“Weaving the Fabric of Reality: Consciousness in the Novels of Virginia Woolf”

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to track Virginia Woolf’s enactment of conscious experience over the course of her 3 most consciousness forward novels, To the Lighthouse (1927), The Waves (1931), and Mrs. Dalloway (1925). This thesis aims to examine Woolf’s ideas and theories about individual consciousness, collective consciousness, and how gendered consciousness plays a role in both. Set against the consciousness philosophy of Woolf’s time, this thesis sets Woolf’s ideas apart from the abstractions of philosophy and attempts to trace Woolf’s enactment of consciousness throughout three of her most famous novels. In researching this project, I studied the consciousness scholarship that was circulating within scholarly circles during Virginia Woolf’s time. I also read about what Virginia Woolf herself had to say about philosophy and its usefulness. Finally, I researched what scholars of Virginia Woolf had to say about her work and the philosophy of consciousness. By using all these avenues for my research, I was able to paint a portrait of Virginia Woolf’s involvement with philosophy, her ideas about conscious experience, and how those ideas took shape in her novels. In her novels, Virginia Woolf transcends academic philosophy by creating a way to understand and visualize the phenomenology of consciousness that is unique and entirely her own. In the first chapter of this thesis, I explore Woolf’s depiction of gendered consciousness in her novel To the Lighthouse. In this chapter, I argue that Woolf suggests a difference between the way men and women experience the world. She explores the implications of those experiences for the collective consciousness, and the delicate line that balances gendered individual consciousness with the collective experience. In the second chapter, I look at Woolf’s theory of group consciousness in The Waves, which explores what it means to be part of a collective experience while also balancing being an individual with one’s own inner experience. In this chapter, I argue that Woolf formulates a coming-of-age narrative to enact the development of both the individual and collective consciousnesses. She also splits the coming-of-age narratives into two different groups, based on gender. I argue that Woolf does this to highlight the different ways in which men and women experience, how that experience develops from adolescence to adulthood, and the balance that must be maintained to reach Woolf’s idea of enlightenment. Finally, in the last chapter, I discuss Woolf’s ideas about inner and outer experience in Mrs. Dalloway, including the novel’s implicit assertion that there must be stability, or balance, in both inner and outer conscious experience if one is to function within the collective consciousness of society. I argue that Woolf shows this balance, or lack thereof, in the parallel narratives of Clarissa and Septimus. In doing this she once again asserts that there is a gendered difference in the way men and women experience and shows how the balance of inner and outer experience functions between both men and women. By analyzing these three texts, I hope to show both Woolf’s understanding of conscious experience and the ways in which she enacts this understanding in her three most consciousness-forward novels.
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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

What is consciousness? What does it mean to have an experience? For years scholars have attempted to answer these questions. Consciousness, as an area of study, raises a few questions. These questions include: What does it mean to have an experience? What is it like, both cognitively and physically, to perceive what’s happening around you, and why does it matter in the first place? In the early 20th century, consciousness, and the study of it were at the center of scholarly attention. Influential philosophers such as William James and G.E Moore were just beginning to formulate their theories about conscious experience and to bring them into public view. In this thesis I argue that Virginia Woolf provided her own answer to these questions about consciousness during her career. By reading Woolf against consciousness scholarship, I aim to discuss the ways in which Woolf creates a new idea or philosophy of consciousness, one that considers gender, society, and the individual, and depicts how all these things coalesce into what we understand as “experience.” Woolf’s thoughts and philosophies were no doubt influenced by those who came before her, but she also created a concept or way of enacting consciousness in her novels that was uniquely her own. In the first chapter of this thesis, I explore gendered and collective consciousness in To the Lighthouse (1927) and the balance that must be maintained within both. In the second chapter, I explore collective or group consciousness in The Waves (1931) and explore how Woolf enacts a coming of age of both collective conscious identity and individual conscious identity, Finally, in the last chapter, I explore Woolf's ideas about inner and outer conscious experience in Mrs. Dalloway (1925), and how one must balance these experiences if they are to function in the collective consciousness of society.
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This thesis was borne from my interests in Virginia Woolf, consciousness, and the theories of the mind. Consciousness, as an area of study, has experienced a revival in the past 20 years. My interest in how the mind works became an obsession during the isolation of the pandemic, and this thesis is a result of that obsession. For a long time, I was at a loss for how this thesis would come together. Writing this thesis seemed like a distant dream, one that always seemed to escape my grasp. The pandemic made it especially hard to focus, write, and brainstorm. For this reason, I am eternally grateful for the people in my life that helped me persevere, despite all of the obstacles the world seemed to throw my way. This thesis would not have been possible without the unending support, kindness, and patience from my advisor Dr. Ashely Reed. I thank Dr. Thomas Gardner for being a source of inspiration and wisdom in my years here at Virginia Tech. Without Dr. Gardner, I would not have unlocked the philosophy of conscious experience that Virginia Woolf weaved throughout her writing. Thank you, Dr. Gardner, for showing me the beauty of poetry and the hugeness of experience. I also thank Dr. Su Fang Ng, as both your student and TA, you taught me that diligence and patience will always lead to good and effective writing. I thank my committee for always being a source of knowledge and kindness in my writing process. Without you, this thesis would not be what it is today. I would also like to thank my partner, William McClellan for opening my eyes to the wonder that is conscious experience and for always holding my hand when I felt lost in the weeds of writing, thinking, and creating.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
Philosophies of Consciousness at the Turn of the Twentieth Century  
Virginia Woolf and the Enactment of Consciousness  

Chapter 1: To the Lighthouse and Gendered Consciousness  

Chapter 2: The Waves and the Phases of Conscious Experience  

Chapter 3: The Mirror of Experience: Inner vs Outer Consciousness in Mrs. Dalloway  
Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway  
The Interiority of Septimus Smith  

Bibliography
Introduction

Consciousness, as an area of study, raises a few questions. These questions include: What does it mean to have an experience? What is it like, both cognitively and physically, to perceive what’s happening around you, and why does it matter in the first place? In the early 20th century, consciousness and the study of it were at the center of scholarly attention. Influential philosophers such as William James and G.E Moore were just beginning to formulate their theories about conscious experience and to bring them into public view. In this thesis I argue that Virginia Woolf provided her own answer to these questions about consciousness during her career. By reading Woolf against consciousness scholarship, I aim to discuss the ways in which Woolf creates a new idea or philosophy of consciousness, one that takes into account gender, society, and the individual, and depicts how all of these things coalesce into what we understand as “experience.” Woolf’s thoughts and philosophies were no doubt influenced by those who came before her, but she also created a concept or way of enacting consciousness in her novels that was uniquely her own.

I use the term “enact” frequently throughout this thesis to help articulate what I believe Woolf is attempting to do in her novels. The term “enact” is defined as: to make (a bill or other proposal) law, or: to act out (a role or play) on stage. The second definition is closer to how I use the term in relation to Woolf’s enactment of consciousness. Woolf acts out consciousness in her novels. She does this by not merely creating characters who experience but by creating a stage on which her vision or interpretation of conscious experience is acted out. We see this in characters’ emotions, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. In this way, she divorces herself from the philosophers she saw as too abstract and lacking real emotion. Instead, Woolf chooses to enact those abstractions in her novels as a way to see and understand conscious experience writ large.
Throughout Virginia Woolf’s nine novels, a few critical questions seem to continually be posed to the reader. These questions include: what does it mean to be human, what is the experience of living with the weight of thousands of years of collective human experience in your subconscious, and ultimately, how do we deal with the inevitability of our own demise? Woolf’s questions speak directly to the problems of consciousness that her contemporaries were grappling with in the early 20th century. During her early years, scholars such as William James, G.E Moore, and Paul Natorp were trying to make sense of what it means to be conscious. Woolf answers these inquiries, not by giving concrete answers, but rather by showcasing the patterns and intricacies of human experience. Virginia Woolf beautifully articulates conscious experience in prose that leaves one in awe of her ability. To this end, Woolf utilizes her thoughts about gender and society, facilitates *knowing* her characters by shrinking in and expanding out of their minds, and alludes to the existential questions of philosophy in order to assert her own assumptions and ideas about conscious experience. Even so, it would seem that Woolf fails to provide any sufficient answers to the problem of defining consciousness, and perhaps the lack of answers is Woolf’s point. Woolf doesn’t seek to answer questions but rather aims to call our attention to both the sensation or feeling of conscious experience and to the existential tenets of human consciousness by creating narratives in which experience, in all of its glory, takes center stage. At the heart of Woolf’s theories about consciousness is the emotion which human experience evokes; that emotion is what she believed was missing from earlier discussions of consciousness by the philosophers during and before her time.

**Philosophies of Consciousness at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

Born on January 25th, 1882, Virginia Woolf grew up in the midst of a philosophical preoccupation not only with individual consciousness but with collective experience. The study of consciousness in the late 1800s focused primarily on trying to break consciousness down into its most fundamental parts. Paul Natorp, a German philosopher, described consciousness as “inexplicable and hardly describable, yet all conscious experiences have this in common, that what we call their content has
this peculiar reference to a center for which self is the name, in virtue of which reference alone the content is subjectively given, or appears” (Natorp 14). Natorp asserts that the peculiarity of conscious experience is what gives it form. This center, or as Natorp puts it, “self,” is where we see conscious experience appear. Another scholar of philosophy, G.E Moore, in an issue of *Mind* published in 1903, says this about conscious experience: “The moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish. It seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness. When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue; the other element is as if it were diaphanous. Yet it can be distinguished, if we look attentively enough, and know that there is something to look for” (Moore 450). For Moore, the phenomenon we call experience or consciousness is an amorphous and elusive subject to pin down. When we try to inspect our conscious experience under a microscope, it seems to fly away from us, and we are left with the emptiness that makes up human understanding.

William James, in his 1904 essay “Does Consciousness Exist?” describes consciousness in this way: “When the world of outer fact ceases to be materially present, and we merely recall it in memory or fancy it, the consciousness is believed to stand out and to be felt as a kind of impalpable inner flowing, which, once known in this sort of experience, may equally be detected in presentations of the outer world” (James 479). James asserts that if we look closely enough and know exactly what we are looking for, we may be able to distinguish consciousness and hold it up to the light.

While Natorp, Moore, and James were concerned with how individuals experience consciousness, early-twentieth century philosophers also explored the possibility of a collective human consciousness, or even a consciousness that would connect mind and matter. In his 1901 book *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*, the philosopher Richard Bucke introduced the concept of cosmic consciousness, which he defined as “a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe” (Bucke 3). Bucke’s definition encompasses the whole of mind, body, and nature and the relationship between them. William James revised Bucke’s theory to produce his own idea
of cosmic consciousness. Lynn Bridgers explains James's thinking about cosmic consciousness in her book titled *Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience: James's Classic Study in Light of Resiliency, Temperament, and Trauma*. Bridgers expounds on James's idea of how a collective cosmic consciousness could result in life after death. She quotes James here, “The mind passes through the body [and] the larger reservoir of consciousness would remain intact after the dissolution of the brain and might retain traces of the life history of its individual emanation” (qtd in Bridgers 27). James alludes to the notion of a mind/body split. He asserts that experience is not condensed to a self or a body, but rather is fabricated in the mind and might transcend death through its connection to other minds.

In an essay in which he discusses the philosophy of radical empiricism, James suggests that the core of consciousness, that is, consciousness in its most basic form, is what he calls “pure experience.” James states, “Experience in its immediacy seems perfectly fluent. The active sense of living which we all enjoy, before reflection shatters our instinctive world for us, is self-luminous and suggests no paradoxes. When the reflective intellect gets at work, however, it discovers incomprehensibilities in the flowing process. Distinguishing its elements and parts, it gives them separate names, and what it thus disjoins it cannot easily put together” (Essays 92). James asserts that it is only the advent of reflection that muddies the waters of pure conscious experience. For James, what made up the contents of consciousness was not the connection, or lack thereof, of the mind and body, but rather the novelty of sensation and the idiosyncratic nature of experience. While these descriptions of consciousness by Natorp, Moore, and James differ somewhat, one thing is certain: early-twentieth-century philosophy was preoccupied with the problem of defining and understanding consciousness and James and his contemporaries had yet to find a light bright enough or a microscope powerful enough to really examine it.

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1 William James was familiar with Bucke’s work around consciousness and the collective. In his essay “The Confidences of a Psychical Researcher,” James wrote: “What again, are the relations between the cosmic consciousness and matter? ... So that our ordinary human experience, on its material as well as on its mental side, would appear to be only an extract from the larger psycho-physical world?” (17).
Virginia Woolf was certainly aware of the conversations surrounding these philosophers. Woolf was raised and reached adulthood in an environment where ideas about consciousness and philosophy were frequently discussed. George Johnson gives a comprehensive overview of the influences on Virginia Woolf’s writing and engagement with philosophical ideas in “The Spirit of the Age: Virginia Woolf’s Response to Second Wave Psychology,” in which he states that “the spirit of the new age of psychological questing influenced Woolf generally” and that “she gained an awareness of these ideas initially through her father, who was undoubtedly influenced by James Sully” and “possibly through contact with James Strachey” (Johnson 159). Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, sought to decipher the theory of objectivity and the role perception has in human consciousness. Scholar Paul Toliver Brown provides a brief overview of Stephen’s philosophical beliefs: “For Stephen, objective existence could neither be proved nor disproved. At the same time, he also believed that human thought and perception were as real as external objects but bound to an individual consciousness that could not reach beyond itself” (41). It was her father’s ideas and the people he spoke to about these ideas that sparked Woolf’s curiosity about consciousness and the way human beings uniquely experience the world. The curiosity ultimately generated the novels in which she displays her understanding of both human psychology and the nature of experience.

Despite not being given a “formal” education in philosophy, Woolf was nevertheless enmeshed in the scholarly conversations of the early twentieth century by virtue of her relationship with Stephen who, as Katherine C. Hill says, “Had given her a solid grounding in English literature and history and [whose] critical ideas informed much of her own thinking” (Gill 351). Woolf, however, became increasingly suspicious of philosophy and philosophers, as Michael Lackey argues:

Engagement with and revaluation of philosophy was a major concern for much of [Woolf’s] career. While it is clear... that the philosopher G.E. Moore heavily influenced Bloomsbury in general, and Woolf in particular, it is also clear that Woolf started to wonder as early as 1920 why someone like Moore exerted so much influence on her
intellectual circle…. Woolf, while influenced by philosophy early in her career (1904-1919), had a radical change of heart around the year 1920, which led to her direct and focused assault on Philosophy in the mind in the mid to late 1920’s. (Lackey 94)

According to Lackey, Woolf’s change of heart about philosophy and the men who study it came from her attempts to understand her father. In short, Lackey argues, Woolf’s own trepidation about philosophy coupled with her father’s involvement in philosophical circles led to Woolf’s critique of and disenchantment with philosophical arguments. Philosophy, to Woolf, was too concerned with absolute Truths and allowed virtually no focus on the individual; philosophers struggled to capture what was at the heart of experience and were unable to consider human emotion in their meditations about experience and thus were prone to forget the intrinsic value of human life. She asked in one of her diary entries, “What is the value of a philosophy that has no power over life?” (Woolf 340).

