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# Dismantling the Cult of Manliness

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DISMANTLING THE CULT OF MANLINESS:  
VIRGINIA WOOLF'S ASSAULT ON TRADITIONAL MALE GENDER  
EXPECTATIONS

By  
Peter Capalbo

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Master of Arts  
in  
The Department of English

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2010

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DISMANTLING THE CULT OF MANLINESS:  
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Dedicated to:

David Ednie

&

Cara, Abby, & Cecilia  
Thank you for your endless support and patience.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1939 Virginia Woolf began writing what would be her final memoir, *Moments of Being*, reminiscences of her childhood and life in London as a young girl. It is a fascinating text, touching on some of the most important moments in her life and echoing some of the most important themes explored in her fiction. Though almost sixty years old, time had not dulled Woolf's analytic eye or her biting criticism of the rigid, stifling society in which she was raised. Woolf's last memoir provides significant insight into the different cultural issues that deeply affected her and her work. The themes of gender equality, social control over the individual, and unrealistic cultural expectations were issues, the memoir suggests, that remained in the forefront of her mind until her dying day. In one of her final entries, written four months before her death, Woolf comments on the oppressive expectations British society places upon its men. Having just finished reading Herbert Fisher's autobiography, she writes, "What would have been his shape had he not been stamped and moulded by that great patriarchal machine? Every one of our male relations was shot into that machine at the age of ten and emerged at sixty a Head Master, an Admiral, a Cabinet Minister, or the Warden of a college" (*Being* 153). Woolf writes, "Most of our male relations were adept at [the] game. They knew the rules, and attached extraordinary importance to those who won the game. Father for example laid immense stress upon school reports; upon scholarships; triposes and fellowships" (*Being* 153).

The fact that Woolf continues to ruminate about the treatment of men in this last book suggests that her concern about gender expectations within her society

remained one of the great unresolved issues of her life. Gender equality is equally one of the most significant aspects of Woolf's major works. Despite the fact "that Woolf's purpose in *Mrs. Dalloway* ... to 'criticize the social system' was hardly guessed at by any" (Carroll 103), readers and scholars have come to recognize over the decades that her work is extremely political, focused intently on her yearning for social change.

The vast majority of Woolf scholarship over the past thirty years has focused on Virginia Woolf the feminist, on the artist working through her writing to undermine a binaristic society that holds women as second class citizens, subjugated to the rule of their patriarchal husbands. Bernice Carroll states the case succinctly: "The battle [in Woolf's work] is fought against the fathers, the patriarchs who are also the masters, the rulers in all spheres" (110). While it is valid to view some of her male characters as patriarchal tyrants, viewing most of them as such ignores the tremendous complexities inherent in these characterizations. What critics have failed to thoroughly explore is the connection between the ideal of British manliness and how Woolf's male characters relate to that ideal. There are critics, such as Alex Zwerdling, Peter Hühn and Allison Booth, for example, who have examined aspects of manliness in Woolf's texts, but none that I have found directly relate those characterizations to the larger social ideal of manliness nor do they explore the implications of a lack of masculinity or Woolf's larger point about the problem of traditional male gender expectations as this thesis seeks to do. Examining the relationship between British manliness and Woolf's male characters is crucial to understanding Woolf's belief that these expectations are one of the foremost causes of social inequality in Britain.

Most scholars would agree that Woolf's female characters work to destabilize the absurd reasoning used to support an oppressive social system, but it is important to recognize that she does not do that at the expense of her male characters. The concern for men demonstrated in her memoir strongly suggests that her thinking was far more complex and more inclusive than a strict focus on equality for women. In novels like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, Woolf's subtle though stinging cultural criticism demonstrates compassion for the difficulty facing men *and* women trapped in the confines of a suffocating system of social expectations, a sentiment her memoir implies did not waver with time.

Alex Zwerdling writes, "Woolf was interested in the process through which an independent, responsive, emotionally supple young man or woman is gradually transformed into a conventional member of his class" (78). When Woolf writes in 1923 that her goal in writing *Mrs. Dalloway* was "to criticize the social system and to show it at work, at its most intense" (*Diary* 248), there can be little doubt she is doing exactly that, criticizing the entirety of the social system. The abundance of scholarly work suggests, however, that most gender critics have focused on only one half of that critique.

This is a significant point because to suggest that the primary goal of her work is to assert a political agenda focused solely on the oppression of women is an exceptionally limited view. Woolf's texts attack traditional British gender expectations; they do not promote women taking power away from men, but they attempt to subvert the entire patriarchal machine. Carroll writes, "Virginia Woolf recognized in the society around her a political and social system geared to the destruction and perversion of human life and creativity" (116). She continues, "Like many radical feminists today, she saw patriarchy as the central pillar, where domestic



politics, institutional politics, and state politics converge” (116). But what is important to note is that attempting to destroy the patriarchal system is not an attempt to destroy the patriarchs; it is an attempt to destroy a system born out of an obsession with manliness, a fraudulent concept that, Woolf suggests, creates and promotes gender inequities within her society.

Her memoir describes this social ‘machine’ as a destructive force, wondering, almost sentimentally, what men of her generation and past generations could have become had they been spared the horrors of the British ideal of masculinity. To be stamped and ‘moulded’ is to be treated as little more than raw material used to perpetuate a unique and debilitating system of cultural expectations from which there is no escape. Rather than viewing the patriarchs as an enemy to be confronted, Woolf is clearly sympathetic to their plight. Moreover, what her work suggests is that undermining male gender expectations is pivotal to upending the entire system of inequality born of those expectations. Since it is the system of belief that creates this patriarchal structure, undermining the linchpin of that system is the most crucial aspect of her attack. I will argue that one of Woolf’s most important political projects is her attempt to undermine manliness in her society, a tactic that, if successful, would provide the most direct and effective path toward cultural upheaval in Britain.

Critics have often noted Woolf’s personal connection to the theme of patriarchy when referring to her dramatization of her father as Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. But in much of her work Woolf is dealing with something more profound than one man; she is examining generations of men stretching from pre-Victorians to their grandsons, the architects of the ‘ideal’ man and those left to deal with the consequences of male gender expectations. Many of her male characters represent these different generations of British men. There are those such as Richard Dalloway,

Dr. Bradshaw, and Percival who eagerly accept and fanatically perpetuate the expectations of British manliness. Then there are men like Septimus Smith, Bernard in *The Waves*, and even Mr. Ramsay, who all prove to be multifaceted characters who do not easily lend themselves to a rigid definition of male gender presentation.

Within this conflict lies the heart of Woolf's attempt to challenge the prevailing social structure of Britain. English boys of the early twentieth century were raised to believe that to be a proper Englishman, they must appear orderly and in control, both publicly and privately, regardless of the circumstances. The argument she presents through the depiction of her most important male characters is that the narrowly defined rules of manliness are an unrealistic ideal that ignores and suppresses reality. What emerges in her work is a far more sophisticated view of gender, where masculinity and femininity are not the only options available, but rather represent two elements of an extensive, inclusive and overlapping spectrum of gender performance that allows for diverse and unique gender presentations.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will develop my discussion of Woolf's unique view of gender by exploring key aspects of Judith Butler's research on gender performance. It is from Butler's book *Gender Trouble* that the term "gender performance" originates, a concept that argues gender is "performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (34). For Butler, "gender is not a fact" (190), rather it is expressed in the repeated acting out of specific behaviors. Butler's scrutiny of traditional gender roles is significant because her analysis creates a framework for understanding gender performance as a concept that is not fixed to an individual's sexuality. Her work begins to develop the idea of a gender performance spectrum that is far less rigid than traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity, a concept closely echoing many of Woolf's central male

characters. David Buchbinder's *Masculinities and Identities* will be used in conjunction with Butler to help provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender performance and how the nature of 'acceptable' performances has changed over time.

The second chapter of my thesis will examine the basic concept of manliness and how Woolf used that concept to structure her novels. Understanding British masculinity is key to understanding Woolf's work because it represents a specific world view, one that holds that men are superior to women, that British men are superior to non-British men, and that the superior British man has both the right and the responsibility to dominate his own and other cultures. The structure of acceptable male gender performance was composed of deliberately developed, highly complex, and strictly enforced rules designed to instill within the individual British man a sense of duty, superiority, and confidence. Throughout these novels Woolf illustrates the ubiquity of manliness in British culture. For men living in Britain in the years before and after World War I, manliness "became so potent that it formed, in effect, a distinctive and powerful moral code; it offered a set of values applicable to each and every facet of a personal and collective life (Mangan 2). Woolf's continual reference to that moral code creates a profound sense that this system of belief is inescapable. It is this system that is the buttress of Woolf's culture, a system that imposes the gender binary resulting in the oppression of women, a system she is committed to dismantle.

When depicting masculine characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*, Woolf presents men who are not relevant, vibrant figures. Instead, many of these characters are the old men who reminisce about the past and the things they have achieved. In *The Waves*, the one young, seemingly energetic character is Percival, a man who dies doing his imperial duty, a casualty of British masculinity. Woolf devotes considerable

time in these books to presenting a realistic depiction of manliness during the post-war years. What emerges from those depictions is a view of a social concept that has clearly outlived any cultural value (or perceived value) it may have once held. Alex Zwerdling writes, “As a class and as a force, then, the world to which the Dalloways belong is decadent rather than crescent. The party at the end of the novel, for all its brilliance, is a kind of wake. It reveals the form of power without the substance” (71). Men like Richard Dalloway, Hugh Whitbread, and Dr. Bradshaw are all members of that dying class, old men who will soon find themselves powerless and socially irrelevant. In *The Waves*, Percival is a man of the next generation, forced to deal with the consequences of a society that glorifies manliness. Yet Percival is eager to accept the mantle of masculinity passed down to him. The voiceless Percival serves to define manliness to his friends who observe his every movement and marvel at the ease with which he has mastered his social gender expectations. He is the embodiment of the British ideal of manliness in nearly every possible way, yet he dies foolishly, falling off his horse in India while fulfilling his obligation to his country.

For Woolf, the doctrine of manliness and the expectations it has spawned are dying. Woolf asserts that Britain has changed dramatically from the society her parents would have known and, as a result, concepts like manliness must be discarded, allowing for more inclusive views of gender to emerge. Undoubtedly Woolf’s Britain had changed, as she makes clear in *Mrs. Dalloway*. After five years away from London, Peter Walsh comments, “Those five years—1918 to 1923—had been, he suspected, somehow very important. People looked different. Newspapers seemed different” (71). Britain had come through the catastrophe of World War I and been transformed. Ted Bogacz writes, “For many Britons, after all, the Great War initially had promised to reassert the power of the moral over the mechanical, of the

élite over the mass” (232). The war was the ultimate test of an ‘élite,’ manly society, the opportunity to demonstrate British superiority and heroically vanquish its enemies on the field of battle. But as Bogacz points out, the war had the opposite effect. He states, “By 1918, as a result of the shell-shock crisis, fundamental questions were being raised not only about the origins and treatment of mental illness but also whether formerly firm lines of moral behavior could continue to be maintained in light of this new knowledge” (236). Those five years had been profoundly important. Manliness had not lived up to the horror of war as had been expected, forcing many core beliefs to come under heavy scrutiny both by returning veterans and the families waiting to greet them. This moment of important self-examination provided an audience ready for new ideas, which is exactly what Woolf’s texts are offering.

In my third chapter, I will examine some of Woolf’s most important male characters, demonstrating how their distinctive gender performances defy the traditional system of classification in Britain during the decades after the war. Many of these men, in fact, do demonstrate various aspects of manliness within their overall gender performance. Yet mixed with their masculinity are aspects of childishness, self-obsession, femininity and homoeroticism, all dimensions of their personalities that make these characters difficult to classify socially. The most important place to begin this discussion is with an analysis of Septimus Smith because he provides a bridge between traditional manliness and a more fluid, nuanced understanding of gender performance. Septimus and Percival share many important characteristics, but unlike Percival, Septimus survives his overseas adventure, returning to England only to question his place in society and the nature of his homoerotic relationship with his friend Evans as he collapses into psychosis. What becomes clear from Woolf’s description is that Septimus had risen to the highest level of society as a heroic war

veteran, a privileged position he quickly loses due, in part, to his emotional outbursts and suicidal thoughts. At certain points in the novel, Septimus is described as the perfect example of masculinity, much like Percival. But as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Septimus transitions to something far more threatening – manliness taken to a terrible extreme. As a result, Septimus is clearly marked in the novel as a man too complex to be classified within his society, leaving him well outside the cultural mainstream.

Like Septimus, Mr. Ramsay, Bernard, Louis and Neville all display personality traits that separate them from a more traditional middle class understanding of masculinity. Mr. Ramsay's obsession with himself, his work, and his childlike need for his wife's reassurance are facets of his gender performance that weaken his potency as a typical patriarchal character. In *The Waves*, Woolf portrays a group of men and their lifelong struggle to come to terms with their identity in the shadow of Percival, the living embodiment of British masculinity. What is important to recognize is that most of these men share distinctive characteristics that separate them in significant ways from Woolf's traditionally masculine characters. Consequently, men like Septimus and Mr. Ramsay cannot easily be categorized within Britain's rigid system of gender classification.

Bernice Carroll writes, "The bolts of iron beneath the surface of Woolf's novels are the 'facts' as she called them, of the social and political system as she perceived it" (103). Woolf's 'facts' lay hidden just beneath the surface of her society, the secret truth that men were much more than what society expected or allowed, evidenced by Peter's tearful breakdown in front of Clarissa, and Mr. Ramsay pleading with his wife for reassurance that he is a great man. Zwerdling states, "In her essay on Elizabethan drama in *The Common Reader*, Woolf suggests that a modern audience

has an absolute need for some exploration of the private as against the public self' (80), a concept at the heart of her male character development. Out of the pattern of these explorations of the private self within Woolf's texts, develops a spectrum of gender performance, a series of personality traits that blend various aspects of masculinity, childishness, anxiety, homoeroticism and femininity. What makes these men significant is that they demonstrate emotions and affectations not so easily defined in a society obsessed with classification. In these powerful moments, the woeful inadequacies of manliness are vividly exposed. Moreover, it is within these moments that an entire society built upon a fragile foundation of manliness is exposed. Here the binary structure of the culture and the rationale for oppressing women and colonized people are equally exposed, and it is through depicting these various powerful moments that Woolf envisioned a radical change in the structure of her society.

Woolf was an important political writer, one who hoped that showing the obvious flaws in her society's perception of itself would lead to profound social change. Carroll argues, "Woolf knew that this system would not be changed with the touch of a wand. No wishing, nor talking, nor even 'vision' would suffice to 'disarrange anything.' It was necessary to confront the 'facts' " (117). She continues, "For Woolf, the method most ready to hand, the tools and weapons at her disposal, were pen and paper" (127). Through her art, Woolf skillfully confronts these facts, promoting a definite political agenda. The most important of these confrontations, I believe, is her attack on manliness because ultimately manliness proves to be the foundation supporting a specious and oppressive social system. Demonstrating the fallacy of manliness cannot help but further expose the fallacies of a social system

supported by such a concept. Therefore, destroying the ideal of manliness provides an important path toward the ultimate goal of social equality for men and women.



## CHAPTER I

## WOOLF, BUTLER &amp; THE REDEFINITION OF GENDER

Virginia Woolf's novels articulate an understanding of gender that is far different than the more traditional, socially accepted view of her society. In fact, the complex representations of gender evident in the descriptions of some of her most significant male characters is a direct challenge to the prevailing tenets of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century concepts of British masculinity. Yet, because Woolf's "social criticism is usually expressed in the language of observation rather than direct commentary" (Zwerdling 1), providing a theoretical framework helps clearly define and contextualize both the traditional view and Woolf's nuanced understanding of gender.

In *Masculinities and Identities*, David Buchbinder provides a concise summary of the basic principles central to modern gender theory and, in so doing, defines the two points of view at the heart of the struggle in Woolf's work. He writes, "We may identify theories of gender as generally falling into one of two categories. The first is *essentialism*: this asserts that masculine and feminine traits are innate (essences) in the individual. This idea underlies common, popular notions of gender" (4). The root of this theory comes from the commonly held idea that gender is merely an extension of an individual's sexuality. It is an understanding of gender based in biology, the belief that there can be only two types of gender as there are two types of people, male and female. For an essentialist, a person's gender expectations are inextricably and unalterably linked to their reproductive organs; a man must be masculine because biology dictates it. Therefore, a man who is not masculine is

somehow unnatural, a person denying their genetic make-up. Moreover, an individual or culture steeped in this belief is likely to see the biological-gender connection as scientific law, something that cannot be changed.

The essentialist point of view is significant because this is the perspective Woolf must confront for any substantive strides toward gender equality to take place. Yet to attack this view of gender would likely have been seen as an attempt to deny scientific fact. This is an important point because coupling this view of gender with the immense amount of time and money invested in the systematic development of manliness in Britain presents a Herculean challenge to anyone offering change.

Buchbinder goes on to describe a second view of gender, one that directly contradicts essentialism, reflecting instead a more inclusive understanding similar to Woolf's perspective. He writes:

The second category of gender theory is *constructionism* (sometimes also called *constructivism*). This type of theory proposes that gender is not innate but rather learned or constructed; and that gender constructions and behaviours are the result of intersecting historical, cultural and social factors at particular moments in a culture's life. It thus allows for change in such constructions and behaviours, since it sees these as dependant on changing circumstances. From the constructionist perspective, changing *practices*, such as, for instance, eliminating sexist language from both official and unofficial communications, will also cause *attitudes* to change. (7)

If gender is, indeed, a social construct, subject to the changing practices of a given culture, then what is 'ideal' is also a construct subject to change. It would seem, therefore, that the concept of the *ideal* has limitless meanings depending on the sensibilities of a particular society. If this is the case, then a constructionist

perspective negates the notion that gender is somehow biological in nature, a significant distinction between these two views of gender. Eliminating the biological component of gender undercuts the central premise of essentialism, allowing for far greater freedom relative to an individual's gender performance, a concept Judith Butler explores in great detail.

Butler's most influential book, *Gender Trouble*, is particularly fitting for this discussion because, like Woolf, she effectively dissects and dismantles the arguments supporting an essentialist perspective of gender. When discussing essentialism, Butler argues that the assumption that men must be masculine and women feminine imposes "institutional heterosexuality" as the only acceptable social norm of gender. She states, "institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system" (Butler 31).

When essentialism is the dominant interpretation of gender in a society, it is inevitable that men within that culture will find their gender performance options extremely limited, as is the case in the Britain portrayed in Woolf's novels. These limitations extend beyond a man's social acts, influencing his choice of profession, personal activities, and anything else associated with his overall presentation. Men who do not live within those limits simply are not accepted socially as many of Woolf's characters demonstrate. Buchbinder argues, "Apart from ignoring them entirely, the culture generally deals with such identities or behaviors by first defining them as abnormal ... or deviant ... and then by institutionalizing affected individuals whether in various sorts of hospitals (for observation, 'cure' or ongoing treatment) or in prisons (in order to punish them for contravening God's law, man's law or both)" (53). These constraints are significant because they constitute one of the central layers

of social indoctrination. Should the highly developed system of British social education not effectively convey the profound importance of manliness to a young man, then that person would face a harsh and equally developed disciplinary system designed to force compliance. As Woolf makes clear in her novels, those who do not conform risk marginalization or expulsion.

Within Woolf's novels there are several examples that illuminate male gender restrictions and the consequences for those who do not conform. In *The Waves*, for example, Woolf creates a brief but telling scene where Dr. Crane, the headmaster of Bernard's school, is sitting alone, thinking to himself "in two years I shall retire. I shall clip yew hedges in a west country garden. An admiral I might have been; or a judge; not a school master. What forces...have brought me to this? What vast forces?" (35). Dr. Crane's question is an interesting point to examine. The positions Dr. Crane lists are masculine professions that carry power and prestige but they also reflect the significant limitations placed on him by society. Manly jobs of rank and responsibility are the only other options available, nothing more. Perhaps his true aspirations do not fit within that rubric of masculine acceptability and are therefore relegated to his imagination. His tone of discontent suggests a profound frustration, partially that he is retiring as a mere schoolmaster, but also, it seems, dissatisfaction with the limitations of his professional opportunities. The way in which he seems to view being an admiral or judge suggests that they are interchangeable positions that any able, masculine man could occupy. Power is the central point; to hold a position of power and status was expected of the ideal man.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf provides an interesting portrayal of the methods used to enforce gender conformity. Septimus's inability to fulfill even minor aspects of his gender expectations clearly marginalizes him within society. Yet when he tells

his wife that he will commit suicide, he has gone beyond ignoring the responsibilities of manliness, he has challenged them outright, placing himself in a precarious position. Dr. Bradshaw tells Rezia, “There was a delightful home down in the country where her husband would be perfectly looked after” (*Dalloway* 96). When she objects, Bradshaw makes the case clear to her: “He had threatened to kill himself. There was no alternative. It was a question of law” (*Dalloway* 96-97). Challenging the rules of manliness by ‘cowardly’ contemplating suicide will not be tolerated. Instead, Septimus is to be exiled, removed from society until such time as he is willing to once again recognize his biologically determined gender role. Peter Knox-Shaw observes, “Bradshaw does much to substantiate the charge, laid at the time by the Ex-Servicemen’s Welfare Society, that those responsible for admitting patients to mental institutions were ‘really more concerned with the safeguarding of the public than with alleviating the sufferer’ ” (101). The limitations placed upon men in a culture steeped in an essentialist ideology are clear and unwavering. Men are to be masculine or risk their place in society.

Butler’s work addresses the individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms, pointing out that, though seen as abnormalities from an essentialist view, they serve an important purpose for a writer like Woolf. Butler argues:

Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder. (24)

Here Butler provides a theoretical framework that helps explain the truly subversive nature of Woolf's novels. Characters like Septimus and Neville are excellent examples of the 'failures and logical impossibilities' that exist in large numbers in Britain. These characters are particularly significant because they represent not singular anomalies but entire segments of the population; waves of shell-shocked veterans returning from the war and a large, though socially unrecognized, homosexual sub-culture. Moreover, they substantiate Butler's assertion that, as these socially ignored communities grow larger, it becomes considerably more difficult to overlook them. Instead, men like Septimus and Neville 'expose the limits' of institutional heterosexuality and heroic masculinity, introducing into the novels "rival and subversive matrices of gender."

The end of the war and the return of soldiers brought to the political forefront the epidemic of shell-shock and the stark realization that the superior masculinity of British men was no match for battle. As Elaine Showalter points out, "By 1916 one observer reported that shell shock cases accounted for as much as 40 percent of casualties in the fighting zones. And by the end of the war, 80,000 cases had passed through army medical facilities" (168). These numbers are significant because the epidemic of shell-shock presents a direct, *public* challenge to the fundamental tenets of manliness. It was no longer sufficient to suggest that these were just a few aberrations, a small fraction of men with abnormally weak constitutions. Just the opposite; it appears that nearly half of the men returning from the war suffered some sort of ailment that would be diagnosed as a symptom of shell-shock. This presents a tremendous problem for those staunch believers in masculinity because it forces them to question the core of their beliefs. Manliness had, on a massive scale, failed what was perceived to be the ultimate test, war. Moreover, attempting to marginalize these

men was clearly not an option; there were simply too many to be quietly sequestered away in the country. The fallacy of manliness was made too apparent to be disregarded.

While the effect of war on the soldier was a common topic of discussion during the post-war decade, homosexuality remained a taboo subject in most social circles. However, the social exclusion of that community did not stop it from thriving. Alan Sinfield cites an important quote regarding the size of the homosexual community in Britain at the turn of the century: “ ‘If all persons guilty of Oscar Wilde’s offences were to be clapped in gaol, there would be a very surprising exodus from Eton and Harrow, Rugby and Winchester, to Pentonville and Holloway,’ W.F. Stead remarked in 1895, in response to the Wilde trials” (65). Like war veterans, the large homosexual population in Britain presents another group too large to be realistically considered a ‘developmental failure.’ Homosexuality is not as dominant a subject in Woolf’s texts as shell-shock, yet it is a subject she addresses both subtly and overtly in several novels.

As has been noted, Septimus Smith is a man who struggles with his homoerotic feelings for his best friend after the war has ended. But in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the earliest of these three novels, Woolf is more subtle, veiling Septimus’s relationship through the metaphor of the romping dogs. In *The Waves*, Woolf takes a decidedly different tack, overtly portraying Neville as a gay character. Throughout the novel, “Neville expresses often the intensity of his passion for Percival” (Shanahan 69). Like the other characters in the novel, Neville is drawn to Percival and his masculinity. However, where men like Bernard and Louis want to emulate Percival and his manly performance, Neville’s thoughts are focused more on feelings of infatuation and desire. “There is Percival in his billycock hat. He will forget me. He

will leave my letters lying about among guns and dogs unanswered. I shall send him poems and he will perhaps reply with a picture post card. But it is for that that I love him. I shall propose meeting—under a clock, by some Cross; and shall wait, and he will not come. It is for that that I love him” (*Waves* 42). Neville is a pivotal character because, like Septimus, he is a man whose gender performance is clearly outside the boundaries of acceptability. Neville is another social anomaly, someone who, from an essentialist perspective, should not exist. He exists nonetheless, a representative of an element of British culture that Woolf is not afraid to explore in her work.

The explosion of shell-shock cases is the most significant historical element relevant to this discussion. The enormity and publicity of the issue forces society to recognize the embarrassing inadequacies of a social system rooted in an essentialist ideology. As a result, there develops an important opportunity to discuss how Britain addresses anyone who does not fit into their prescribed gender role: shell-shock veterans, homosexuals, and other men who present countless unique gender performances. By creating these characters, Woolf is unmistakably stating that these men are not singular irregularities in an otherwise homogenous group; there are simply too many to support such an interpretation.

Butler writes, “When the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe” (185). Some of Woolf’s characters do just that; they expose the fiction of heterosexual coherence, a concept that insists that gender is based on biology, that men can only be masculine, women feminine. Woolf’s work is an appeal to her society to recognize that these men exist, that men are far more



intricate than the utterly ridiculous tenets of manliness would allow. Moreover, she is telling her readers that the inability of their society to explain these men demonstrates its own dangerous weakness. Simply ignoring these men is no longer tolerable or sustainable.

What is needed, Woolf's novels suggest, is a new way of viewing gender, one that is flexible enough to include those men who have been previously ignored. Butler's work emphasizes Woolf's assertions by explicitly stating what Woolf's work implies. Butler states, "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (190). For Butler, gender is not a singular entity, rather it is "a performance that is *repeated*" (191). She argues that "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (191). Gender is not a fixed idea; rather, it is malleable, inclined to change with time and open to various forms and interpretations.

Buchbinder takes up this theory of gender, providing an interesting example relevant to Woolf's work. He writes, "Constructionist theory would thus argue that male homosexuality is not in itself abnormal ... To say that it is unnatural or immoral or repulsive is to impose a judgement upon it that has ... less to do with the reality of homosexuality than with the speaker's assumptions" (7). This is a crucial point to note because it highlights part of Woolf's portrayal of Neville as well as the other men who live outside the norm of British gender expectations. Throughout her novels, Woolf does not judge these characters or suggest that they are somehow abnormal

because they are unique. She depicts these characters as noble and flawed, attempting to find some sense of stability in a culture that reserves stability only for those who do as they are told. The very nature of her characterizations suggests that these men are, in fact, normal; they are products of their culture, just as much as Percival and Richard Dalloway. Though society, for the most part, attempts to marginalize and ignore these men, what becomes clear is that, to Woolf, unique gender performances are as “normal” as masculine men and feminine women.

## CHAPTER II

## “THE CULT OF MANLINESS”

The concept of manliness had become supremely important in Britain during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, so much so that it came to influence many aspects of British culture, a fact Woolf is careful to point out to her readers. Woolf creates a series of characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* that reflect different aspects of manliness, establishing for her audience a strong sense of the power this ideology commands socially. J.A. Mangan and James Walvin provide some historical perspective on manliness, writing, “To the early Victorian it [manliness] represented a concern with a successful transition from Christian immaturity to maturity, demonstrated by earnestness, selflessness and integrity: to the late Victorian it stood for neo-Spartan virility as exemplified by stoicism, hardiness and endurance” (1). They continue, writing that manliness embraced “qualities of physical courage, chivalric ideals, virtuous fortitude with additional connotations of military and patriotic virtue” (1). George Mosse further defines manliness, stating, “Such a true man was a man of action who controlled his passions, and who in his harmonious and well proportioned bodily structure expressed his contentment to moderation and self control” (101).

Many historians have discussed the heightened significance of manliness during the mid to late Victorian period. One of the most common reasons provided for this development was the “concern felt about the physical, and later the psychological, condition of a highly urbanized plebian life where physical and social deprivation was widespread” (Managan & Walvin 4). Coupled with a concern about “the excessive

influence of women” (Sinfield 64) upon boys as they developed into young men, there grew a renewed interest in how best to instill manliness in British boys. As a result, a multilayered system of education was developed in England, designed to nurture and cultivate the masculinity believed to be inherent in every boy.

Perhaps the most significant layer of that system was the creation of the British public school system. Mangan and Walvin write, “After its inception in the mid and late nineteenth-century English public schools, a neo-Spartan ideal of masculinity was diffused throughout the English speaking world with the unreflecting and ethnocentric confidence of an imperial race” (3). These schools were designed essentially to isolate boys from the distractions of family, (mothers and girls in particular) as well as any social activities that could otherwise divert them from developing into a proper British gentleman. Traditional academics were an important part of this education as well, yet the primary function of these institutions was to provide instruction on the multiple facets of masculinity. Alan Sinfield argues, “The middle-class public school system was the main site where manliness was supposed to be established. That system did have other priorities ... But, distinctively, it was to keep men masculine” (64). Sinfield continues, “The parting of boys from women who were generally dominant in their childhood, and subjecting of them to systematic brutalization [in school], were not the incidental price of ‘a good education’; *they were the point*” (65).

While boys were instilled with tales of heroic British soldiers, explorers, and colonizers in school, they were expected to express and test their manliness on the playing field. Great importance was placed on athletics in school as a way to apply the lessons learned in the classroom. Roberta Park writes, “The games-playing cult which emerged first in Britain ... gave concrete – and spectacular— attention to action

through the medium of the male body” (10). Walvin adds, “Games became an agency for disciplining the young and addicting them to a number of important individual and collective qualities: obedience, physical commitment, accepting rules and authority and to give one’s all for the good of the team (or house, or school, or country)” (250). He continues, “The two games which dominated the lives of public school athleticism – football and cricket— were highly structured and disciplined” (250). While sports appeared on the surface to provide an outlet for energetic teenage boys who spent a great deal of time studying, the reality was that encouraging athletic competition was a calculated decision with a definite goal in mind. Sports allowed boys to experience and overcome physical challenges, to build camaraderie and to gauge their level of masculinity against others. Athletic, in effect, provided another layer of indoctrination in the tenets of manliness.

With school and athletics, many felt that activities such as camping and scouting were important ways to help develop a boy’s masculinity. Scouting, in particular, became more organized during the Victorian period, eventually coalescing into the Boy Scouts. Allen Warren describes the first scouting manual, *Scouting for Boys*, as almost a handbook for manliness. He states, “The Scouts’ laws enjoin him to be honourable, loyal, useful, friendly, courteous in his dealings, kind to animals, to obey orders with a smile and to look after his money in a thrifty fashion” (201). The scouting handbook is an important artifact when examining manliness, not only because it was extremely popular among boys of the period and built upon accepted concepts of masculinity, but because it connects manliness to something of far deeper cultural significance. Warren continues, “From its opening pages there is a direct association between manliness and the life and training of the military scout, trapper and colonial frontiersman. These are the ‘real men,’ who do their duty to the King and

their countrymen and who form part of a heroic national tradition stretching back to the knights of King Arthur and Richard I and including Raleigh, Drake and Captain Cook” (201). In creating this important link between masculinity and the heroic traditions of Britain’s past, manliness was no longer a device used to counteract the effects of city life or the over-influence of women, it was a matter of national identity and pride. *Scouting for Boys* transformed manliness from a socially imposed conception of gender into something intrinsic in every boy’s makeup, a significant aspect of their genetic being as natural born Englishmen. The concept of the rugged outdoorsman was another step toward achieving the ideal of British manliness. The intelligent, athletic young man who was stoic, well spoken while at the same time rugged and able to fend for himself had, by the turn of the century, become the ideal perception of the British man. Developing boys into this ideal man became a project of great importance during this period, requiring a complex, multi-systemic regimen of indoctrination. What developed was a process where school, sports, and scouting became the primary tools used to inculcate boys with the narrow, unyielding rules of British masculinity and the social expectations associated with that ideal.

Beyond fighting urban frailty and female influence on boys, there appeared to many in Britain at this particular time a more practical reason to organize a system designed to cultivate masculinity. Park writes, “In Britain, concern about vigorous action was heightened by the demands of the Crimean War (1854-6) and the needs of a nation which was engaged in empire-building and intent upon expanding its commercial sphere of influence” (10). While the playground and scouts proved significant in “encouraging the physical fitness which imperial life demanded” (Walvin 248), “it was ... in the more dangerous world of colonial adventure ... that such lessons were thought most valuable” (Walvin 249). As Great Britain continued

to take possession of whole sections of Africa, India and other parts of the world, they were in constant need of adventurous young men to do the physical work of colonizing. Moreover, colonial adventure provided an important outlet for an individual to express his masculinity while engaged in efforts to increase his country's wealth and global influence.

This is not to suggest that manliness was the sole reason behind imperial expansion during the Victorian period. Certainly there were several factors contributing to this expansion including the desire to exploit the natural resources of other countries and expand British authority worldwide. Yet one must recognize that there was a definite ideology behind the stated ambition to expand, an ideology that made it not only acceptable but responsible to colonize non-Western countries, to impose 'modernity' upon the primitive peoples of the world. Walvin explains that a "host of little wars and overseas adventures ... provided further evidence, and proof ... that Britain's unique role in the world – her apparently irresistible rise to global pre-eminence – was shaped by the distinctive qualities of her men-folk" (243). He continues, "If Britain was the world's leading power it was because her people were superior. There is ... a welter of evidence to illustrate the fact that the British *believed* themselves to be superior" (251). This sense of superiority combined with the tenets of manliness wielded immense social and political influence, creating an atmosphere that made colonization seem almost inevitable.

The language of manliness permeates *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* as Woolf establishes the power of the social group she is examining. One of the first scenes in *Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates the effects of British social training upon men well schooled in the expectations associated with masculinity. As a car carrying either a royal or the Prime Minister is spotted driving slowly down the street,

the men in the crowd demonstrate their reverence for British tradition and social order. Woolf writes:

Tall men, men of robust physique, well-dressed men with their tailcoats and their white slips and their hair raked back who ... perceived instinctively that greatness was passing, and the pale light of the immortal presence fell upon them as it had fallen upon Clarissa Dalloway. At once they stood even straighter, and removed their hands, and seemed ready to attend their Sovereign. (18)

The suspicion of ‘greatness’ passing elicits a very specific, almost military reaction from the men watching the spectacle. Like Pavlovian dogs, they respond ‘instinctively’ to one of the key signifiers of their culture, though there is absolutely nothing instinctive about it. These are men trained to react this way when such a vision passes before them, the result of a proper English education. Suzette Henke writes of that scene, “Nationalism is portrayed allegorically as a blind and gaping figure, a spirit of groupthink that engulfs the will. The grotesque caricature is both ludicrous and threatening: behind it lurks Woolf’s perpetual fear of authoritarian forces that lead to cultural devastation” (129). She continues, “Woolf recognizes a genuine danger in social pressures that force men and women to relinquish autonomy in deference to a higher power” (129). Placing this scene at the beginning of the novel helps set a tone for the rest of the book. These anonymous men reveal the degree to which British men have been indoctrinated as they display a deep feeling of affection and respect for a representative (or perceived representative) of the Empire. As Woolf begins her depiction of men in that culture, the concept of ‘groupthink,’ as Henke puts it, becomes central in the larger portrayal of traditional gender expectations.

Woolf does not make explicit statements about masculinity in her texts, rather



she creates characters who represent different aspects of traditional British masculinity. It is through the narrator's descriptions that Woolf is able to present a complete view of the ideal male of that period. Peter Walsh's description of Richard Dalloway is a good example of how specific depictions are woven throughout the fabric of the novels to illustrate the significance of masculinity. Peter says of Dalloway:

He was at his best out of doors, with horses and dogs—how good he was, for instance, when that great shaggy dog of Clarissa's got caught in a trap and had its paw half torn off, and Clarissa turned faint and Dalloway did the whole thing; bandaged, made splints; told Clarissa not to be a fool. (75)

While he has not fought in any wars or served in a foreign post, Dalloway clearly represents the model of British masculinity. He is a man in control of his emotions, a man who does not panic when he finds Clarissa's injured dog. Rather, Dalloway instinctively knows what needs to be done, skills no doubt learned in scouting as a youth. He is also an important politician, a man comfortable mixing with the Prime Minister and other social elites. Peter continues to observe Dalloway, remarking, "He was a thoroughly good sort; a bit limited; a bit thick in the head; yes; but a thoroughly good sort. Whatever he took up he did in the same matter-of-fact sensible way; without a touch of imagination, without a spark of brilliancy, but with the inexplicable niceness of his type" (*Dalloway* 74). Dalloway is indeed a 'type,' a man who does things precisely but without creativity. However, creativity is not expected of him in his position. Dalloway is not a man who, at any point in the text, questions his place socially, the rules by which he is governed or the nature of his feelings and desires. He is a type, a representative of an uncomplicated group of masculine men who fit neatly into the socially prescribed expectations of their gender. Beverly Ann Schlack

writes, “Richard and Hugh Whitbread are the types of patriarchal tyrants who in their roles as minor government officials direct the affairs of the great world” (70). This, ultimately, is one of Woolf’s great complaints with her society. The rules by which everyone must live are maintained and enforced by these shallow, uncreative men who determine the direction of the culture and the people.

Like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waves* presents an iconic figure of English masculinity in Percival. Watching a young Percival, Louis thinks, “His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander” (25), continuing, “Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle” (25). Percival and Dalloway are both presented as explicit representatives of British masculinity; however, Woolf’s portrayal of Percival is more overt in holding him up as the archetype of manliness. Peter Hühn argues, “Percival embodies the traditional personality who is still determined by social inclusions and complete conformity with the existing class and gender conventions and patriotic values, which defines him as a stereotypical young upper middle-class Englishman” (343). Walking among Bernard and his friends is the best of Britain in the flesh, reinforcing through his charisma the lessons drilled into all young men during their education. Bernard, Louis, Neville and the rest are intoxicated by Percival and all that he represents. Bernard explains that, “He [Percival] is conventional; he is the hero. The little boys trooped after him across the playing-fields. They blew their noses as he blew his nose, but unsuccessfully, for he is Percival” (*Waves* 88). It is their duty to follow him, not just to admire him. He is a leader and they are to be led by such a man, willing to follow him to their deaths should he simply give the command. Here, as in the opening of *Mrs. Dalloway*, there appears the groupthink Henke referenced. Something is stirred in these young men when in Percival’s

presence; their reverence for his overpowering manliness suggests that they will mindlessly follow him anywhere.

Like Dalloway, Percival has no difficulty in fulfilling his gender expectations, his manliness coming to him with incredible ease. Hühn writes, “His [Percival’s] stability shows in his ‘monolithic’ self-centeredness and in his spontaneous effect of imposing order and unity upon the group as a whole” (343). Percival’s depiction suggests that the ideal British man should be a whole individual, suffering no inner conflict with his identity or social place. J. W. Graham states, “he exists *per se valens*, at one with his world and himself, with no need to struggle, as his friends must, to assimilate the world-as-object to himself as subject” (314). Both Dalloway and Percival are completely accepting of the requirements of British masculinity, including the repression of emotion or the right to question, much less criticize, their culture. Their lack of any self-reflexive thought or emotional depth is an important point to note. Without those capabilities, Woolf suggests, they are stagnant characters, unable to change and grow in a world that has undergone a violent transformation over the previous decade.

*To the Lighthouse* differs greatly from *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves* in that Woolf offers no clear patriarchal ‘type’ analogous to Dalloway or Percival. While many critics have viewed Mr. Ramsay as the figure of traditional masculinity, I believe that he is a character far more complex than a stereotypical patriarchal ‘type,’ a point I will further develop later. Nevertheless, when discussing the language of manliness within Woolf’s novels, Mr. Ramsay is a character who must be mentioned. His absurd belief that he is a heroic, masculine character allows Woolf to show that many of these middle class men are more than just insipid disciples of manliness; they are delusional as well.

Mr. Ramsay is a man consumed with his legacy as a philosopher and academic, demonstrating a level of reflexivity that separates him from more traditional patriarchs. What is important to note is that his obsession with reaching intellectual immortality is framed in a unique way. Ramsay views that intellectual achievement as a progression through the alphabet. True greatness, he believes, belongs to the few minds who will reach Z, lamenting the realization that he has reached Q but will likely go no further. “How many men in a thousand million, he [Ramsay] asked himself, reach Z after all?” (*Lighthouse* 35). He continues:

Feelings that would not have disgraced a leader who, now that the snow has begun to fall and the mountain top is covered in mist, knows that he must lay himself down and die before morning comes, stole upon him, paling the colour of his eyes, giving him, even in the two minutes of his turn on the terrace, the bleached look of withered old age. Yet he would not die lying down; he would find some crag of rock, and there, his eyes fixed on the storm, trying to the end to pierce the darkness, he would die standing. He would never reach R.  
(*Lighthouse* 35)

He goes on to think in the noblest terms, “It is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies how men will speak of him hereafter” (35). Allyson Booth makes an important point, arguing that if Mr. Ramsay cannot “prove his mettle by reaching his destination, then [he] must construe his heroism from the way in which he handles the journey’s fatal stalling” (137). Ramsay is a man who clearly sees himself as a heroic, masculine figure dying in the adventure of noble achievement. Moreover, he connects himself to a specific aspect of manliness, calling on the ‘tradition’ of adventurers like Drake and Raleigh, a theme further developed throughout the text by Ramsay’s references to the *Charge of the Light Brigade*. The

language of manliness permeates Ramsay's exaggerated self-image, suggesting that, like most educated men of the period, he had a thorough understanding of manliness (though it is questionable how well he actually fulfills those expectations).

Nevertheless, it is clear he views himself no less a man than the great explorers of British tradition, a belief that proves to be totally absurd. Booth writes, "Mr. Ramsay's melodramatic images of himself riding boldly and well, navigating frail bark to a distant shore, or freezing at his alphabetical post certainly indicate his hyperbolic egotism, but these narratives also highlight the uncomfortable position of an ambitious intellectual man stationed in a culture that valorizes death" (140).

In drawing upon the "convention of a triumphant defeat" (Booth 136), Ramsay places himself in a specific context; he is a leader, a soldier or explorer who has made a valiant, manly effort and faced death with a stiff upper lip, in many ways fulfilling a noble English ritual.

It is the absurdity of this man's self-perception that is Woolf's larger point. Hermione Lee states, "The language associated with Mr. Ramsay's thoughts frequently takes on the extravagant mock-heroic tone which was used in *Mrs. Dalloway* as an instrument of satire" (11), continuing, "The metaphor of a dangerous expedition ... colours the passage in which he is trying to 'reach R.' Though it is a satirical image imposed from the outside to make Ramsay's heroic struggle seem absurd, it is also part of his train of thought" (12). While Woolf views men like Dalloway as static and unthinking, Ramsay makes the point that this group of men are hopelessly unaware that their tradition of heroism lacks the same depth that they themselves lack. Ramsay's belief that he is somehow heroic is perfectly within the boundaries of traditional British manliness. However, Ramsay has, in fact, done nothing to merit such a glorious self-image. He has not traversed a desolate landscape

or faced death in battle; he has reached what he believes to be his intellectual peak, nothing more.

The hyperbolic language used to describe Percival's most trivial actions in *The Waves* provides another important example of Woolf mocking the middle class sensibilities of the masculine hero. In the middle of the novel, Bernard describes his vision of Percival's life in India with such blatant exaggeration that it borders on the comical. " 'But now, behold, Percival advances; Percival rides a flea-bitten mare, and wears a sun-helmet. By applying the standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to him, the Bullock-cart is righted in less than five minutes. The Oriental problem is solved. He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were – what indeed he is – a God' " (*Waves* 98). Bernard's imaginative perceptions of Percival throughout the novel are reminiscent of Ramsay's self-delusions, and this instance is no different. Though he would have no way of knowing what his experience in India is like, Bernard is certain that Percival's overt masculinity has overpowered the minor imperial obstacles that he has encountered. More to the point, readers are once again faced with a character who is presented as heroic, though without having done anything to warrant such praise. Instead, Peter Hühn argues, "the novel clearly marks his [Percival's] identity as obsolete and ridiculous both by his unheroic death (a trivial riding accident) and in Bernard's clichéd picture of his service in India" (343).

Clearly Ramsay and Percival are designed to illuminate the emptiness of middle class masculine heroism. To be considered heroic without having done anything of merit is, according to Woolf, acceptable within this culture. As a result, Woolf lays bare the fraudulent nature of British manliness along with the superficiality of men like Dalloway and the institutions they hold dear. That heroism

for these men is so easily attained renders the term, and those burdened by such a label, meaningless.

What is important to note is that while Woolf does a great deal to satirize men like Dalloway and Percival in her descriptions, there also appears to be a measure of sympathy displayed for them, a recognition that they are not simply tyrants who oppress weaker people. Rather, the same men who have the most power within this culture are also victimized by their gender expectations. The best example of this social repression is demonstrated through Richard Dalloway's inability to break free of the expectations of masculinity to tell his wife he loves her. Walking through London on the afternoon of the party, Dalloway thinks to himself, "it is a thousand pities never to say what one feels" (116), something his masculinity simply will not allow him to do. "Here he was walking across London to say to Clarissa in so many words that he loved her. Which one never does say, he thought. Partly one is lazy; partly one's shy" (115).

This is a crucial scene in that readers are given access to Richard's thoughts as he makes his way home after lunch, thoughts dominated by his desire to express what appears to be a simple statement. As he walks home, his mind roams to different subjects: his annoyance with Hugh, his onetime jealousy of Peter Walsh, the sights and sounds of Green Park, and his adoration of royalty. All the while his thoughts are interspersed with visions of handing flowers to Clarissa, telling her he loves her, "For he would say it in so many words, when he came into the room" (*Dalloway* 116). But despite his best intentions and his desires, Dalloway simply cannot work up the nerve to go through with it, silently handing her the flowers. "But how lovely, she said, taking his flowers. She understood: she understood without his speaking" (*Dalloway* 118). Dalloway is so overpowered by his sense of manliness that he is defeated before

he even gets home. To show emotion is to be feminine, to break away from the ideal, something that men like Dalloway find abhorrent. Instead his emotional needs are relegated to fantasies, dreams of things considered socially unacceptable. Dalloway, like the traditional men he represents, is a prisoner of masculinity, trapped in a system of expectations and programmed by a system of indoctrination that proves extremely effective at keeping manly men from breaking with acceptable modes of conduct even when (*especially* when) in private.

Perhaps the most important characteristic shared by many of Woolf's masculine men is that they are of a passing generation. While I have focused on a few specific characters as representing key aspects of traditional masculine gender performance, Woolf presents a host of other characters similar to Dalloway. There are men like Hugh Whitbread, referred to as the "perfect specimen of the public school type" (*Dalloway* 73), or doctors Holmes and Bradshaw who "embody ignorance, repression and rigidity" (Schlack 61). In *The Waves*, Woolf makes allusions to Bernard's teachers, those "men in black gowns" (41) who have taught the boys to "quit ourselves like men" (40). What Woolf makes clear is that these are old men imparting their values and beliefs to the succeeding generation. As Woolf depicts these aging characters, men who represent so much of their society's cultural institutions, she creates the overwhelming impression that the power of manliness is fading with them. In discussing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Alex Zwerdling states, "the class under examination in the novel is living on borrowed time. Its values – 'the public spirited, British Empire, tariff-reform, governing –class spirit' (pp. 85-86), in Peter's words –were very much under attack" (70). He continues, "Woolf gives us a picture of a class impervious to change in a society that desperately needs or demands it, a class that worships tradition and settled order but cannot accommodate the new and



disturbing” (72). Dalloway, Hugh and Dr. Bradshaw, the champion of “family affection; honour; courage” (*Dalloway* 102), all are men who are past their prime, men who are basking in the dimming embers of a dying ideology. Retirement will soon arrive for Richard Dalloway, who is “already making plans for that event. He will write a history of Lady Bruton’s family when he is out of Parliament” (Zwerdling 70). As these men move throughout the day, they do not appear to perform any great civic duties that would suggest they are in any way socially relevant. Hugh’s and Richard’s day consists of helping Lady Bruton write a letter while they have lunch before shopping for gifts for their wives. Eventually Richard strolls to parliament to attend to a committee meeting about ‘ “Armenians,’ he said; or perhaps it was ‘Albanians’ ” (119). Bradshaw’s day is spent providing bad medical advice to Septimus Smith and reminiscing about his life and career. These are men who are at the end of their public lives and as representations of masculinity, they signify the end of that tradition.

Percival is obviously of a different generation than the men of Dalloway’s set, yet he too helps further this point. Percival is a man thoroughly imbued with the expectations of traditional British gender performance. But he represents something more than just conventional masculinity — he is a colonizer, traveling to India to fulfill his imperial duty. Graham states, “the real community of English life [is] issued...from the irrational adherence to traditional values so apparent in the conventional Percival, the strong silent youth who goes to a far country in the service of Empire, as one of its culture-heroes” (726). It is in that imperial service that this culture-hero dies, not engaged in an important military battle or suppressing a revolt by the oppressed, but foolishly falling off his horse. “ ‘His horse tripped. He was thrown’ ” (*Waves* 109). The simplicity of the words suggests the un-heroic nature of

the act. Percival's death in India represents the death of so much of the old patriarchal system, manliness as well as Empire. As Zwerdling points out, "The Empire was crumbling fast. In 1922, the Irish Free State government was proclaimed" (70). He goes on to note that 1922 marks "the beginnings of agitation for [Indian] independence" (70). Placing Percival's death within these specific circumstances represents the end of a significant historical period in Britain, suggesting the society that had blossomed from the seed of masculinity was on a precipitous and unstoppable decline.

One of the key aspects of Woolf's work is her attempt to make plain the dangerous patterns of belief that had taken hold of her society and the system of gender expectations that had developed from those beliefs. Manliness had unquestioningly become an obsession in her country and, her work suggests, was the main force behind a society that oppressed both men and women in Britain. Zwerdling writes, "As a moralist, Woolf works by indirection, subterraneously undermining the officially accepted code, mocking, suggesting, calling into question, rather than asserting, advocating, bearing witness" (70). The first step in Woolf's social criticism is to point out the numerous fallacies and restrictions of the traditional gender expectations dominating her country. By creating characters like Dalloway and Percival, Woolf is able to satirize the patriarchal system that has ensnared men into specific patterns of thought and behavior, patterns that greatly affect women as well. What Woolf is able to demonstrate is that Britain is ruled by a narrow system of classification, a system that makes no exceptions for those who do not or cannot fit into the neatly prescribed categories of masculine or feminine, a system that, by the end of World War I, Woolf suggests, is no longer tenable.

## CHAPTER III

## THE INDEFINABLE MEN

The central male characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* are very different than characters like Richard Dalloway, Dr. Bradshaw, and Percival in a variety of ways. However, it is important to note that they are not the opposite of men like Dalloway. There are times in the novels when these men clearly display characteristics that would qualify as traditionally masculine. Yet they also exhibit traits that Dalloway or Percival could never understand. They are hopelessly self-obsessed, childish, reflexive, given to public fits of emotion, and involved in homoerotic relationships. Unlike Dalloway and Percival, their gender presentation is so complex that they are impossible to classify within the rigid, binaristic system of gender categorization in Britain, a system that only recognizes men as masculine and women as feminine. There is no space for variation in this system, yet variation is one of the defining aspects of these unique male characters.

As a character, Septimus Smith is Woolf's most powerful social critic. There is little question that part of his role in the novel is to underscore Woolf's passionate disapproval of shell-shock treatment in the post-war years, treatments she experienced personally during her own episodes of mental breakdown. However, Septimus comes to represent much more, introducing a number of points about men in post-war Britain and the pressures they faced to conform.

The complexities of Septimus Smith are apparent in the opening pages of the novel. Sitting in Regents Park with his wife, Septimus says, " 'I will kill myself' " (16); suicide is one of the prevailing themes from his first appearance to his last. As

he begins to openly cry in a public park, his wife, Rezia, thinks, “It was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave” (*Dalloway* 23). She continues, “he was selfish. So men are. For he was not ill. Dr. Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him” (23). In these opening lines, readers are presented with a short summation of Septimus’s depiction in the novel. He had been a masculine man, had gone to war to protect his country and his society, only to return profoundly damaged, consumed with hallucinations and thoughts of death. Within those few scenes at the beginning of the novel, readers see that Septimus is a man suffering from shell-shock, a result of his war experience and, Woolf suggests, his stoic response to his best friend’s death. Woolf explains that Septimus “developed” manliness during the war and that he was well-liked and promoted. Yet Woolf makes clear that Septimus develops his manliness to such a point that “when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The war had taught him” (*Dalloway* 86). Suzette Henke writes, “Septimus learned the lesson too well. Adopting a ‘manly’ posture of detached rationality, he embraced the widespread, socially acceptable madness of modern society” (139).

What masculinity has done to Septimus is one of Woolf’s most important arguments. Despite his manly credentials as a heroic veteran, his experience in the war has not reinforced the widely held belief that the morally sound embodiment of English masculinity could withstand the emotional, physical, and psychological trauma of violence and death. Karen DeMeester argues, “Woolf’s characterization of Septimus illustrates the disillusionment and confusion that result from this postwar identity crisis. Septimus could no longer be the man he was before the war or have

faith in his prewar beliefs and values” (656). She suggests, “the civilized order of England and its social rubrics, which define Septimus’s assumptions and expectations about himself ... could not stand up against the truth that Septimus discovered in war” (657).

Like Percival, Septimus excelled at being masculine. Yet what the war ultimately taught him was the inadequacies of manliness and the social system born of that concept. Septimus undergoes a profound change after his return from the war. Having returned with a new awareness of his defective society and a mind filled with horrible images, he develops shell-shock, a term that, by the time *Mrs. Dalloway* was published, had transformed “from a battlefield disease into a social indicator” (Mosse 104). Septimus is no longer manly on that June day in 1925 when he sits in the park declaring to his wife that he will kill himself. He is self-absorbed, cowardly, unable to care for himself or his wife, and he cries in public — all aspects of his personality that render him socially unacceptable.

Shell-shock was a topic widely discussed in Britain during the time Mrs. Dalloway was written. In August of 1922, a report investigating the causes and treatments of shell-shock had been presented to the British Parliament. Sue Thomas states, “Sections of the report ... assuredly seem to inform Woolf’s characterization and development of Septimus Smith, a character she conceived in October, 1922” (49). Woolf’s work clearly draws from these discussions, reflecting the treatments and misconceptions surrounding shell-shock at that time.

However, Septimus’s war experience may not be the sole cause of his mental illness. Woolf implies that Septimus may have been involved in a homoerotic relationship with his friend Evans. Henke observes, “Woolf subtly suggests a homosexual attraction between Septimus and Evans – an affection sublimated in the

ingenious metaphor of two romping dogs” (141). What the novel insinuates is that the inadequacy of manliness was not the only lesson Septimus learned during his war experience. “Ironically ... he had simultaneously discovered homosexual inclinations that in turn played havoc with his ‘manly’ conscience and thereby contributed to his madness” (Bazin & Lauter 29). Returning to his society, Septimus had to deal somehow with his homoerotic feelings for his friend in a culture that does not provide space for such an important self-examination. In fact, “The taboo surrounding homosexual attraction undoubtedly contributed to Septimus’s ambivalent feelings about Evans—at first an absence of grief and later a sense of sin” (Bazin & Lauter 18).

Historian Paul Fussell provides further clarification regarding a homoerotic reading of Septimus’s war experience. Fussell writes, “given the deprivation and loneliness and alienation characteristic of the soldier’s experience—given, that is, his need for affection in a largely womanless world—we will not be surprised to find both the actuality and the recall of front-line experience replete with what we can call the homoerotic” (272). Interestingly, historians commonly accept that men fighting in the First World War would have been exposed already to homoerotic relationships if they were products of the British public school system, as many of them were. Alan Sinfield argues, “the very institutions that were supposed to protect men from effeminacy were the ones where same-sex practices flourished” (65). He continues, “Commentators generally agree that same-sex practices thrived in public schools. I go further: public schools were crucial in the development of homosexual identity” (65).

What is important to note about Septimus is that when Woolf created this damaged veteran, as well as many of her other characters, she drew from specific male characteristics that were culturally present, despite the ubiquity of the manliness

ideal. There was a massive population of veterans returning from the war suffering from shell-shock and questioning the fundamental beliefs of their culture. Moreover, as Fussell makes clear, homosexual relationships of varying degrees were known and understood by soldiers and students. What Woolf does with her presentation of Septimus is expose those realities of life to a society unwilling to acknowledge them, forcing her readers to recognize male gender performances outside of and apart from what was commonly accepted.

While Septimus is one of the more significant and complex of Woolf's male characters, her novels present a series of men who share his difficulty in finding an appropriate social place. Peter Walsh, for example, has much in common with Septimus. Alex Zwerdling states, "Peter thinks, and it is true that he is in some sense an emotional exhibitionist ... What one sees throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* is a single disease that takes different forms. Peter's or Septimus' ... emotional compulsiveness and display, their gaudiness and profligacy, are the antithesis of the denial of feeling in the governing class" (78). In fact, Woolf uses very similar language when describing each man's episodes of public emotion: "the tears running down his [Peter's] cheeks" (46) to "Tears ran down his [Septimus's] cheeks" (22). That both men are shown in their initial scenes as crying publicly is an important statement about their lack of masculinity. For Peter, it suggests that perhaps he is suffering from some sort of emotional trauma similar to Septimus's. Woolf implies as much, suggesting that he has never fully recovered from Clarissa's rejection years before. In a larger sense, their crying suggests indifference toward the rules of masculinity, strict rules that forbid such overt public displays of emotion, displays detestable to a man like Dalloway. Margaret Blanchard observes, "Crying, while indicating an emotional sensitivity useful to 'feminine' rational abilities ... is totally inappropriate to the

stoicism and goal-directedness of ‘masculine’ production” (304). That Septimus and Peter lack any real control over their emotions is a significant point because it suggests a measure of femininity in their performance, marking them as weak and unmanly.

While Peter is not a character suffering from a debilitating psychosis, he is presented as a man overwhelmed by and obsessed with his past failures. The majority of the narrative surrounding him examines his relationship with Clarissa, their mutual friends like Sally Seton, and Clarissa’s eventual courtship with Dalloway. The entire foundation of their relationship is built on their shared past; their moments together in the novel are almost always colored by memories of their youth.

Standing together in Clarissa’s private attic room, Peter is reminded of difficult memories that have clearly tormented him throughout his life, particularly his rejection by both Clarissa and her family. Twice Clarissa forces Peter to remember their past, as though drawing some pleasure from his suffering. “ ‘Do you remember,’ she said, ‘how the blinds used to flap at Bourton?’ ” (*Dalloway* 42), continuing, “ ‘Do you remember the lake?’ ” (*Dalloway* 43). Peter is tortured by these thoughts, memories of their shared experiences that have never left him. “Of course I did, thought Peter; it almost broke my heart too, he thought; and was overcome with his own grief, which rose like a moon looked at from a terrace, ghastly beautiful with light from the sunken day. I was more unhappy than I have ever been since” (*Dalloway* 42). Zwerdling writes, “Peter’s tears and moments of joy are paler variants of Septimus’ rages and rapturous visions” (78). He argues that these men are linked by their “failure to maintain a natural flow of response commensurate with the occasion or situation” (78). What further links these two men is the emotional trauma each man has experienced. Certainly Septimus’s trauma is far more severe, resulting



in a complete inability to function on any social level. Peter's traumatic experience is less severe, yet Woolf's depiction strongly suggests that it has affected him greatly, leaving him unable to control his overwhelming emotions.

In the early part of the novel, Peter returns from a long stay in India as a colonial administrator with the intention of finding work in England. Yet Peter does not return as a heroic figure who has been working in the service of the Queen and the perpetuation of the empire. Instead Peter returns a fairly pathetic figure. "And she would think me a failure, which I am in their sense, he thought; in the Dalloway's sense. Oh yes, he had no doubt about that; he was a failure" (*Dalloway* 43). From the Dalloways' and society's view, he is correct. Not only does he display open and unabashed emotion, but he has returned from India without having distinguished himself in any significant way. Woolf's most detailed description of Peter emphasizes that very point: "Peter Walsh, who had done just respectably, filled the usual posts adequately, was liked but thought a little cranky" (*Dalloway* 158). More to the point, Peter is unable to attain employment on his own, relying instead on men like Richard Dalloway or Hugh Whitbred. "At fifty-three he had to come and ask them to put him into some secretary's office, to find him some usher's job teaching little boys Latin" (*Dalloway* 74). Here, again, there exists a similarity between Peter and Septimus. Colonial adventure was seen, like war, as a place to prove one's manliness, yet Peter arrives in England a jobless, emotional wreck, not unlike Septimus. He had failed to prove his manliness in India, to achieve some level of status, power or wealth, a failure that marks him as unmasculine.

Woolf provides another point about Peter that may also play a part in his unmanly performance. Peter had not grown up entirely in England; rather, he is part of "a respectable Anglo-Indian family which for at least three generations had

administered the affairs of a continent” (*Dalloway* 55). Elizabeth Clea Lamont suggests, “Peter’s relationship to either country is not easy to categorize; neither place is definitively ‘home’ or ‘foreign’ for him” (174). She continues, “He is in between two radically different cultures, living in an Appaduraiian ‘ethnoscope’ created by the immigration of British families into India necessitated by colonialism” (174). As a result, Peter “is a product and victim of British colonialism” (Lamont 175). Because he has spent so much time as a member of two distinctly different cultures, Peter is, in fact, a full member of neither. This is particularly significant because it is quite likely that Peter’s connection to that all-powerful ideal of British manliness may actually be rather tenuous, certainly by comparison to a man like Dalloway, a man who may never have left England in his life. When Peter thinks to himself that he is a failure “in their sense,” he is a man who, unlike Dalloway, recognizes that there is more than one standard by which an individual may be measured. Peter is an immensely complex character who clearly sees the world in a far more global sense. Perhaps it is that very point of view that allows him the freedom to do things Dalloway only imagines, such as expressing emotion. Yet while such a perspective offers him some freedom from the pressures of traditional British gender expectations, it also locks him out of the mainstream, leaving him culturally unacceptable.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf continues this theme of unique male characters who do not fit the traditional understanding of masculinity. As previously mentioned, Mr. Ramsay is a character who appears to be associated with manliness in that he conceives of himself as a traditional British hero in the mold of an explorer proudly meeting death (albeit a metaphysical death) in the midst of a noble adventure. He is also closely associated with manliness in that his first appearance in the novel seems to establish him as a classic patriarchal figure. When Mrs. Ramsay tells James that the

weather will be good enough to sail to the lighthouse the following day, Mr. Ramsay is incredulous, immediately correcting her and drawing the ire of his son. “ ‘But, said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, ‘it won’t be fine’ ” (*Lighthouse* 4). Woolf describes him as “incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children” (*Lighthouse* 4). Mr. Ramsay’s introduction in the novel gives the impression that he is a patriarchal tyrant, and it is tempting to see him in much the same light as a Dalloway or Bradshaw, a masculine man who accepts things as they are, meeting hardship with stoic fortitude.

Yet Ramsay’s presentation proves to be more multifaceted than that of the average patriarch Woolf portrays in her novels. In fact, that Woolf initially presents him as a patriarch is an important point. As was stated earlier, Woolf uses Ramsay as a tool designed to ridicule the middle class concept of the hero. But the satire only works as a literary tool because Ramsay *does not* resemble a heroic, masculine man in any way. That this intellectual, who demonstrates only a few characteristics associated with manliness, sees himself in the tradition of a Raleigh or Drake is absurd. