeal lies in her cultured subtext. As Silver argues, Woolf's face on t-shirts and posters announces to the world, "I am civilized" (149). She belongs to many realms—academia, popular culture, progressivism, feminism, and—at least in the United Kingdom—a reminder of an outdated era.

Despite her status as an icon, Woolf has become someone who cannot be secured into an easily recognizable category. Like the lighthouse, or the plate of fruit, or any number of the objects that busy her pages, she is not able to be so easily contained, for the fullness of her being is too multi-dimensional. To label her as a feminist, pure and simple, reduces so many aspects of her career. Similar things happen when she is labeled as a pure modernist, or a mentally tortured artist, or—perhaps most dreaded of all—a snob. She simply defies objectification and cannot adequately be summed up. As a subjective human

being, she lacks the smooth, delineated boundaries of the physical object, and neither fame nor iconic endurance can deliver such a fixed status.

Yet regardless of the nuances within the icon's meaning, Woolf's image will endure on the paraphernalia it graces, perhaps not for eternity, but at least for a time lengthy enough to be envied by mortal beings. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf even pokes fun at the hideous fact that objects can outlast people, even fame. "The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare," Mr. Ramsay bitterly muses, all the while anxious about the erosive water that bullies the stony shores of his island retreat (39). But despite the injustice of stone's relative permanence, Woolf offers a consolation throughout her work. She shows that objects—like the stone that outlasts Shakespeare—are infinitely less interesting without being passed through the fascinating filtration of the human consciousness. Indeed, what makes the stone so interesting is the water of consciousness that laps at its shores. Her work urges us to consider the watery ambiguity just as much as the solid facts, urges us against unambiguous readings of a person or an object, for "nothing is simply one thing." And although iconic statuses may endure longer than a human being, and physical objects may in turn last longer than the iconic statuses, both are inevitably incapable of recapturing the subjective experience of a human life and consciousness.

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