For Woolf, human emotion, desire, and experience were ways to expose the fabric of conscious reality, which is why she created depictions of consciousness to explore the mechanisms behind conscious experience. Rather than analyzing consciousness through the mechanism of academic philosophy (like her contemporaries James, Moore, and Natorp), Woolf wrote novels that staged enactments of consciousness. Woolf grappled with the problems facing consciousness scholarship, not in an attempt to solve them or even to prove the philosophers wrong, but rather to unweave the fabric of reality in order to glimpse the intricacies locked within. Using nothing more than her characters as iterations of human experience, Woolf provides both microscope and light for the problem of enacting consciousness.

Virginia Woolf and the Enactment of Consciousness

Though Woolf was immersed in discussions of the philosophy of consciousness, her own philosophical tendencies are a point of contention for scholars. Many scholars contextualize Woolf’s writing with philosophers and their philosophies. Mark Hussey uses the phenomenological theory of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to help define the elusive notion of the self in Virginia Woolf’s novels (Hussey
Another scholar, Pamela Caughie, uses Ludwig Wittenstein’s philosophy of language to untangle Woolf’s preoccupation with understanding the fabric of reality (Caughie 114). Martha Nussbaum also applies the philosophy of language to Woolf’s work. But perhaps most interesting is Yuko Rojas’s analysis of Woolf’s use of philosophy in *To the Lighthouse*. Rojas argues that “[t]here is a difference between studying philosophy in its own right and studying the ways in which fiction itself pursues or portrays its protagonists as pursuing aesthetic, intellectual, or emotional objectives analogous to those pursued and described by many of the most prominent philosophers” (Rojas 451). Rojas focuses his analysis on *To the Lighthouse*’s Lily Briscoe and her attempt to “[r]elease herself from the past and from the sense of loss associated with the death of Mrs. Ramsay, through a creative process analogous to Proustian ‘reminiscence,’ which Woolf depicts as overcoming the space between past and present, while also reconciling self and other, conscious and unconscious, abstract and concrete, and the rational and the intuitive” (Rojas 463). Rojas stresses that Woolf doesn’t seek to dramatize philosophical theories, but rather attempts to explore the ways in which her writing and the experiences of her characters express the concerns and intellectual aims of many of the philosophers who preceded her. Rojas’s claims are very close to my own assertions about Woolf’s philosophy of consciousness, but they still aim to relate Woolf to scholars she found strict, unimaginative, and too concerned with definitions and not concerned enough with enactment.

The scholars I’ve mentioned above, and many others, have done an excellent job of situating Woolf’s works within the context of other philosophical ideas, but not many have discussed Woolf’s own integrity as a philosopher. To this end, I circle back to Michael Lackey, who argues for a reading that positions Virginia Woolf as a philosopher in her own right. Lackey subverts the notion that Woolf was merely reading or influenced by philosophy, and instead encourages readers to see Woolf as a writer who shunned the prescriptive nature of academic philosophy and instead came up with her own ideas about and depiction of the nature of existence. Lackey’s analysis provides a look at how Virginia Woolf
interacted with the philosophers during and before her time and argues for a reading that does not label Woolf anti-philosophical because of her lack of engagement with philosophy, but rather sees beyond the stringent qualities of academic philosophy. Much like Lackey, in this thesis I am to detail the ways in which we see Woolf’s own philosophy of consciousness, or the “fabric of reality,” in her novels. I do not position her as simply parroting the ideas of her contemporaries and older scholars, but instead treat her as a philosopher of consciousness who seeks to enact the elusive nature of experience through fiction.

In her novels, Woolf transcends academic philosophy by creating a way to understand and visualize the phenomenology of consciousness that is unique and entirely her own. Woolf’s depiction of human perception, feelings, and thought can be traced back to her questions about what she calls “the unknown and uncircumcised spirit” (“Modern Fiction” 150). What Woolf’s novels describe is not simply experience itself, but rather the amorphous and nebulous feelings and perceptions that experience gives rise to. In many ways, this echoes James’ focus on pure experience, but Woolf enacts a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Experience, to Woolf, was just as mysterious as God or the afterlife. Thus, what she tried to uncover in her novels was the mechanics behind conscious experience; she parsed the different ways her characters and, by proxy, humans consciously experience the world. Unlike James, who focused on the connection of mind and body, Woolf focuses her theory of conscious experience on the emotions and feelings that experience gives rise to. Though Woolf’s characters are merely ink on a page, it is in Woolf’s enactment of conscious experience through these characters and the richness of emotions they experience that we can begin to see Woolf’s own definition of consciousness in her novels.

Woolf felt that the unknown around us was just as real as our material world, and she claimed that our material reality gives way to our unknown reality or our conscious experience. In A Room of One’s Own, she wrote:

What is meant by ‘reality? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the
street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates. Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality. (165-166)

Uncovering the relationship between reality and the mechanisms of consciousness is at the heart of Woolf’s novels. It is Woolf’s attempt to reveal the inner workings of both individual and group experience that positions her as one of the greatest modernist writers. Woolf clearly desired to find some connection between the erratic and impermanent nature of reality and the stable sense of self or conscious experience that was common to all human beings. What I call Woolf’s philosophy of consciousness is her assertion that there is both an individual and collective conscious identity and even further, that there is a difference between the way men and women consciously experience. Woolf goes on to articulate how that difference influences both the individual and the collective. Thus, what Woolf does is attempt to enact these identities in her novels and articulate the ways in which we see experience writ large.

Woolf’s preoccupation with human experience and how that experience plays a role in understanding the fabric of reality may have stemmed from her struggles with mental illness and her own fraught relationship to reality. Virginia Woolf battled depression and suffered manic episodes for a large part of her adult life. From her complicated relationship with her mother to her sexual abuse at the hands of her half-brothers, Woolf’s personal life was far from picturesque. Thomas Caramagno describes Woolf’s private life in detail, citing scholars who describe Woolf’s writing as her way to escape the turmoil of her inner experience:
Some [critics] claim that Woolf’s fiction functioned as a defense mechanism against grieving, against confronting unresolved feelings of guilt, defilement, anger, and loss. Given Woolf’s suicide, one critic worries that her much-touted “moments of being” may not have been epiphanies at all but dark dissolutions of the self, flirtations with death disclosing a misguided desire to escape her individuality, her very self. (Caramagno 6)

My project is less concerned with Woolf’s struggles with mental illness or with her suicide than with what her fiction reveals about the patterns and continuities she discovered in human experience. It is still important, however, to consider Woolf’s own inner life to highlight her perceptions and theories around consciousness. Woolf’s moments of being may not have been epiphanies in the Joycean sense, but rather something darker and more fraught. Nevertheless, we may still be able to use them to help parse Woolf’s preoccupation with understanding the individual experience, as she was perhaps trying to understand her own.

The goal of this thesis is to display Woolf’s unique theory of consciousness and how she enacts this theory in To the Lighthouse, The Waves, and Mrs. Dalloway. In the first chapter I explore Woolf’s depiction of gendered consciousness in her novel To the Lighthouse. In this chapter, I argue that Woolf suggests a difference between the way men and women experience the world. She explores the implications of those experiences for the collective consciousness, and the delicate line that balances gendered individual consciousness with the collective experience. In the second chapter I look at Woolf’s theory of group consciousness in The Waves, which explores what it means to be part of a collective experience while also balancing being an individual with one’s own inner experience. In this chapter, I argue that Woolf formulates a coming-of-age narrative to enact the development of both the individual and collective consciousnesses. She also splits the coming-of-age narratives into two different groups, based on gender. I argue that Woolf does this to highlight the different ways in which men and women experience, how that experience develops from adolescence to adulthood, and the balance that must be maintained in order to reach Woolf’s idea of enlightenment. Finally, in the last chapter, I discuss Woolf’s
ideas about inner and outer experience in *Mrs. Dalloway*, including the novel’s implicit assertion that there must be stability, or balance, in both inner and outer conscious experience if one is to function within the collective consciousness of society. I argue that Woolf shows this balance, or lack thereof, in the parallel narratives of Clarissa and Septimus. In doing this she once again asserts that there is a gendered difference in the way men and women experience and shows how the balance of inner and outer experience functions between both men and women. At the core of Woolf’s philosophy of consciousness is her assertion of conscious experience as a collection of consciousnesses all attempting to operate simultaneously, while also seeking to individuate themselves outside of the collective. By analyzing these three texts, I hope to show both Woolf’s understanding of conscious experience and the ways in which she enacts this understanding in her three most consciousness-forward novels.
Chapter 1: *To the Lighthouse* and Gendered Consciousness

*To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf’s fifth novel, establishes her unique theory of group consciousness, which traces its origins back to theories of consciousness posited by William James and G.E Moore. Woolf’s assertions about conscious reality echo the assertions of the philosophers before her, most notably William James’s theories of collective consciousness. Virginia Woolf was not concerned with the business of defining consciousness, but rather with enacting the feelings and sensations that made up conscious experience. William James also wrote about sensation or feeling, but Woolf takes it one step further and attempts to *show* that feeling and act it out in her novels. Woolf did not care for abstraction; she cared about expressing human experience. To this end, Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* differentiates between the consciousnesses and experiences of men and women; she shows how these consciousnesses seem to act in concert with one another and yet function as separate experiences in the collective consciousness that is shared by all human beings. Woolf exposes the perceived barrier that separates the lived experiences of men and women, as well as the individual experiences of human and human. She does this in order to bolster her own assertions about the nature of experience, the difference in the separate conscious realities between men and women, and the collective consciousness that is shared between all human beings. Woolf dissolves the thin, permeable film that separates us from our ability to understand one another’s experience and effectively answers Lily Briscoe’s inquiry of what it is like to be someone else. By the end of *To the Lighthouse*, human experience is held up, examined, and suspended in this sweeping novel about what it means to be alive, human, and on the verge of imminent decay. In this chapter, I will begin by discussing how collective consciousness operates generally in *To the Lighthouse* before homing in on the gendering of consciousness in the novel.

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2 The novel where we see Woolf really explore her ideas about group consciousness would be her seventh novel, *The Waves*. While I believe that *The Waves* is an excellent example of group consciousness, or the ability of humans to relate to and understand each other without the use of the five senses, I argue that it is in *To the Lighthouse* that we see Woolf really play with and expand on the ideas that allowed *The Waves* to become the novel that we know it as today.
Scholars of Virginia Woolf have ruminated for many years on Woolf’s stream of consciousness narrative style and her ideas about individual and collective consciousness. Most scholarship on Virginia Woolf describes consciousness as a stream, which implies a steady, non-ceasing flow of water or, in this case, ideas. William James first coined the term “stream of consciousness” in his book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), where he defines it as “a stream, a succession of states, or waves, or fields (or of whatever you please to call them), of knowledge, of feeling, of desire, of deliberation, etc., that constantly pass and repass, and that constitute our inner life” (James 19). Modernist authors including Woolf applied James’s ideas about consciousness to literary form. In 1968 Robert Humphrey described the use of stream of consciousness in Woolf, Joyce, and Faulkner. Humphrey described “stream of consciousness” as a “type of fiction in which the basic emphasis is placed on exploration of the prespeech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of the characters” (Humphrey 4). Humphrey went on to name some of the most well-known stream of consciousness novels, such as *Ulysses, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse*, and *The Sound and the Fury*. In his discussion of Virginia Woolf and her use of stream of consciousness in *To the Lighthouse*, Humphrey asserts that the symbolic structure of the novel gives the stream of consciousness narrative coherence. Thus, it is Woolf’s symbolism that creates order in the flowing conscious stream of characters’ thoughts and emotions. David Daiches similarly describes Woolf’s stream of consciousness style in detail, saying that when writing her characters, “Virginia Woolf passes from one consciousness to another, from one group to another, exploring the significance of their reactions, carefully arranging and patterning the images that rise up in their minds” (Daiches 82).

This stream imagery is a valid way to describe Woolf’s free-flowing writing style but seems to miss Woolf’s unique philosophy of consciousness itself. Woolf was infinitely mesmerized by the human condition and wanted to enact the reality of experience as the main focus of her novels. In *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf described her earliest memory of conscious reality:
If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed at the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive. (Woolf 65)

For Woolf, human emotion and sensation are the basis of conscious experience. It is in the finer details of memory, emotion, and feeling that one can achieve the purest ecstasy and eventually reach transcendence. Woolf was concerned with matters that dealt with the breadth of human emotion and how both emotion and experience collectively fit into the larger fabric of reality.

Woolf asserted in her writing that she considered human experience to operate much like a wave does: “A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it” (The Letters of Virginia Woolf 8). This “wave in the mind” represents Woolf’s attempt to describe the shadowy phenomena that make up experience. Woolf may have gotten this language from William James, who, as we saw above, also used the word “wave” to describe the mechanism of consciousness. Allen McLaurin calls attention to Woolf’s use of the word “wave” and applies it to her depiction of conscious experience, asserting that the imagery of a wave or sea is more descriptive of her style than the imagery of a “stream” of consciousness. McLaurin writes that, “Certainly the ebb and flow of waves is a better image for the texture of Virginia Woolf’s portrayal of moments of reverie than ‘stream’ would be” (McLaurin 38). Woolf’s use of the word “wave” as a way to understand consciousness posits that human experience functions as a great unending force that crashes upon the shore of an individual’s existence. It also hints at a unification with the whole, or a union with something larger than just the individual and the individual mind. A wave feeds back into a larger reservoir of water and Woolf’s use of something so grand to describe conscious experience seems to hint at her ideas about collective experience or group consciousness.
The theory of group consciousness on display in Woolf’s 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* is not one that Woolf made up on her own. The idea of collective consciousness, or a shared way of understanding and behaving in the world, was brought forth by Richard Bucke and William James, who both thought of consciousness as a collective phenomenon. Bucke first proposed the idea of a cosmic consciousness, which “shows the cosmos to consist not of dead matter governed by unconscious, rigid, and unintending law; it shows it on the contrary as entirely immaterial, entirely spiritual and entirely alive; it shows that death is an absurdity, that everyone and everything has eternal life; it shows that the universe is God and that God is the universe, and that no evil ever did or ever will enter into it; a great deal of this is, of course, from the point of view of self consciousness, absurd; it is nevertheless undoubtedly true” (Bucke 17-18). William James, just a year later in 1902, revised Bucke’s cosmic consciousness and called it a collective consciousness which, as Lynn Bridgers quotes, “manifests itself in the minds of men and remains intact after the dissolution of the individual. It may retain traces of the life history of its individual emanation. It is a larger reservoir of consciousness” (qtd in Bridgers 27).

Though there is no evidence of Woolf’s direct engagement with James or Bucke’s ideas, it is not hard to see where the theories of these philosophers and of Woolf merge, especially in *To the Lighthouse*. The characters in this novel seem to be reading each other’s minds in the most intimate of ways, but this mind reading takes place without the characters consciously knowing that it is happening. Woolf positions her characters as interacting with one another in a sort of large living organism composed of all of their individual consciousnesses. Thus, what James and Bucke asserted in their definitions as a cosmic collective, in Woolf is perhaps a different sort of collective. What forms the collective consciousness of these characters is their relationships to one another. This collective experience is seen in Mrs. Ramsay’s sympathy, in Mr. Ramsay’s need for sympathy, in Lily Briscoe’s desire for Mrs. Ramsay, and in the children’s need for autonomy from their parents. What captures these characters is their collective identity and the large working body of experience they share that connects them both socially and internally.
Wool’s collective consciousness does not exist for purposes of societal control, but rather relies on the emotional interdependence of human beings within the collective. Wool’s characters ask what it is like to “be” someone else, or wonder what it is that people have “locked up within” themselves, as Lily Briscoe does when she considers Mrs. Ramsey:

Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? Was it, once more, the deceptiveness of beauty, so that all one’s perceptions, half-way to truth, were tangled in a golden mesh? or did she lock up within her some secret which certainly Lily Briscoe believed people must have for the world to go on at all? Everyone could not be as helter skelter, hand to mouth as she was. But if they knew, could they tell one what they knew? (Lighthouse 62)

Lily does not just assume she understands another person or interpret Mrs. Ramsay’s actions as universal truths. Lily instead ponders what Mrs. Ramsay’s experience is like and, at the end of the passage, ponders what the experience of everyone is like. In this way, Lily tries to empathize with the consciousnesses of others to create a unified idea of a whole consciousness, one which she can fit into. The “secret that people have locked up within themselves” is Lily’s way of describing conscious experience. Thus, through Lily, Woolf questions the nature of consciousness and asserts that the reason the world goes on is because the social world is made up of a large living organism of individual experiences, or consciousnesses. Lily yearns to be a part of something larger: not just an individual, but an individual that has roots in a collective. Lily’s need for unification may explain her attachment to Mrs. Ramsay, as she feels unmoored, with no tether to latch her to something larger than just herself.

Virginia Woolf’s use of shifting perspective and mind-jumping and her uncanny ability to present the inner world of her characters as real tangible experience writ large has been a source of scholarly conversation since Woolf published her first experimental novel, Jacob’s Room (1922). What many scholars have focused on are the ways Woolf presents experience and how that presentation is enacted in
her novels. Martha Nussbaum provides a notable example in her examination of the reader’s knowledge of
other minds in To the Lighthouse. Nussbaum asks how one can understand the mind of another, much like
Lily Briscoe herself asks in the novel, and explores how Woolf enlightens us about not only the minds of
her characters, but also perhaps our own minds and the minds around us. Perhaps most interesting is
Nussbaum’s assertion that the reason we (as both readers and human beings) have such a hard time
understanding the experience, or inner worlds, of others is because of a fault in language. Nussbaum
describes language as an imperfect medium for expressing one’s inner world and asserts that language
issues from personal history. It is idiosyncratic, but it is also non-private and tellable in the way the novel
itself is told. Nussbaum’s analysis of To the Lighthouse shows the hiddenness of consciousness by
showing the reader’s miraculous access to the thoughts of Woolf’s characters (Nussbaum 740).
Nussbaum, in her analysis, provides a good example of the idiosyncratic nature of language. This example
is the “poor little world” conversation between Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Ramsay. This conversation depicts a
difference between Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay, where Mr. Ramsay’s calling the world “poor” and
“little” aggravates Mrs. Ramsay about how dismal and depressing Mr. Ramsay seems to make everything,
even existence itself. Nussbaum ascribes this difference to the idiosyncratic nature of Mr. and Mrs.
Ramsay’s lived experiences, and thus situates her argument around the failings of language as a medium
for understanding other conscious experiences. However, I argue in this chapter that Woolf is providing
commentary on a different sort of experience, one that accounts for how experience may be different
between the sexes.

Scholarship about the interiority of Mrs. Ramsay provides further insight into how Woolf
accomplishes her presentation of consciousness on the page. Brian Richardson, in a revision to
Nussbaum’s thesis, centers his argument around language and the act of reading in the novel. In his
analysis of reading in To the Lighthouse. Richardson looks at the story read by Mrs. Ramsay at the
beginning of the novel, The Fisherman and his Wife. This story, which Jane Marcus argues is a “sexist
parable of women’s insatiable desire for power” (154), is positioned by Richardson as subtext for the novel. Richardson argues that “[i]t is then not surprising that she [Mrs. Ramsay] finds comfort in imagining herself drowning and finally finding ‘rest on the floor of the sea’ (84). The narrative of the life of Mrs. Ramsay thus functions as a critical rewriting of the sexist fairy tale from a feminist perspective” (149). Richardson and Marcus’s analysis of a desire for power between the sexes, or Woolf purposefully providing a revisionist feminine fairy tale, is in line with my assertion that there is a gendered difference in experience between men and women.

Language and Woolf’s use of it is just one avenue scholars use for critical discussion of consciousness in To the Lighthouse. Kristina Groover takes a different approach in explaining the trouble of knowing another mind and how Woolf explores that trouble. Groover, in her analysis of To the Lighthouse, asserts that Woolf uses the physical body as both a means and an obstacle to understanding or knowing others. Woolf’s philosophy of the body, Groover argues, is different from her father’s thoughts about consciousness, which were rooted in the platonic ideal of the separation of mind and body, and thus the separation of human consciousness from physical nature. Virginia Woolf, according to Groover, rejects that notion and instead presents the body as a problem: “Woolf thus depicts the body as deeply problematic: as a vehicle for intimate connection and for healing, it also renders her female characters vulnerable to the demands of the male ego” (Groover 220). Much like my assertion about the experience of men and women, and even further, the experience of Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay in their relationship, Groover posits that Woolf creates a differential experience in her characters using the body. In short, Groover argues for a corporeal reading of Mrs. Ramsay’s experience, one that considers her body, and as a result her experience, as both giver and receiver in the novel and how that body of experience fits in with the experiences of others. This argument echoes my own analysis of Mrs. Ramsay’s conscious experience, which includes her experience as both an individual and as part of a larger collective.
Human experience is a phenomenon that is one-sided for most people: the only experience that we can lay claim to is our own. In her novels, Woolf unshrouds the mystery of human experience by allowing her readers not only to see and experience her characters’ actions, but also to experience their psyches. The most obvious example of this is the dinner scene in “The Window.” What is most interesting about this scene is not just Woolf’s play with collective consciousness, but also her ability to single out and uplift Mrs. Ramsay as the lead or primary consciousness in the scene, with all other experiences seemingly revolving around hers. We do not get a “bird’s eye view” of the scene, but rather a fractured portrait of all of its abstract parts. In the dinner scene we seem to be operating from Mrs. Ramsay’s point of view, but that quickly changes as the dinner progresses. Nonetheless, it is in Mrs. Ramsay’s organization and orchestration of the people around her, as well as her ability to situate herself among them, that we see Woolf’s idea of collective consciousness really come to light.

The dinner in To the Lighthouse is surrounded with as much anticipation and anxiety as the trip to the lighthouse itself. The dinner table acts as a collective mind, with the thoughts of its occupants functioning as cloches in which experience is served. Mrs. Ramsay spends a great deal of time fretting over the advent of dinner—more than she does over just about anything else in the novel. When she finally sits down to dinner, she is immediately flooded with thoughts: “‘But what have I done with my life?’ thought Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table, and looking at all the plates making white circles on it. ‘William, sit by me,’ she said. ‘Lily,’ she said, warily, ‘over there.’ They had that—Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle—she, only this—an infinitely long table and plates and knives” (Lighthouse 60). What we see in this scene are two things. On the one hand, we see Mrs. Ramsay having her own interior thoughts, in which she ponders what she has done with her life and perhaps even what the meaning of life is. These thoughts aren’t intrusive, nor can they be described as negative or positive; rather, these thoughts simply are. On the other hand, we see the collective consciousness of the group as it forms around the dinner table:
Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, 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. (Lighthouse 70)

The room functions in this scene as a microcosm of conscious experience; the outside world is a watery apparition, but the true reality of experience is inside with the party. The party acts as a bubble of experience, as all individual consciousnesses are interacting as one whole conscious collective. We can imagine the party acting as a collective brain and the windows in the scene acting as eyes that reveal the outside world. The outside world is unstable—it wavers and vanishes—but the party, or the group, is stable. The collective consciousness of the party is unwavering.

The dinner scene serves as an excellent example of the group consciousness formed by the interplay between the individual conscious minds of Woolf’s characters. As we read the scene, it is almost as if we are hopping from one head to the next or, as Mrs. Ramsay puts it, “hovering like a hawk” over the spectacle of the dinner. On the surface we see a family eating together, but beneath that surface we see the characters’ inner experiences. Consider this passage, in which Mrs. Ramsay watches over the dinner and Woolf gives us access to her inner monologue:

Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought dissociating herself from the moment while they were all talking about boots) just now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness… seemed now for no special reason
to stay there like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. (*Lighthouse* 85)

This hovering, or as Woolf calls it “wholeness,” displays another iteration of what I call the “unfurling” of Mrs. Ramsay, in which she is within her own individual conscious experience while also maintaining a presence within the collective consciousness of the group. Mrs. Ramsay removes herself from the activity of the party to retreat into an inner world. This world is one in which Mrs. Ramsay can be completely alone with her thoughts, while also still being a part of the collective consciousness of the dinner party. She finds a sort of safety both within the activity of the dinner party and within herself. However, the inner experience of Mrs. Ramsay is far more complex than her outer reality and this experience seems to hint at something much greater than both Mrs. Ramsay and the collective experience she is a part of. Irene Simon describes the enlargement of Mrs. Ramsay’s inner experience as a “vantage point from which to view life... that emerges stark from the fluidity of things” (Simon 191). In other words, Mrs. Ramsay's escape into her inner experience is also a direct confrontation with the larger scale of reality. It is where she sees “a coherence in things, a stability” (*To the Lighthouse* 85). Even so, there also seems to be an instability in this inner experience. As Mrs. Ramsay herself says, “It could not last…” (Woolf 86). Woolf seems to be asserting that one cannot exist in this inner experience forever and must come back down from the suspension or furl the petals once more to have one foot firmly planted in the individual experience and the other within the collective experience.

In *Moments of Being* Woolf remarks of her writing,

> It is only by putting [the world] into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine;
that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art. (Moments of Being 72)

Woolf suggests that in writing she can identify the patterns that form the matrix of collective consciousness. Woolf’s preoccupation with collective consciousness not only hints at a unification of the whole of humanity’s collective experience but also illuminates a distinct and almost mystical communion of human experience and makes perhaps a grander allusion to the fabric of reality that is often shrouded in mystery. Woolf manages to hold up to the light the breadth of human connection, while also asserting that this mystical connection between conscious experiences is somehow more stable than the outside world. Paul Toliver Brown explains Woolf’s play with the thoughts of characters as a function of her curiosity about consciousness:

For Woolf, reality is not contained within a single perceptual consciousness, nor does it exist as a collection of multiple but rigidly divided perceptual consciousnesses. It is not an entirely boundless collective, nor does it exist as some form of transcendent actuality. The reality depicted in To the Lighthouse seems to be composed of multiple interpenetrating consciousnesses interconnected with one another and loosely housed within fluid subjectivities and objectivities that interactively create, as well as observe, their environment. (Brown 54)

Woolf utilizes the party scene to assert that the collective consciousness is made up of individual consciousnesses; thus, each individual is one piece of the whole portrait. One way to think about this is to think of the individual consciousnesses as solitary bits of color and beauty that, when put together, form a larger piece of artwork, or the collective consciousness. To use Brown’s imagery, the individual is both art and artist in the mosaic of experience and the fluidity that Brown describes is the fluid nature of all parts of the artwork coalescing into one painting. Thus, the party acts as a medium for Woolf to reveal the
fabric of reality by highlighting the way in which humans both individually and collectively experience an event.

For Woolf, it is the act of creation and understanding what lies behind the cotton wool that allows her to keep one foot within her own individual experience while also beginning to see the web of collective experience writ large. Much like Woolf, as Mrs. Ramsay comes back from her place above the intricate matrix of collective experience, she both dwells in inner experience by furling the petals of her mind and simultaneously participates in the collective consciousness by hovering above the group like a hawk. Like Woolf, Mrs. Ramsay can identify the art of the whole world, find peace within collective consciousness, and understand that the beauty created by the patterns and moments of human experience will “remain forever after” (56).

Even though characters in To the Lighthouse seem to act and experience as a collective, there is also an inner life, interiority, or personal consciousness that is explored with almost all of the characters in the novel. In this exploration we see a fine distinction between men and women: men and women exist as separate factions in a collective consciousness but still inhabit the same collective experience. Woolf meditates on the experiences of women and how women seem to share a unique collective experience with each other. In the remainder of this chapter, I take Woolf’s much researched and discussed theories of group consciousness and complicate critical theories about Woolf further by examining Woolf’s depictions of gender and the role it plays in conscious experience.

Mrs. Ramsay’s is the consciousness readers experience the most in To the Lighthouse. Though she is not the narrator of the novel and (arguably) not the main character, Woolf positions her as the character we see, hear from, and care about the most. A beauty and matron of all things domestic, Mrs. Ramsay is a hard character to pin down: in one moment she is attentive and bustling in the center of a social environment, but in the next we see her reduced to something dark and achingly human. Lily’s description of Mrs. Ramsay as a “wedge shaped core of darkness” is another way of describing Mrs. Ramsay’s furled
petals, or the sympathy that Mrs. Ramsay keeps within those petals. This core of darkness is the inner life, experience, or consciousness of Mrs. Ramsay.

From the very beginning of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay is positioned as the interlocutor and protector of her family, and she will remain in this position until her death. In many ways, Mrs. Ramsay is the feminine “ideal”; at least, that is how she herself and many others see her. What interests me about Mrs. Ramsay is not her domesticity or her beauty or her matchmaking tendencies. It is Mrs. Ramsay’s moments of being held suspended that make her such an interesting character. These moments, where her reality or experience is held in front of her for her perusal, reveal Woolf’s gendered theory of consciousness: that women are able to contribute to the collective consciousness because of the sympathy they bring to it, while men can only benefit from the collective and the sympathy that resides within it. The interiority of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe is not shared with others in the novel, so while both women are present and active within the collective experience, they are also able to sink into the “wedge shaped core” of inner experience that allows them to enlarge their experience of both themselves as individuals and of the collective world around them. Mrs. Ramsay experiences that “sinking” in her mind and Lily finds it within her art. Men, on the other hand, seem to wear their interiority on their sleeves, so that nothing remains hidden or interior, but rather all is fragile and open for anyone to view.

Take, for example, the first pages of the novel, which begins with Mrs. Ramsay talking to her son about the planned trip to the lighthouse:

“Yes, of course, if it’s fine to-morrow,” said Mrs. Ramsay. “But you’ll have to be up with the lark,” she added. To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail, within touch. (Lighthouse 1)
Woolf begins the novel by focusing on the interpersonal relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and her son. This moment is intimate, and the reader gets a sense of witnessing something private between mother and son. The scene continues with Woolf shifting the focus away from Mrs. Ramsay and James to just James alone as she writes,

he belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests. (Lighthouse 1)

Woolf positions James’ experience of being a child as fundamentally separate from Mrs. Ramsay’s experience of being an adult. Woolf also asserts that James is part of a “great clan,” which makes him both part of a collective consciousness and yet still somehow separate from his mother’s experience. James, because he is a child, has the ability to hold a moment in time transfixed.

James’ experience is very much like Mrs. Ramsay’s own experience in the dinner scene: “[H]er eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling” (Lighthouse 99). Like James “transfix[ing] the moment” of his future joy, Mrs. Ramsay also knows what it means to hold a moment suspended. However, Mrs. Ramsay seems to be aware of the moment; ergo, she is able to analyze the experience of consciousness. James, on the other hand, seems to be unaware of the stasis; the moment is transitory for him. The difference here between Mrs. Ramsay and James is that Mrs. Ramsay can take the moment and analyze it, while James is only focused on what lies ahead and not the moment in front of him.
Despite their similar experiences of transfixable moments, Woolf is hinting at a fundamental difference between Mrs. Ramsay and her son. Woolf asserts that there is a difference between adult and child, but even further suggests that the conscious experience of the women in the novel differs from that of the men. This is because of women’s ability to have an inner experience that isn’t shared with the collective but is still a part of the collective by virtue of the women’s having to give sympathy to others. We can see this idea unfurl in this scene between Mrs. Ramsay, her son James, and Mr. Ramsay:

Mrs. Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and, half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. (*Lighthouse* 61-62)

In this scene, Mrs. Ramsay opens up her interiority and allows Mr. Ramsay a glimpse of what her inner experience is like. It is his demanding nature that forces her to expose herself, or to produce “a column of spray.” When the act is finished, she is left fragile and folds her petals once more. Thus, the inner life of Mrs. Ramsay is shrouded once more from view and Mr. Ramsay has satiated his desire. The relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and her husband upsets Mrs. Ramsay because it implies that Mr. Ramsay needs her more than she needs him. It also upsets the schema of Mrs. Ramsay’s conscious experience; her interiority has been breached and it shifts the balance of power in her favor.

Throughout the novel, Woolf positions the experiences of men as linear, or following a clear trajectory. We see this in the way Woolf presents James’s life as open and rife with future possibility, and his inability to focus on the present moment. It is the same thing we see in the description of Mr. Ramsay’s philosophical mind, which functions as a masculine mind and thus a masculine conscious
experience: “It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly, and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q” (Lighthouse 30). Mr. Ramsay, so concerned with syllogism, has based his whole philosophy of intelligence and what it means to “be” on the letters of the alphabet: if Q is the furthest that a mind can reach, and Mr. Ramsay reaches Q, then Mr. Ramsay will be one of the greatest thinkers to live. The kind of thinking that Mr. Ramsay engages in is artificial and not the same thinking that Mrs. Ramsay engages in; hers is abstract in nature.

Mr. Ramsay’s linear thinking stems from a discomfort with himself as both a man and a scholar. The fault in Mr. Ramsay is his failure to realize that life is not linear, human experience is not linear, and as a result time itself is not linear. Thus Mr. Ramsay, with all of his thinking and posturing, fails to grasp the point of conscious being and thinking entirely, whereas Mrs. Ramsay in her darkness, femininity, and moments of interiority does. This allows Mrs. Ramsay to not simply exist in her own conscious experience, but also to sympathize with and view experiences other than her own.

It is Mrs. Ramsay’s comfort and solace within her own inner experience that draws Mr. Ramsay (and other men) to her like moths to a flame. Frank Baldanza attempts to parse the psyche of Mr. Ramsay, who imagines all thought can be arranged, like the alphabet, from A to Z; since he has only reached Q, all his anxieties center on whether anyone can span the whole range. If it is possible, will he ever do it?... He sees himself, in a lyrical self-projection, as the leader of a lost expedition making a heroic last stand. All this self-pitying dramatization of his plight puts him into a state of anxiety which can only be assuaged by feminine pity, that of Mrs. Ramsay in the first section of the book, and of Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Beckwith in the third. (Baldanza)
As Baldanza notes, Mr. Ramsay’s anxiety can only be quelled by feminine pity. Thus, the only thing that will restore Mr. Ramsay is Mrs. Ramsay’s willing feminine empathy in the first half of the novel and Lily’s unwilling sympathy in the last:

He must have sympathy. He must be assured that he too lived in the heart of life; was needed; not here only, but all over the world. Flashing her needles, confident, upright, [Mrs. Ramsay] created a drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow; bade him take his ease there, go in and out, enjoy himself. (Lighthouse 27)

Woolf positions Mr. Ramsay as incapable of functioning without Mrs. Ramsay, and further suggests that this supposedly synergistic relationship may actually be one-sided. Mr. Ramsay needs something in this scene but does not directly express or perhaps even know that he needs it. He comes limping and mauled by life or the elusive letter “Q,” begging to have his wounds licked but too proud to ask. Mr. Ramsay, the novel implies, is not even conscious of this desire or need for sympathy, but rather there is something deep within him that feels this desire.

In this scene, Woolf creates a sort of unconscious dynamic between husband and wife and man and woman. Mr. Ramsay comes with his desires and Mrs. Ramsay fulfills them, while receiving nothing in return. This transaction is completed in silence and by the end of it we understand that this synergistic relationship may be parasitic, as Mr. Ramsay is violently taking what he needs from Mrs. Ramsay, but offers nothing in return:

Immediately, Mrs. Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself, so that she had only strength enough to move her finger, in exquisite abandonment to exhaustion, across the page of Grimm’s fairy story, while there throbbed through her, like the pulse in a spring which has expanded to its full width and now gently ceases to beat, the rapture of successful creation. (Lighthouse 34)
After Mrs. Ramsay’s death, Mr. Ramsay tries to extract this same sympathy from Lily Briscoe. But Lily is no Mrs. Ramsay, and she cannot give Mr. Ramsay the sympathy he needs:

“What beautiful boots!” she exclaimed. She was ashamed of herself. To praise his boots when he asked her to solace his soul; when he had shown her his bleeding hands, his lacerated heart, and asked her to pity them, then to say, cheerfully, “Ah, but what beautiful boots you wear!” (Lighthouse 115)

Perhaps this is because she does not want to, because what Mr. Ramsay really wants or needs is empathy and Lily is only capable of feeling sorry for him, not understanding him. She had no trouble empathizing with Mrs. Ramsay, however. Thus, in To the Lighthouse, women form a sort of clan of feminine experience in which they are able to understand and empathize with each other but are often forced to understand and sympathize with the opposite sex. In short, Woolf positions women as a separate faction in the collective whole. They are able to integrate into the collective consciousness due to their sympathetic dispositions, while men are only capable of benefiting from the collective and the sympathy that resides within it.

In her article “Sexual Imagery in To the Lighthouse,” Annis Pratt discusses the difference between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily in their sympathetic roles: “Whereas Mrs. Ramsay exhausts herself in pouring out sympathy, Lily demurs—her question about Mr. Ramsay’s boots does not give him the sympathy he demands, and he draws back into himself, walking off in solitude. Whereas Mrs. Ramsay turned to the lighthouse, Lily turns to her brush, a small but parallel vehicle for her creative endeavors” (Pratt 429). Once again, nothing is said directly in the text about Mr. Ramsay’s demand for Lily’s sympathy and her inability to give it. To say it explicitly would miss the point entirely. What Woolf does is show the unconscious dynamic that exists between the men and women in this novel as well as the divergent desires of men and women. Mrs. Ramsay and Lily turn toward a stable existence (the lighthouse) and a transitory
creative existence (Lily’s painting). They are capable of fulfilling their own needs. James and Mr. Ramsay act in direct opposition to this notion by needing emotional support from others, taking from the collective whole. James’s need is for his mother’s and then eventually his father’s attention while Mr. Ramsay’s need is for feminine sympathy. The demand for and giving of sympathy between men and women, mother and child, wife and husband is a core facet of the commentary about gendered consciousness that Woolf presents in this novel. Woolf allows her readers to see characters’ inner thoughts, desires, dreams, and interior moments of being and, by extension, their conscious experience.

_To the Lighthouse_ is a novel about the ways in which human beings both belong to themselves or their own singular identity and are simultaneously also a part of a larger gendered collective consciousness. Virginia Woolf enacts her theory of conscious experience by creating characters who are both deeply interior and also inextricably connected with the organismic group of experiences around them. What Woolf enacts in the novel is the web or fabric of reality that so haunted her earlier essays and diaries and that is composed of conscious experience and the “locked up” secrets that individuals hold within themselves. In _To the Lighthouse_ and in her other novels as well, Woolf presents the mind writ large on the page and goes beyond describing a sort of literary conscious experience, but rather weaves a beautiful and intricate web of conscious experience in which readers can recognize their own lived experience. Woolf also enacts a theory of a gendered consciousness, one in which men and women experience differently, and depicts how that difference functions in the larger collective experience. Woolf expands on these theories and ideas about conscious experience in her other novels _The Waves_ and _Mrs. Dalloway_, and in my next two chapters I will expound on the ways in which Woolf attempts to get at the heart of experience in those novels in order to weave the fabric of conscious reality.
Chapter 2: *The Waves* and the Phases of Conscious Experience

Virginia Woolf begins her fifth novel *To the Lighthouse* with a young James Ramsay playing on the floor while his mother watches him and thinks about his membership in “that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand” (*Lighthouse* 7). In addition to the gendering of consciousness that Woolf depicts in *To the Lighthouse*, there seems to be a difference for her between the experience of children, which is wondrous and novel, and the experience of adults, which is often dull and predictable. James is part of a group that experiences life the same way that he does, while Mrs. Ramsay is outside of that wondrous and awe-filled collective identity which is a hallmark of childhood. Virginia Woolf explored this childlike wonder and the ability to find it in experience four years after *To the Lighthouse* in her novel *The Waves*. In *The Waves*, Woolf changes perspective to focus the narration not through the eyes of an adult, but through the eyes of children who, as we are guided through the novel, eventually become adults. In this way, Woolf grants her readers a perspective that she had not granted in *To the Lighthouse*. This perspective illuminates the development of conscious reality from childhood to adulthood and grants readers an intimate look at the birth of both an individual and collective consciousness.

*The Waves*, Virginia Woolf’s seventh novel and perhaps her most experimental, calls attention to the innate beauty and terror of human consciousness and the waves that experience causes both in outer reality and the inner reality of our individual experiences. *The Waves* follows the lives and consciousnesses of six characters (and a seventh who has no dialogue). Readers are guided through the lives of seven friends from early childhood to late adulthood: Jinny, Rhoda, Susan, Bernard, Louis, Neville, and Percival. The novel provides an in-depth enactment of the way human beings relate to one another and experience both themselves and the world around them as they grow. This experience is seen in the way these seven characters interact with each other as a unit, as well as in their conscious experiences as individuals as they go through their lives. In each paragraph Woolf changes the point of
view among the six characters in the form of soliloquies and grants her readers what can only be described as an intimate look at the consciousnesses of these characters. She then enlarges her focus to comment on the characters’ coming-of-age and what that coming-of-age says about human experience, human mortality, and how humans age and grow both within the collective consciousness of humanity and within their own individual experience. I argue that by looking at the way Woolf changes the point of view among the six characters and the dilemmas they face during their coming-of-age, we can see that she opposes two different types of coming-of-age stories—Bernard versus Percival. She does this to show that there is no ideal consciousness. Woolf asserts that characters must learn to accept their mortality in order to have a harmonious relationship with the world and that the nature of our experience is both to be shared and also to be experienced alone, which is what we learn through Bernard by the end of the novel. I also argue that Woolf articulates a separation between men and women when it comes to their conscious experience. She artfully shows, in the bildungsroman style, how men and women are separated into two different kinds of collective experience that only becomes evident as they age. In this way, Woolf is expanding on her ideas of conscious collectivity when it comes to the experiences of both men and women.

*The Waves* situates its seven characters and the group they are a part of in a way that both expresses a singular consciousness and illuminates Woolf’s theory of a collective consciousness that is shared between human beings or, more specifically, among these seven human beings. Woolf uses the bildungsroman genre to depict what it means to be born an individual who is inevitably part of a collective and to explore how life’s progression alters the relationship between individual and collective. Even further, Woolf uses Bernard’s character to kill the notion of an ideal conscious experience (Percival) and demonstrates how death and the acceptance of our own mortality affects the relationship between the conscious individual self and the world beyond the self.
In 1974 Jerome Hamilton Buckley defined the bildungsroman as a novel that displays all but two or three of a set list of characteristics, among them “childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (18). The use of the bildungsroman genre helps to illuminate Virginia Woolf’s theory of consciousness as it forces the text and the reader to start from the beginning, knowing as little as the main characters themselves do, and to conclude the narrative older, wiser, and more enlightened. Woolf cleverly structures The Waves as the coming-of-age of 7 young adults and allows her readers to experience that coming-of-age by the end of the novel. I argue that in The Waves, Virginia Woolf includes almost all of Buckley’s bildungsroman characteristics while also using the conventions of the genre to assert that human consciousness develops and evolves over the span of a lifetime; through the opposition of two types of characters, Bernard and Percival, she enacts the beauty and terror of collective consciousness, and highlights the impermanent nature of existence.

The Waves is regarded as Virginia Woolf’s most experimental work and the one that best captures her fascination with what is at the heart of things. Scholars who tackle the questions posed in The Waves have brought a wide range of perspectives to it to understand its complexities. Rachel Crossland, for example, centers her argument about The Waves around twentieth-century developments in physics and discusses how writers such as Woolf employ the theory of relativity as well as other theorems in physics in their writing. Jack Stewart, in his article "Spatial Form and Color in the Waves" focuses his analysis of the novel on the use of color and Woolf’s desire to see form in her spatial perspective, asserting that Woolf, in an effort to unweave what she called the fabric of reality, wrote a novel that attempted to balance consciousness with nature and, through this balance, to ultimately connect six different iterations of the self to form one stable self (Spatial 88). Stewart has argued elsewhere that in The Waves Woolf attempts to dissolve the ego limits of the “I” in an “oceanic feeling” of oneness with other selves (Stewart 437).
My own discussion of *The Waves* builds on the work of these and other scholars who are particularly concerned with the novel’s depiction of conscious experience. Igor Webb echoes Stewart’s sentiment about selfhood in the novel and argues for a reading that takes note of Woolf’s preoccupation with the senses, positioning Bernard as a modified Lily Briscoe. Unlike Lily, Bernard is no longer concerned with art and how it may define him but rather attempts to transcend the limits of the self in relation to art. Webb concludes that by the end of *The Waves*, Bernard, and ultimately Virginia Woolf herself, come to the realization that there is no such thing as a stable self. What Woolf discovers in *The Waves* is “the ego as a barrier raised between the person and his experience, and the extension of the ego becomes not an extinction of the soul in God” (Webb 573). Like Webb, I am preoccupied with Woolf’s exploration of consciousness. Unlike Webb, however, I focus my argument, not on the configuration of a stable self, but rather on the idea of a collection of consciousnesses which attempts to operate simultaneously, while also seeking to individuate outside of the collective.

Suzette Henke argues for a reading of *The Waves* that acknowledges the difference between self and other. “The entire novel,” Henke states, “is delicately balanced between nature and personal consciousness, self and other. The self must continually define itself through the instrument of language, which re-creates the world in a panoply of symbols that anchor the ego in its human environment” (Henke 462). Henke goes on to describe the novel’s characters as making a journey of “heroic self-creation” (462). Henke’s argument focuses on Bernard and his personal growth throughout the novel. It is here that Henke touches on the categorization of the novel as a bildungsroman that I also argue for; we see the coming-of-age narrative enacted through Bernard, who begins the novel juvenile and unaware and ends the novel enlightened by his journey. My analysis of Bernard’s role in the novel echoes Henke’s, as I argue for a reading of Bernard that positions him as the center of Woolf’s coming-of-age narrative. It is through Bernard that we understand Woolf’s fascination with the self and the experience of the self. Susanna Rich also explores Bernard’s role in the novel, drawing on the writings of Lucretius and arguing
for a reading of *The Waves* that grapples with Woolf’s preoccupation with transformative death and how she uses Bernard to articulate that fascination. Rich asserts that the characters in the novel represent atoms, each unique, but that together they form a unit of matter that matters—or, in other words, a collective consciousness.

Following Rich’s assertions about a unit that matters, Susan Gorsky also focuses on the idea of a collective consciousness, or what she calls a “cosmic communication,” in *The Waves*. Gorsky asserts that Woolf attempts to “define adequately and accurately the complex ‘modern’ view of human nature…. Individuals are replaced by characters who are at once individual, representative, and a unity, and for whom traditional interaction is supplemented by what will here be called cosmic communication—the internalization of another’s unexpressed thoughts and experiences” (Gorsky 450). For Gorsky, experience is transposed in the novel with communication. Her focus is on how the seven characters of the novel communicate with one another and how that communication enriches their characterization. I agree with Gorsky’s analysis but revise it to focus not on how the characters communicate within their collective experience, but rather how these characters are entangled in a cosmic web of experience.

Woolf’s ability to jump from one character’s mind to another is perhaps her strongest enactment of consciousness in her novels. To this end, Robert Richardson focuses his analysis on how Woolf’s constantly shifting point of view helps enrich the reader’s understanding of both the characters and what Woolf is trying to say about conscious experience. Robertson argues that Woolf does not present an objective reality in *The Waves*, but rather shows reality as it is experienced by her characters. Thus “[w]hat one sees of the objective world in *The Waves* one sees athwart the consciousness of the characters as they reveal themselves in the monologues. No author intrudes explicitly to qualify or explain any of the characters’ speeches, although a central intelligence is implicit in the arrangement of the monologues themselves. One knows, simply, that Woolf is trying to render through the monologues the quality of her characters’ experience” (Richardson 698). I agree with Richardson’s assertion about the role of
characterization in the novel: Woolf uses these six characters to articulate her own thoughts and philosophies on the nature of experience and creates these characters to enact both conscious individual experience and collective experience. As I will show, she achieves this by creating a narrative that highlights the growth of these characters, from their simple beginnings to their enlightened ends.

_The Waves_ introduces its main characters without much attention to plot, setting, or even what the characters look like. Instead, Woolf forces the reader to experience raw sensations and images in the same way her characters consciously experience them. The novel begins very simply with rudimentary language and syntax as the characters utter very short sentences that merely describe the world around them. These phrases are quick and do not offer any insight into the characters’ psyches. Thus, the characters are blank slates on which experience can begin to write itself out. _The Waves_ begins with the voice of Bernard who will be, very loosely, the main character of the novel, and then introduces other characters’ observations:

“I see a ring,’ said Bernard, ‘hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light. I see a slab of pale yellow spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.’ ‘I hear a sound,’ said Rhoda, ‘cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.’ ‘I see a globe,’ said Neville, ‘hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.’ ‘I see a crimson tassel,’ said Jinny, ‘twisted with golden threads.’ ‘I hear something,’ said Louis. ‘A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.’ (The Waves 6)

Woolf uses these utterances to paint a picture of the scene while also calling attention to the way the characters themselves are experiencing their surroundings. Here we can see Woolf enacting William James’ notion of ‘pure experience’ in which the characters are in “the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories… a that which is not yet any definite what, tho’ ready to be all sorts of whats…” (James 46). Thus, what the characters are experiencing, as James would put it, “purely,” is the contents of consciousness itself. The characters are
experiencing purely, that is, they are experiencing the world around them without the attachments of a self. Through the experiences of these characters, we are granted a fractured view of the scene and not a full picture. Woolf is setting the stage, not through an omnipresent narrator’s eyes, but rather through the eyes of six different characters who are all perceiving the scene differently. The sparse descriptions of the things around the characters and their simplistic reactions to these things are indicative of childishness or perhaps innocence. These characters are young, and though Woolf doesn’t explicitly say they are young, the way these characters perceive the world around them hints at a certain youthfulness or childlike wonder. It is not until a little later in the novel that we see these - now older - characters begin to develop individual personalities or consciousnesses within the collective experience of the group. Readers thus watch the children go from consciousnesses who experience purely, that is without individual attachments to their perceived world, to members of a stabilizing collective consciousness.

The kiss scene in The Waves captures the beginnings of sexually mature adolescence while also transitioning both the text and the characters themselves into a new space that is removed from the rudimentary language of their childhood and into a more emotionally developed and linguistically mature consciousness. This scene is crucial not just for Louis, who is kissed, but also for the development and pace of the rest of the novel. Louis and Jinny are confronted with external consciousnesses which take the shape of the other characters witnessing and reacting to what transpired between them. In one second they are individual bubbles of experience and in the very next second they are forced to deal with the fact that there are other bubbles of experience beyond their own. Woolf is able to process, in a mere few lines, the fracturing and cohesion of our own closed-circuit conscious identity into one that has to take in and process external consciousnesses. The scene shows us the very moment that individuals become conscious of other conscious identities and the implications that consciousness has.

The scene involves a rite of passage for the six characters, as they are all in some way transformed by the experience of the kiss even though the event does not affect all of them directly. The
scene begins with Louis’s consciousness: “Now an eye-beam is slid through the chink. Its beam strikes me. I am a boy in a grey flannel suit. She has found me. I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered” (The Waves 9). What has been shattered for Louis is the innocence and wonder of the previous scenes, in which the children had simply experienced the world around them and not the complexities of human interaction. Louis is taken away from the simplicity of noticing nature and is born into something foreign. As a result, Louis becomes aware not only of his external environment, but also of his internal environment. He must both recognize and parse his physical and emotional space. The scene continues with Jinny’s experience:

I ran past Susan, past Rhoda, and Neville and Bernard in the tool-house talking. I cried as I ran, faster and faster. What moved the leaves? What moves my heart, my legs? And I dashed in here, seeing you green as a bush, like a branch, very still, Louis, with your eyes fixed. Is he dead? I thought and I kissed you with my heart jumping under my pink frock like the leaves, which go on moving, though there is nothing to move them. (The Waves 9)

For Jinny, this moment is a departure from the beauty of the crimson tassel. She must confront not only her own sexuality in this scene, but also the reaction that her sexuality invokes. She questions both external nature and the nature of her own experience as a sexual being. Both Jinny and Louis are confronted with their own conscious identity: “what moves my heart, my legs”, “She has found me…. She has kissed me. All is shattered” (9).

Kenneth Moon explains the kiss scene as a coming-of-age moment between two sexual bodies that is entangled with the natural imagery presented in the opening scenes:

Jinny, too, identifies foliage with vital forces. Before assaulting Louis, she had been startled by a commotion amongst the green leaves, one which had no apparent cause. This seems to prefigure something of the spontaneous nature of the passionate impulse within
her which she proceeds to indulge upon Louis, because whatever thus agitated the leaves, Jinny decides, is what propels her heart and legs too. So she dashes to Louis. She finds him ‘green as a bush’ and, as was suggested earlier in his own monologue, self-focused: ‘very still’ with ‘eyes fixed.’ Jinny seems to discover an element of erotic consciousness in him, which in turn agitates her. Her heart jumps—significantly, ‘like the leaves, which go on moving though there is nothing to move them.’ (Moon 323)

Moon asserts that there is an almost mystical quality about the kiss between Jinny and Louis, one that is influenced by nature. I agree with Moon’s assertion, as this scene does indicate a rite of passage into a more sexually mature adolescence. However, this scene is not merely about Jinny and Louis being influenced by the nature (sexual or otherwise) that surrounds them, but rather shows how they are influenced by the nature of their own conscious experience and are acting in response to it. In the opening lines of the novel, Jinny expresses some affinity with heat and passion with her imagery of the crimson tassel twisted with gold threads, which may suggest fire. We can think of Jinny’s opening observations as the catalyst for the events that take place. Thus, what happens between her and Louis is not emblematic of the mystic and erotic force of nature, as Moon asserts, but is rather an embrace of innate conscious identity.

The kiss serves as the jumping-off point for the novel and functions as the birth of the conscious identities of all of the characters. I use the word “birth” to assert that Woolf is formulating a coming-of-age narrative, where the birth of conscious identity begins with the advent of the kiss. Steve Pinkerton seeks to understand the transformation that comes from the kiss between Jinny and Louis in his article “Linguistic and Erotic Innocence in Virginia Woolf’s The Waves.” He writes that the kiss “transforms the text’s narrative form as well as the characters themselves, and it marks [the characters] as occupying a liminal position between, on one hand, an infantile relation to language and identity and, on the other, an inevitable initiation into linguistic aptitude and erotic self-knowledge” (Pinkerton 75). Pinkerton marks this scene as the catalyst to conscious adulthood and identity for these characters. I
likewise situate the kiss as the birth of the novel’s collective consciousness: the kiss scene catalyzes the rest of the novel as these characters mature further into their conscious and collective identity. What Woolf establishes in these first few pages is the six identities of these characters and the relationship they have with themselves and with each other. Their “infantile relation to language” and a collective identity will only continue to change and become further complicated as the novel progresses.

The graduation portion of the novel marks not only a departure from adolescent education and thus childhood but also a dismantling of the collective identity that the six characters have had up until this point. It is here that we see the coming-of-age narrative appear once more. The collective consciousness of adolescence is now tested in adulthood, where one is expected to individualize. At this point, a palpable feeling of discomfort and anxiety enters the characters’ monologues as there is a building fear of being forced away from each other and made to experience the world as individuals. Up until this point, the children have experienced life as a collective, and while Woolf presents a collage of personal identity from the very beginning of the novel, the characters are still acting upon the world as one collective conscious organism. This is the case until the characters are sent off to their respective boarding schools and forced to separate. What is interesting about the graduation scene is how interested the boys of the group seem to be in departing and becoming men of scholarship and making their way in the world, while the women seem to be more focused on who they will become as individuals. This harkens back to my discussion of To the Lighthouse and the separation between genders in terms of conscious identity.

In Woolf’s time, it was normal for young men and women to attend separate schools, and it is in the graduation scene that we see the characters truly break off and begin to embrace different gendered experiences. It is here that we see the group splinter off into different collective consciousnesses. To be sure, the characters are still experiencing within the collective, but they begin to associate with other collective identities; in this case it is a gendered collective identity. Thus, the men go one way, and the
women go another. In this part of the novel, the stories of Bernard, Louis, and Neville seem to take center stage, while the stories of Jinny, Susan, and Rhoda fade into the background.\(^3\) The focus on the masculine coming-of-age is a characteristic trait of what Charlotte Goodman has called the “Male-Female Double Bildungsroman.” Goodman states that,

> Normally linear in design, the typical male Bildungsroman begins in childhood and progresses toward the moment when the mature adult, having cast off the restraints of his/her earlier life, faces the future. However, the design of the male-female double Bildungsroman is circular; tripartite in structure, it describes the shared childhood experience of a male and a female protagonist who inhabit a place somewhat reminiscent of a prelapsarian mythic garden world where the male and female once existed as equals; then such novels dramatize the separation of the male and the female character in adolescence and young adulthood as the male, like the hero of the typical male Bildungsroman, journeys forth to seek his fortune, while the female is left behind; and finally, the novels conclude with a reunion of the male and the female protagonist. (30-31)

Though Goodman’s article discusses works like *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot and *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, her analysis rings true for *The Waves* as well.\(^4\) In the graduation scene the women of the novel seem to be pondering their lives as women and what role they will play in that conscious experience. Susan seeks a life that involves unraveling her tight ball of agony and hints at the act of

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\(^3\) Other scholars assert that the female stories take on a different narrative arc than the male characters. One such scholar, Chloe Taylor, suggests that Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda exemplify Kristevas themes of womanhood. She writes, “A more interesting parallel, I will argue, can be made between the three female characters of *The Waves* and the three positions of identification or negotiation that women may take in relation to the semiotic and the symbolic as described by Kristeva…. Susan represents the woman who fully identifies with the mother and rejects language, or the paternal, while Jinny represents the phallic woman who fully assimilates herself into the symbolic, rejecting the maternal and embracing the role defined for her within patriarchy. Finally, Rhoda represents the woman who is suspended in between, but who, like the three women writers of revolutionary language whom Kristeva mentions, eventually teeters on the side of the mother, goes mad, and embraces death” (Taylor 61-62).

\(^4\) If we break Goodman’s analysis down, we can see each aspect of her argument exemplified in the narrative of *The Waves*. Goodman asserts that the male-female double bildungsroman features a childhood in an edenic setting, which we see at the very beginning of the novel, as in the lines “The light struck upon the trees in the garden, making one leaf transparent and then another. One bird chirped high up; there was a pause; another chirped lower down… [T]he birds sang their blank melody outside” (*The Waves* 6). We see the children interacting as equals with their singular conscious experiences coalescing to form the landscape they inhabit. Goodman then asserts that the male and female coming-of-age narratives break off, which I argue is seen in the graduation scene.
creation: “I do not want people, when I come in, to look up with admiration. I want to give, to be given, and solitude in which to unfold my possessions” (The Waves 39). On the other side of the spectrum there is Jinny, who seems to want a life full of movement and heat, of eyes and lovers, and endless days and endless possibility: “But I shall not let myself be attached to one person only. I do not want to be fixed, to be pinioned. I tremble, I quiver…. I have not yet broken into my hoard. This is the beginning” (The Waves 40). Finally, there is Rhoda, who seems to operate outside of convention and hovers in the space between conscious experience and something closer to the “fabric of reality” that so preoccupied Woolf. For Rhoda, the flow of being is unstable and her conscious experience exemplifies that instability or disunity, as we see later in the novel: “There is some check in the flow of my being; a deep stream presses some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some knot in the centre resists” (The Waves 41). What rings true for the women in the novel is a separation into a collective consciousness of their own, one in which they are forced to confront their personhood. The women of the novel, unlike the men, collectively ask who they desire to be rather than what they will impart to the world. Thus, the group’s collective consciousness fractures between the experience of men and the experience of women but will reunite as the novel progresses.

Meanwhile, at graduation the men of the story seem to operate with a conscious experience that is entirely separate from the women of the novel, one which asks them what they will contribute to the world and human progress. Louis is preoccupied with the great thumping beast of human existence, Bernard worries over obscurity and impermanence, and Neville wants to transform a world of mess and disorder into one that is like the literature he reads and the words he reveres so much. The men, much like Mr. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse, are concerned with what they can impart to the world. They too wonder if they will ever reach “Q.” To this end, Woolf has effectively separated the six characters into two different camps of collective experience. The women focus on their lives as women and who they will be as singular conscious identities, while the men focus on the world beyond conscious experience. In many ways, it does seem like the women of the novel are left behind while the men go off to seek their fortune,
as Goodman suggests. I argue that Woolf structures the novel this way to highlight the difference between these gendered conscious experiences as well as the way these experiences develop as the characters age. She utilizes the typical bildungsroman narrative structure to assert that men and women embark on different conscious journeys and thus belong to different collective experiences. It is not until the end of the novel that we see the collective experiences of men and women cohere once again.

The coalescence of male and female experience into one collective occurs with the experience of death. Percival’s death comes at almost exactly the halfway point of the novel, conveniently separating the book into two parts, the bliss before his death and the trauma after it. Before this point the concept of death had been examined only once, at the very beginning of the novel, by Neville: “He was found with his throat cut. The apple-tree leaves became fixed in the sky; the moon glared; I was unable to lift my foot up the stair. He was found in the gutter…. I shall call this stricture, this rigidity, death among the apple trees” (17). We see how profoundly Neville was impacted by this confrontation with death, though it was a death that was unseen by him and had no personal relation to him. Neville continues, saying, “But we are doomed, all of us, by the apple trees, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass” (18). In this instance, Neville seems to be making a comment about how one cannot escape death. Neville thus becomes conscious of the inevitability of both his own death and everyone else’s.

Percival represents an important figure and symbol in the novel even though, unlike the other six characters, we never hear from Percival—we only hear about him. His absence from the text means that he is readily idealized. Percival is never spoken about in a negative light and instead represents all that is good and heroic in the world. To the characters in the novel, Percival represents a life worth living and thus is situated as the stabilizing force for all of the characters. Woolf situates Percival as the anchor of the group. While the other six characters struggle to understand their conscious experience or their identity as they go through life, Percival seems to always be comfortable in his existence and his conscious experience, which makes him appear enlightened, above reality, and unattainable.
In the first half of the novel, there is a healthy sort of optimism exhibited by all of the characters. However, after Percival dies and the characters are confronted with not only a very personal death but also the awareness of their own inevitable deaths, the novel takes on a darker tone. What is lost in the death of Percival is not only a friend but also a sort of god, one they thought could lead the soul into a more enlightened existence. In short, Percival represents an ideal—one that Woolf subverts by the end of the novel. Qiuxa Li, in her article “The Absent Presence: A Study of Percival in The Waves,” writes that,

The six monologists all thought Percival had a stable self, so they all regarded him as their ideal self….. He had the typical characteristics of a traditional British young man. He loved sports; he had patriotism and heroism; he was willing to go to India to serve his country. His social identity is stable. In the novel his silence is a sharp contrast with the continuous monologues of the other six, which seems to suggest that he is not annoyed by his identity. His stable self was demonstrated in his ability to bring order and harmony to the group. (Li 78)

Li asserts that the other six characters are annoyed with themselves and their identity. However, I interpret this annoyance as a characteristic searching for oneself that comes with any coming-of-age tale. This annoyance seems to me to be insecurity with how one relates to and with the world at large. Though we never get an inner look at Percival’s consciousness as we do with the other characters, it is primarily what Woolf offers in Percival that draws the other six characters in. Percival is a model for a stable self, or an identity that seems to be at peace with its conscious experience and the collective experience of the world around it. Percival’s godly presence acts as a lighthouse for the rest of the characters. However, this stability is not realistic. Human nature is complex and chaotic, and Percival’s stable conscious experience is unattainable, which is why his death is necessary: Woolf kills the ideal and replaces it with the reality of impermanence. Woolf kills Percival in order to force the remaining six characters to understand their
experience without the guidance of the unattainable ideal. The characters must now develop further into their conscious identities in light of the impermanence of existence.

To the other six characters, Percival represents a model of stable existence, one where the inner turmoil of conscious experience is at rest. We can see this in the way the characters regard Percival. Here is Neville: “My tree flowers. My heart rises. All impression is relieved. All impediment is removed. The reign of chaos is over. He has imposed order” (*The Waves* 88). This is Bernard: “He rides on; the multitude cluster round him. Regarding him as if he were—what indeed he is—a God” (*The Waves* 107). When Percival leaves for India, the characters feel for the first time what it is like to live without that stable self and their experience as a collectively conscious unit becomes fraught. The character who feels Percival’s departure to India most acutely is Neville: “Now the agony begins; now the horror has seized me with its fangs…. Now the cab comes; now Percival goes. What can we do to keep him? How bridge the distance between us? How fan the fire so that it blazes forever? How signal to all time to come that we, who stand in the street, in the lamplight, loved Percival? Now Percival is gone” (*The Waves* 105). Neville’s sentence structure and language harkens back to the beginning of the book, where individual consciousness was just becoming stable, but instead of progressing forward into conscious identity, the characters seem to be regressing. Neville and the other characters are lost without Percival and become the childlike entities we were introduced to at the beginning of the book. They are free consciousnesses without a tether to attach them to a collective and thus are lost. There is a similar sort of anchoring or attachment in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs. Ramsay acts as the stabilizing force or consciousness for everyone around her. However, in *To the Lighthouse* the reader was offered some insight into Mrs. Ramsay’s inner life and consciousness.

When Percival dies, the group and the novel as a whole are thrust into a world in which a model for perfect human existence no longer exists. This absence is felt by all of the characters and significantly alters the way some of their stories conclude. Percival acted as an anchor for the group and had a
profound influence on these characters, and it is also clear that the trajectory and tone of the novel take a turn after his death. Neville is left aimless and distraught and seems to relive the death he witnessed as a child: “There stands the tree which I cannot pass” (*The Waves* 107). Percival’s death represents an obstacle he cannot get through. It is both the death of personal love and his own confrontation with mortality that seems to stall him. Rhoda is also confronted with the obstacle of Percival’s death, saying, “There is a puddle, and I cannot cross it…. All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors forever” (*The Waves* 113). Once again, there is a sense of detachment in the absence of Percival. In Rhoda, an already mentally unstable character, there is a lack of identity or of conscious understanding. Percival’s death operates paradoxically as not just an obstacle, but also an alternative or way out of her fraught consciousness, an escape from the pain of existence and conscious experience. Rhoda, from the beginning of the novel, has struggled with her experience. She has always been lost to the world of symbols and broken images; the advent of Percival’s death simply ushers her further into the world she has made in her mind: “Look now at what Percival has given me…. Percival, by his death, has made me this present” (*The Waves* 113-114). What Rhoda comes to understand, by virtue of Percival’s death, is that there is a certain kind of freedom in death. There is freedom from the daily turmoil of experience and a way not just around the puddle but also through it. Rhoda, who has feared any kind of intimate experience, finds intimacy with death. It is with this knowledge that Rhoda takes her life at the end of the section and gives her final offering to Percival, her muse, for a way out. In Percival’s death, the characters are forced to grapple with their own mortality and, in essence, are forced to *come of age* and confront the fact of their own impermanent existence as both a collective consciousness and as individuals.

In *The Waves* Percival’s interiority is never exposed to the reader; Percival is idyllic and represents the standard heroic character, one who is all action and physicality but has no real depth in the
end. Lisa Marie Lucenti describes Percival in her article “Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*: To Defer that Appalling Moment,” writing,

> Where self-congruence is constantly slipping away, we try to stop the flow by imagining an original center—Percival is that phantom. He is not simply an “absent center” but the blank mirror through which each character tries to erase his or her own absence. His death is, then, so completely alien because it starkly fails to represent or mean anything.… This death makes the characters confront the facelessness that was always waiting, simply deferred. (Lucenti 92)

Lucenti describes the inevitability of the characters having to ultimately face their individual and collective conscious identity. I argue that Percival acts as the center consciousness around which all the other six consciousnesses revolve. When that center (Percival) is absent, it sends the other six individual consciousnesses reeling. In Percival’s absence the group experience is fundamentally altered; this is where we see the characters finally mature into their own individual experiences and drift away from the group, following the bildungsroman’s narrative arc, in which the characters are forced to mature, learn from their experiences, and individuate. I suggest that Percival and his death act as that integral lesson for the characters and is what allows them to continue to come of age. To this end, I agree with Lucenti’s assertion about Percival acting as center; however, I revise Lucenti’s idea to assert that in Percival, Woolf presents a conscious experience that is unattainable and demonstrates that the desire to reach Percival’s lack of depth is not only impossible but also detrimental to one’s psyche. Percival cannot serve as a suitable lighthouse for others because Percival is only a reflection or, as Lucenti puts it, a “blank mirror” of an unattainable ideal.

On the other side of the coin, Bernard reacts differently to the death of Percival. Unlike the rest of the characters, who seem to stall in their coming-of-age and subsequent individual experience because of
Percival’s absence, I argue that Bernard is the first and perhaps only character to individuate completely out of the collective because of Percival’s death. At first, Bernard is just as distraught as the others. He fails to understand the tragedy of Percival’s death and cannot square it with his own conscious reality: “Such is the incomprehensible combination, such is the complexity of things, that as I descend the staircase, I do not know which is sorrow, which is joy” (The Waves 109). Bernard wrestles, just as the others do, with the overwhelming knowledge of both death and life. He ruminates on the birth of his son, which represents life and an attachment to conscious experience, and on Percival’s demise, which represents death and a loss of that consciousness. Unlike Rhoda, who finds comfort in the detachment, Bernard realizes that despite it all one must go on. Unlike Neville and Rhoda, who seem to get trapped in the obstacle of Percival’s death, Bernard finds a way to keep going: “I grow numb; I grow stiff. How shall I break up this numbness which discredits my sympathetic heart? There are others suffering multitudes of people suffering. Neville suffers. He loved Percival. But I can no longer endure extremities” (The Waves 112). Bernard realizes that he must cut down Neville’s apple tree; he must jump over Rhoda’s puddle.

Ultimately, Bernard realizes that death is part of the human condition and thus the nature of human experience. His epiphany is that death is nothing to despair over, but rather something to embrace. This embrace is different from Rhoda’s macabre release from conscious reality; it is the acceptance of the natural order of things. Bernard’s attitude toward Percival’s death is examined by John Hulcoop in his article, “Percival and the Porpoise: Woolf’s Heroic Theme in The Waves.” Hulcoop writes,

Bernard resists the temptation to acquiesce, to end tragically with Percival’s death; in words and phrases that will recur in the final paragraph of his monologue (in which he will, like Percival, like Raleigh, and like Woolf herself, defy death), Bernard gets up as he “must” and goes on in a manner that can only, in literary terms, be called comic. Bernard’s initial response to Percival’s death, his recalling of the event in this summing up, and his reenactment of it in the final paragraph of the novel all insist on the “vital
continuity” of life (rather than the finality of death), on “the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again” which is the comic rhythm. (Hulcoop 483)

While Rhoda tragically cannot leap over the puddle of Percival’s death and acquiesces by committing suicide, Bernard can take the leap of faith. As a result, Bernard succeeds in transcending the fear of death and understanding the fabric of life. Woolf uses Bernard to usher in enlightenment for all of the characters, or the collective, by proxy. Just as Percival served as center until his death, Bernard becomes the “model” and through his enlightenment the rest of the characters also achieve this enlightenment. In Bernard’s final scene there is an embrace of death that seems natural and right. It is not the melodrama of Rhoda’s suicide or the tragedy of Percival’s death. The novel, as a whole, is about these six characters grappling with the enigmatic nature of reality and their role in that reality. Woolf, after killing Percival, positions Bernard as a shepherd figure who ushers the collective to enlightenment. Bernard does not see death as an answer or a way out, as Rhoda does. Bernard sees death as an inevitability.

Woolf thus swiftly brings the narrative full circle by beginning with the birth of these characters and their conscious experience and then ending with a death of sorts, as Bernard switches roles with Percival and becomes the enlightened figure of the group who leads them to collective enlightenment:

And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement. It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death! (The Waves 211)

Bernard has accepted death, not as something to be afraid of but rather as a formidable opponent, one that should be charged upon, as Percival did on his great horse. With this knowledge, Bernard also has come
full circle in the narrative. He began his conscious experience only understanding his perspective of the world at large, and he ends his experience with an understanding of both his own mortality and human mortality. Bernard ends his life with the acceptance that death in all forms is simply the nature of things. Tomorrow will come in waves forever, until human life and consciousness are no more. Thus, the coming-of-age narrative comes to an end.

By the end of the novel, Bernard and Woolf herself urge readers to accept that human experience is a fraught and limited thing and that the nature of our experience is both to be shared and also to be experienced alone. What Woolf depicts in The Waves is the fabric of reality. What we see in that depiction is the nature of human experience: we are born, we consciously experience, and then we die. In short, Woolf articulates that it is humanity’s fate to repeat this cycle over and over and over again. She enacts this notion through the coming-of-age of all the characters and the eventual enlightenment of Bernard by the end of the novel. What Woolf offers in Bernard but not in Percival is a better model for a stable self. Bernard acts as a consciousness that is at peace with the chaos and impermanence of human existence. Percival was an unattainable idol; Bernard represents what is true of both human consciousness and human existence: that the waves will always break upon the shore.

In the end, The Waves is not merely a novel about the life and death of seven ordinary characters. It is, at the same time, a novel about Woolf’s fascination with conscious existence and how these characters, and human beings in general, are part of a collective experience — or what William James calls a “cosmic consciousness” — while also existing as individual consciousnesses within that collective. Woolf uses these six characters to articulate her ideas about the nature of reality, the collective conscious body we are all a part of, and the inevitability of our own impermanence. Thus, the lesson The Waves imparts is not one about the acceptance of death, but rather the role we play as individuals who are also part of a larger cosmic organism. Moreover, Woolf suggests that there is a difference in the way men and women function as both individuals and within the collective and how that difference shapes the experiences of people of
different genders. Woolf enacts consciousness by creating a coming-of-age narrative about experience itself and how that experience evolves both individually and within the collective consciousness of all human beings. She positions Bernard as an Everyman character who not only shepherds the other five characters into enlightenment (by way of his own enlightenment) but also shepherds the reader to this enlightenment as well. As a result, the novel ends not simply with acceptance of the nature of reality but also with an understanding of our role as individuals who are part of a cosmic collective. Woolf does this so that we too may strike spurs into our proverbial horse and fling ourselves unvanquished and unyielding toward, not death, but an understanding of our place in the nature of reality.
Chapter 3: The Mirror of Experience: Inner vs Outer Consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway*

*Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf’s fourth novel, is, on its surface, a story that is explicitly about a social gathering or collection of individual consciousnesses and thus directly displays Woolf’s philosophies about how consciousness operates in the individual and the collective. The event of Clarissa Dalloway’s party is interwoven through almost every page of the novel; the party fills the mind of both reader and character alike. *Mrs. Dalloway* functions as a story about the conscious identities that inhabit human beings. I argue that those identities present themselves as inner and outer conscious experience. The inner experience is human interiority; it is what Woolf calls a “wedge shaped core of darkness” (*To the Lighthouse* 45). The outer experience is what functions within the collective consciousness of society. This conscious experience is composed of everything outside of our individual consciousness or, as William James describes it, a larger reservoir of consciousness, which “manifests itself in the minds of men and remains intact after the dissolution of the individual.”

Using the parallel stories of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, Virginia Woolf articulates how those who operate within the collective consciousness of society seem to be able to stabilize or balance their conscious identities, while those who operate outside of it cannot calibrate their inner and outer experience and thus are lost to both themselves and those around them. For Woolf, the collective consciousness of society is not merely something that all human beings are a part of, regardless of whether they realize it or not. For Woolf, collective consciousness was something that one could opt in or out of. Essentially, Woolf suggests that one can phase in and out of their interior and exterior conscious experience. She enacts this idea in her characterizations of Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway.

Woolf parses reality and conscious experience in both *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, but I argue that *Mrs. Dalloway* truly gets at the root of Woolf’s fascination with social consciousness and the effects it has on individual experience. We can also see Woolf’s fascination with gendered consciousness

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5 See page 5 in the introduction to this thesis.
in the novel, including her implicit assertion that women act as the givers of sympathy and men act as receivers, and the fragile balance that is maintained as a result of that dynamic. By using the traumatized veteran Septimus Smith and the beautiful socialite Clarissa Dalloway as foils, Woolf exposes the thin membrane of our collective life while also creating a space in which we can see two experiences that on their faces seem to be directly in opposition to each other but are really running parallel. What Woolf exposes in her writing is the fluidity that must exist in conscious experience for a person to function as both an individual consciousness and a node within the collective experience. In the end, what Woolf creates in *Mrs. Dalloway* is a window into conscious reality that gives readers a glimpse of how the experience of collective human consciousness subsequently affects individual conscious experience, by creating a reality that exists separately from our own inner worlds.

Scholarship around *Mrs. Dalloway* is predominantly concerned with the parallel experiences of the veteran Septimus Smith and the socialite Clarissa Dalloway. Stuart Rosenberg focuses his analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway* on Virginia Woolf’s authorial intrusion and how that intrusion helps us to understand the conscious experiences of the characters. Rosenberg suggests that Woolf’s authorial intrusions “deal with events not as elements in a linear sequence but as they actually affect her characters, freely bringing the past to bear on the present in accord with what were apprehended to be the true workings of the human mind. Furthermore, she could treat the physical world as subjective experience, thereby giving it a significance comparable to that which it has in real life” (Rosenberg 211). Rosenberg asserts that Woolf’s authorial intrusions in the novel not only grant readers a glimpse into Woolf’s own thoughts about conscious reality but also serve to enrich our understanding of her characters’ experiences by depicting the inner workings of the human mind.

While one strand of scholarship sees the parallel experiences of Septimus and Clarissa as central, another strand focuses mainly on Clarissa as the central focus of the novel, with Septimus treated only as a mirror or parallel narrative. In this vein, Lorie Fulton asserts that the novel is essentially about Clarissa’s
journey and not Septimus’s. Fulton argues that *Mrs. Dalloway* is a novel about alienation. Clarissa alone reaps the benefits of Septimus’s tragedy, and she alone becomes the enlightened figure who understands her interior and exterior experience more fully. Fulton writes, “Septimus’s suicide causes [Clarissa] to ‘feel the beauty’ and ‘feel the fun’ of life by juxtaposing it with death, and makes her realize that, by taking his own life, Septimus ‘preserved’ the meaningful core of his existence” (Fulton 69). Death is no longer a fear for Clarissa because Septimus already addressed that fear for her. Conversely, Jaquiline Latham uses Septimus, not Clarissa, as the focus for her analysis. Latham suggests that *Mrs. Dalloway* strives to reconcile the conflict between Septimus and society. Latham situates Septimus as a promethean figure, calling attention to Septimus’s delusions about himself as an “outcast” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 103,157), a “Scapegoat” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 29), and "spread like a veil upon a rock” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 76). Latham concludes her analysis by positioning Septimus as a defiant Prometheus figure whose sacrifice helps Clarissa reach enlightenment by the end of the novel. For Latham, the resolution of the fraught inner/outer split of conscious experience is made possible in Septimus’s/Prometheus’s sacrifice. Latham, at the end of her analysis, introduces Shakespeare’s play *Cymbeline* and suggests that the death and rebirth of Imogen is like the death and rebirth of Clarissa’s conscious experience (Latham 482, 487, 488). Jean Wyatt echoes this argument in her analysis of both Clarissa and Septimus as archetypal figures, suggesting that *Mrs. Dalloway* is filled with literary allusions to *Cymbeline*. Wyatt asserts that the theme of *Mrs. Dalloway* is a new life brought forth by death, which echoes the theme of *Cymbeline*. Septimus’s death brings Clarissa a new life and a new way to consciously experience, and Septimus can live through Clarissa in that new experience (Wyatt 2).

When it comes to both Clarissa and Septimus, a good portion of scholarly conversation seems to focus on the way conscious experience is enacted in the two characters and how they diverge from, enlighten, or complement one another. To this end, Alex Page presents Clarissa and Septimus as doppelgangers and asserts that, by virtue of their shared understanding of reality, they merge into one
entity by the end of the novel (Page123). Another scholar, Annalee Edmonson, focuses her analysis of the text on the private and public split that Woolf presents in the novel and questions what it could mean for both the collective consciousness and our own interior experience. Edmonson focuses on Clarissa Dalloway and her uncanny ability to “read” other characters. Edmonson argues that Woolf destabilizes her audience by setting Clarissa up with the ability to mind-read and then goes even further by making Mrs. Dalloway’s own mind the central problem of the novel. In effect, Woolf creates the notion of an inner/outer split, where Clarissa’s interior mind is presented to the reader as a problem and her relationships with the people outside of herself are also a problem. Perhaps most interesting in Edmonson’s analysis is her focus on the question of how Clarissa’s and Septimus’s consciousnesses are interrelated. Edmonson argues for a reading that presents both Clarissa and Septimus as seen from the perspective of other characters. Edmonson writes, “To create this network of complex intersubjectivities, Woolf creates both a character who deeply affects Clarissa (Septimus) and a framing character who is deeply affected by her (Peter)” (Edmonson 24). Edmonson suggests that Woolf, by highlighting Clarissa as the central consciousness, presents a model for ethico-affective response. The reader must, like Clarissa, slice like a knife through Clarissa herself, while also standing on the outside looking in.

Gregory Wilson echoes Edmonson’s focus on Clarissa and uses Clarissa’s interior and exterior consciousness to illuminate Wool’s own fraught relationship with her interior experience and her inability to reconcile that interiority with the exterior world. Wilson diverges from Edmonson’s analysis in his discussion of sympathy in the novel and how it affects our understanding of the characters’ conscious experiences. Wilson defines the term “sympathy” “not just in the simple emotional sense, that of feeling compassion and pity for the sufferings of another, but in a larger, more literary and artistic conception: a capacity to appreciate and identify with the inner lives, thoughts, and spirits of others, even when those lives are difficult to see or interpret clearly.” He argues that sympathy “is a particularly useful term to use when referring to Virginia Woolf’s work, dominated as it is by the tension between subjective and
objective points of view and its concern with representing the operation of the mind and its relationship to the outside world” (Wilson 33). Importantly for my own argument about Clarissa and Septimus, Wilson draws a connection between the two characters and asserts that they act as mirrors for one another: Clarissa understands Septimus and is moved by his suicide because he acts as a reflection of her own interior experience (35, 36). This experience is just as broken as Septimus’s, but the difference lies in enactment. Septimus lives out his interior experience, while Clarissa’s remains interior and thus hidden. I agree with Wilson’s analysis of the characters, but I diverge in my argument by asserting that both characters are enacting the inner/outer split. While Wilson asserts that Septimus acts as a mirror for Clarissa’s own interiority, I suggest that both characters are dealing with the integration, or lack thereof, of their inner and outer conscious experiences, but one finds a way to merge the two because she has to, while the other perishes because he simply can’t and doesn’t have to. Not only is Woolf making an assertion about how we must maintain our inner and outer experience, but she is also commenting on gender and the nature of experience. Woolf suggests that women, by virtue of their sympathetic dispositions and status in society, must find the balance. They must find a way to exist in both the inner and outer experience, lest they perish and be forgotten. Men, by contrast, have the option or the ability to choose which experience they wish to exist in, and if they perish, they are kept alive in memory by feminine sympathy.

**Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway**

The reader’s introduction to Mrs. Dalloway includes an erasure of identity: her first mention in the novel is under her married surname. She is simply, at this point, the wife of Richard Dalloway. On the very same page, however, something interesting happens and suddenly Mrs. Dalloway isn’t just Mrs. Dalloway; Woolf manages to split the identity of Clarissa Dalloway in two. The novel begins with, “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumplemayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a
morning — fresh as if issued to children on a beach” (Mrs. Dalloway 3). “Mrs. Dalloway” is a doer: she is on top of what needs to be maintained, trimmed, and perfected. Mrs. Dalloway is concerned with order and stability. However, in the same breath, Woolf introduces the reader to “Clarissa Dalloway,” who is less concerned with buying the perfect flowers and more concerned with the natural wonder of the outside world. The scene continues with Clarissa’s thoughts:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen…. (Mrs. Dalloway 3)

This opening scene encapsulates the two parts of Clarissa Dalloway’s experience: she oscillates between her private inner experience and her social collective experience. To be clear, this split always exists in Clarissa. In this chapter I name the interior side of Clarissa Dalloway’s conscious experience “Clarissa” and the exterior collective social conscious experience “Mrs. Dalloway.” It is Clarissa who notices that the morning is fresh and compares it to the jubilance that children experience on a beach. Mrs. Dalloway, however, is concerned with what is happening in her immediate circle and how that immediate circle perceives her. Mrs. Dalloway doesn’t have time to enjoy the world outside, yet Clarissa does. These moments of being, or Clarissa’s ability to plunge down into her own mind, happen throughout the novel. Clarissa seems to need these moments, so as not to lose an integral part of who she is to the collective

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6 Annalee Edmonson, writing of this opening scene, explains this shift in character this way:

After encountering the famous opening line, the implied reader is immediately plunged into the innermost recesses of Mrs. Dalloway’s mind—gaining access not only to what she is thinking and feeling on this June day in 1923, but also to what she thought and felt (or at least to how she now constructs what she thought and felt) thirty-three years earlier, as an eighteen-year-old standing at the open French windows at Bourton, her family’s country house. (17-18)

What is interesting about Edmondson’s analysis is the acknowledgement of perhaps two different Clarissas, but Edmondson’s split is a product of time, or the rift between past and present. I argue, by contrast, that the split reflects Clarissa’s state of consciousness on the day of the party, as well as her everyday life.
experience around her. Much Like Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, these moments of being seem to recharge and enliven Clarissa.

The split between Mrs. Dalloway and Clarissa acts as a screen that divides the two selves into different conscious identities: there is the Mrs. Dalloway conscious identity, who operates well in her social sphere and is an active participant in the collective consciousness of London, and, on the other side of the screen, the Clarissa conscious identity, who functions in an interior world of images, feelings, and recollections. We can see this nuance in this scene which shows the dichotomous split between Clarissa’s two selves:

Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them very lightly to the belt. So on a summer’s day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying ‘that is all’ more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all its sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away and barking. ‘Heavens the front-door bell!’ exclaimed Clarissa. (*Mrs, Dalloway* 59)

David Neal Miller speaks to the schism between Mrs. Dalloway and Clarissa in this scene and asserts that Woolf is attempting to enact consciousness in the splitting of Clarissa:

This passage approaches interior monologue: the sentence cadence is slowed down and made rhythmic by repetition of verbs depicting the sea’s movement—“collect, overbalance, and fall,” “Renews, begins, collects, lets fall”; by frequent replacement of commas by semicolons; by a lack of characteristic parenthetical observations, and by the alliteration-assonance of the final sentence. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 126)
While I agree with Miller that this is indeed Woolf attempting to mold experience out of words on a page, it is also Woolf attempting to highlight the way Clarissa/Mrs. Dalloway operates in the world. It is Woolf parsing the many nuanced ways consciousness makes itself known, not just to ourselves, but to others as well. It is how the Clarissa/Mrs. Dalloway entity balances itself to survive in both the collective experience and the individual experience.

What is fascinating about this scene and integral to the notion of an inner vs. outer split or world, is the depth of quiet that comes over Clarissa while her mind seems to be racing. Clarissa seems to be in an almost meditative state, her mantra of “that is all” riding the waves of her thoughts. Clarissa’s moments of interiority are filled with peace and a sort of cosmic understanding about the nature of reality and conscious experience. The words themselves seem to operate with a rhythmic wave-like cadence, as if Clarissa is being hypnotized out of physical reality and into a deeper state of consciousness. In the passage above, Clarissa is aware of both the passing bee and the dog barking, and she is also aware of the natural order of reality. The waves will always break upon the shore. By the end of the passage, Clarissa is roused from her dreamlike state by the barking of the dog, which morphs into the ringing of a doorbell that brings her back to the present moment. Once Clarissa has fully cleared her mind of the breaking of waves, she is back to being Mrs. Dalloway, who is outraged at being interrupted on the day of her party.

The character of Peter Walsh offers an excellent way to see the schism between Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway. As a former lover of Clarissa’s, Peter holds the old Clarissa in his mind as a relic of the past and at the same time is confronted with this new, present Mrs. Dalloway, who is concerned with parties and seems to be acting only with concern for appearances. So not only does Woolf present the dichotomy of Mrs. Dalloway/Clarissa in Clarissa’s own moments of interiority, but she also manifests this dichotomy in the way Clarissa is seen in the present and remembered (by Peter) in the past. Peter compares the old and new Clarissa Dalloway in his mind: “in those days a girl brought up as she was, knew nothing, but [now] it was her manner that annoyed him; timid; hard; something arrogant; unimaginative; prudish. ’The
death of the soul.’ He had said that instinctively, ticketing the moment as he used to — the death of her soul” (89). In this scene, Peter Walsh is critical of the Mrs. Dalloway iteration of Clarissa, the part of her that shuts him out and seems to be cold and locked up. But what he characterizes as the death of her soul is actually the death of the way he used to experience her. Thus, to Peter, the death of Clarissa’s soul represents the death of something tangible, real, and conscious. It seems that Peter regards Mrs. Dalloway as the consciousness or persona that obscures or protects the Clarissa that he once knew. This cold, detached, and frivolous Mrs. Dalloway is nothing more than armor, but armor, however uncomfortable, typically serves a purpose.

Through Clarissa’s moments of interiority, Woolf presents her unique assertion about the way consciousness operates. The novel suggests that there is both an inner and outer experience that one engages in, or an inner and outer way of being conscious. For Clarissa, her inner experience is one filled with ruminations about life and its meaning. Clarissa questions the nature of experience and ponders experiences other than her own. Clarissa’s outer experience, or her Mrs. Dalloway experience, is focused on bringing people together, in a rush, a thrill, and a commotion of bodies and conversation. This inner/outer split is shown successfully in this passage:

But to go deeper, beneath what people said (and these judgements, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!) in her own mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing she called life? Oh it was very queer. Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; someone up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? (Mrs. Dalloway 184-185)

This moment for Clarissa is filled with questions of existence. These questions ask about the nature of conscious experience and the queerness of it. The Mrs. Dalloway iteration of Clarissa would not bother
with thoughts such as these. What fills the mind of Mrs. Dalloway are thoughts of immediacy and social connection. What fills the mind of Clarissa are thoughts of an existential nature. This moment of Clarissa’s thoughts directly contradicts Peter’s assumptions about her. This is not an unimaginative woman, but rather a woman who imagines deeply and thinks deeply.

The oscillation between Clarissa Dalloway’s inner and outer conscious identity makes for a confusing narrative to follow, but hints at a larger discussion that Woolf is attempting to highlight. That discussion concerns the balance between our inner and outer selves. To this end, *Mrs. Dalloway* is a novel about seeing other people—that is, seeing their true interior experience. The question that Woolf raises is what that interiority looks like. In “Misreading *Mrs. Dalloway*,” Vereen Bell writes that,

Identity in the stream-of-consciousness novel is never a stable construct, as Virginia Woolf tirelessly pointed out in her prose and illustrated in her fiction.... This may account for the strange sadness, the sense of loss or of absence that pervades all of her work. Her characters are never wholly alive to themselves because they can never be complete in the way they had expected to be. The same transience and mutability that rule in the outer world rule in the inner world as well, from one hour, from one day, to the next. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 110)

I disagree with Bell’s analysis. Clarissa’s inner-outer split is not indicative of a wayward character who leads an unstable existence due to a sense of absence. Rather, Woolf is positioning Clarissa as a sort of Everyman character, one with whom we can all identify. There is no such thing as a stable conscious experience, but Woolf asserts that there is a balance that can be maintained between the conscious experiences of the inner and outer life.

The split between Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway does not mean that one of these conscious entities is more real than the other, but rather that they both operate together to function in collective reality. Deborah Guth asserts that there is indeed an inner and outer component to Clarissa’s existence, writing that “Clarissa justifies the distance she keeps from her eternal life, encoded in her ceremonial attitude, as
protection of her inner life which, through its free-flowing associativity, is felt to be more ‘real’” (Guth 21). Woolf portrays Clarissa’s inner world as more desirable to both Clarissa and others than the artificiality of her outer world. What people want from Clarissa is insight into that inner experience she so carefully hides away. However, Guth goes on to write that,

If one looks closely... this inner world is also largely composed of strangely stylized gestures and romanticized self-images: that of herself coming down the steps at Bourton in a white dress, or approaching her parents holding her life in her arms; that of the nun in her cell, the martyr standing alone, ‘a single figure against the appalling night’; her dramatic sense of abandonment (‘He has left me; I am alone for ever’) when she remembers that Richard is at Lady Bruton’s, or of herself seeking pinnacles and standing drenched in fire, brandishing torches and flinging life away. Quite clearly, the images of disrobing which appear to give access to the naked self actually mask a crucial aspect of her private world: that this ‘real’ inner world is itself a robe, a form of self-dramatization created for herself and duplicating rather than contradicting the somewhat artificial existence. (Guth 21)

Guth asserts that because Clarissa’s inner consciousness is structured by iconic images, this inner life is just as fake and permeable as her outer experience. The issue with this reading (with which I disagree) is the assumption that any human being, much less a fictional character, is in some way, shape, or form an “authentic” self. Human beings, even ones between the pages of a book, are amalgamations of different experiences. Thus, Clarissa’s nuanced inner conscious experience is yet another iteration of her inner self. To say that Clarissa’s experience is stylized is another way to assert that Clarissa has lived a life that has shaped both her inner and outer conscious experience. We can assume that Clarissa, much like the characters at the beginning of The Waves, was born and experienced purely, and then her blank slate of consciousness was filled up with the many years of experiences that one acquires as one ages. Thus, unlike Guth, I am not concerned with the “artificiality” of Clarissa’s psyche or whether she is being honest
with herself or even the reader. What interests me is Clarissa’s *experience*. Woolf is enacting a point about balance—more specifically, about balance between the selves. Woolf understands this balance of inner vs. outer as it is one we all have.

**The Interiority of Septimus Smith**

The events that take place in *Mrs. Dalloway* occur over the span of one day in London. Throughout this day, the narratives of Clarissa and Septimus seem to run parallel to each other. In many ways, Clarissa and Septimus share similar interior experiences, ones that are fraught and filled with the broken images of past traumas and allusions to the nature of reality. However, Septimus is suffering from several mental disorders (notably PTSD), and the images that occupy both Septimus’s and Clarissa’s minds are cut from the same cloth but share different patterns. While Clarissa ponders the nature of existence and human consciousness, Septimus takes these ponderings one step further, seeking to provide answers to the question of consciousness in ways that become increasingly distorted and removed from reality.

The difference that Woolf articulates between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith is that one can find a balance between their inner and outer conscious identities (Clarissa), while the other seems to favor one conscious identity over the other (Septimus). I argue that Woolf is also articulating a gendered difference here. Clarissa *must* find the balance between her inner and outer experience or else she’ll be left bereft, floundering, and lonely just as Rhoda was in *The Waves*. Septimus, however, need not find that balance. He may exist entirely in his own inner world. For example, after a discussion with Rezia about having children, Septimus thinks:

> One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 135)
Unlike Clarissa, Septimus does not ask questions, nor does he ponder the nature of things; he assumes he already knows the answers to life’s problems. Septimus, by virtue of his illness, cannot see beyond his broken inner experience. His mind grows increasingly pessimistic as he doubts the good nature of human beings, saying that they are “lustful animals.” While Clarissa ponders the nature of reality, Septimus assumes he already understands it. He has only an inner reality, with no outer one.

It is this assuredness about the way the world works and its immutable terrors that prevents Septimus from being able to fully understand his wife’s desire and need for children and also prevents him from shaking the nihilistic affirmations that plague his innermost thoughts. In other words, Septimus cannot balance his inner life—his fixed ideas about the nature of humans and existence—with his outer, which includes his experiences with his wife and other people. Thus, what is interesting about Septimus is not how similar he is to Clarissa (as critics like Alex Page assert), but rather how different he is from her. Septimus is lost in the past and is deluded into pursuing a future that is at odds with reality. As a result, Septimus is not able to function in society, or in the collective consciousness of his surroundings, as he should be. He cannot move seamlessly between his inner world of individual experience and the outer world of social experience, as Clarissa is able to.

Septimus’s mental illnesses make it nearly impossible for him to parse the difference between his inner conscious experience and his outer. For instance, Septimus seems to constantly relive memories of the past: “So there was a man outside; Evans presumably; and the roses, which Rezia said were half dead, had been picked by him in the fields of Greece. ‘Communication is health; communication is happiness, communication—’ he muttered” (Mrs. Dalloway 141). Septimus is unable to communicate what is happening within himself and thus retreats into his inner experience, which is filled with broken images and traumatic memories from the past. Thus, Septimus is unhealthy and unhappy because his inner conscious experience is completely incongruent with his outer conscious experience and this leaves him
unable to articulate the pain he endures, even to those closest to him. Clarissa can move seamlessly through her inner and outer experience, but Septimus is trapped in his inner experience.

A profound passage that shows Septimus’s inability to confront the brokenness of his inner experience with the possibility of a better and more hopeful outer one comes in the moments before his suicide: “he could feel her mind like a bird, falling from branch to branch, and always alighting, quite rightly; he could follow her mind, as she sat there in one of those lax poses that came to her naturally and, if he should say anything, at once she smiled, like a bird alighting with all its claws firm upon the bough” (Mrs, Dalloway 222-223). In this moment, Rezia and Septimus are interacting as they once did. Septimus’s inner life is stable and he can see outside of himself and his trauma. Thus, what is seen here is a congruence of both inner and outer conscious experience. However, with every passing moment Septimus becomes more disillusioned with his inner and outer experience. As a result, the gap between the reality presented by the outside world and the reality of broken images that constitutes his inner world becomes larger and larger:

But he remembered Bradshaw said, “The people we are most fond of are not good for us when we are ill.” Bradshaw said, he must be taught to rest. Bradshaw said they must be separated. “Must,” “must,” why “must”?... “What right has Bradshaw to say ‘must’ to me?”... “It is because you talked of killing yourself,” said Rezia. (Mercifully she could now say anything to Septimus). So he was in their power! Holmes and Bradshaw were on him!... Where were his papers? the things he had written? (Mrs. Dalloway 223)

It is here that we see Septimus’s descent back towards the unstable inner life. Septimus is angered by the hold that Dr. Bradshaw has over both his inner and outer experience and thus makes a move back into that world of misaligned understanding and broken images. For Septimus, this inner experience where he has all the answers and no one is there to tell him that he ‘must’ is a comfort. He is transported back into the
cloistered experience; his inability to reconcile his inner experience with his outer conscious experience seems to be what causes him the most suffering in the end.

Septimus does not have the inner and outer split that allows Clarissa to have an interior experience while also functioning in the realm of collective experience. Septimus is unable to be anything but his innermost self, the self that is lost in the past and sees himself as a broken outcast. His inner conscious experience both affects him and how he sees the world and also affects those around him, namely his wife Rezia. It is due to Septimus’s inability to reconcile his inner and outer conscious experiences, or balance them, that he ultimately takes his life towards the end of the novel.

In the moments just before his death, Septimus experiences a brief encounter with normalcy and calibration. In this scene, Septimus, according to Rezia, is his old self again. Perhaps even more interesting is that it is a self that we, as readers, have not yet been exposed to:

They were perfectly happy now, she said, suddenly putting the hat down. For she could say anything to him now. She could say whatever came into her head. That was almost the first thing she had felt about him…. She had never seen him wild or drunk, only suffering sometimes through this terrible war, but even so, when she came in, he would put it all away. Anything, anything in the whole world, any little bother with her work, anything that struck her to say she would tell him, and he understood at once. (Mrs, Dalloway 221-221)

This small moment between Septimus and Rezia is perhaps the only happy time the two spend together for the entirety of the novel. What is most interesting about Rezia’s thoughts is her mention of “this terrible war.” Rezia could be speaking about the First World War and the horrors it has caused, but this novel is specifically about the trauma and turmoil that came after the war. The setting for the novel is about five years after the First World War and five years after Septimus came back home a broken and battered man. Thus, perhaps what Rezia is alluding to is the terrible war being raged on and within
Septimus’s conscious experience. Septimus, by virtue of his mental illness and trauma, is unable to parse his inner experience from his outer experience. Thus, all the turmoil he feels on the inside, the hurt, anguish, rage, and sadness, make their way out into his outer experience, or the part of his consciousness that interacts with society’s collective consciousness.

Septimus sees those who want to help him as those who want to control him. He is unlike Clarissa, who thrives in the social collective consciousness. In his final scene, Septimus seems to call out to something greater than both himself and the world:

> It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia’s (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw like that sort of thing. (He sat on the sill.) He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings — what did *they* want? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stooped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. “I’ll give it you!” he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on Mrs. Filmer’s area railings. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 226)

It would seem that Septimus experiences a brief moment of stasis, in which his fraught inner self is able to see life for what it is. Septimus is able to recognize the good in the world, the hot sun and the beauty of language. It is only the existence of other conscious beings that prompts him to fling himself to his death. Septimus is unable to mesh with the collective because he fears being controlled by the collective. Unlike Clarissa, Septimus is unable to balance his inner and outer experience to create one whole conscious being. Instead, Septimus is a fractured self who cannot seem to integrate with everyone else. He fears control, but what I argue Septimus truly fears is also what Mr. Ramsay feared, and what Bernard feared before his enlightenment. What Septimus fears is oblivion, not in the literal sense, but the figurative. Septimus fears oblivion of his perceived self and eradicates it in his final act of will.

What makes Clarissa able to function in the collective consciousness of society is literally what kills Septimus in the end. Arthur Bethea positions Septimus as a Christ-like figure in his article “Septimus
Smith: The War-Shattered Christ Substitute in *Mrs. Dalloway*.” Bethea asserts that Septimus sees himself as a martyr who “carries the greatest message in the world” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 83). But I argue that it is Septimus’s inability to properly orient himself, not in the world of religious apparitions, but rather in the world of the collective that ultimately leads to his death.

It is in Septimus’ suicide that Clarissa finally reaches a sort of enlightenment and truly finds a stable conscious experience. Clarissa hears news of Septimus’s death during her long-awaited party: “‘A young man (that is what Sir William is telling Mr. Dalloway) had killed himself. He had been in the army.’ Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here’s death, she thought” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 279). In line with Woolf’s depictions of gendered consciousness, it is Clarissa’s sympathy that allows Septimus to live on. Even in death, Woolf asserts, men and women still operate in their gendered experiential roles. The party, up until this point, has functioned like a microcosm of collective consciousness. It is death, or a departure away from that collective, that bursts that bubble and thrusts Clarissa away from the party and back into her inner experience for the last time in the novel:

Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which mystically evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death…. She felt somehow very like him — the young man who killed himself. She felt glad he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty. He made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 282-284)

Clarissa, from the very beginning of the novel, is arguably just as psychologically fraught as Septimus. The only difference is that Clarissa is able to balance the difference between inner and outer conscious experience and live despite the fragility of her interior experience. In this scene, however, Clarissa must confront that fragility in the wake of Septimus’s death. It seems almost too much to bear, the knowledge
of death and the freedom associated with it. Clarissa seems to toy with the notion of taking her own life just as Septimus had but decides against it as she recalibrates her inner and outer experience. In this way, she acts in direct opposition to Septimus, who allows himself to get lost in the inner world and meets his demise because of it. For Clarissa, the inner consciousness is able to recognize the beauty and fun of outer experience because of Septimus’s willful act of choosing death over life and the heat of the sun.

Thus, we could read Bethea’s assertion that Septimus acts as a Christ-like figure as valid, since it is through Septimus’s self-sacrifice that Clarissa can now lead a better and happier life. But I would also argue that Woolf is doing more here than just positioning Septimus and Clarissa as religious figures. Woolf captures the innate schism that is present in all conscious beings. We all have an inner and outer experience, and we all must engage in the act of reconciling these experiences. In Clarissa and Septimus, Woolf presents her unique philosophy of conscious experience, which asserts that there is both an inner and outer conscious identity and that these identities, when stable, can flourish and thrive both within the individual and as part of the collective consciousness. But there must be a balance between the two: when they are not stable or the individual is unable to find the delineation between inner and outer experience, the individual will be lost both to themselves and those around them. Woolf also suggests that there is a difference between men and women when it comes to this balance. To this end, Woolf shows not only in the stories of Clarissa and Septimus, but also in the relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Ramsay, as well as in the dichotomy between Rhoda and Bernard, that men and women must balance their experiences differently. Women, Woolf asserts, must find the balance between their inner experience and their outer. Men, on the other hand, do not need to find that balance. Woolf does not create a cautionary tale with the stories of Septimus and Clarissa, but rather unravels a tangled problem of human experience in a form that exposes the phenomenology of conscious experience as terrifying and ecstatic all at the same time.
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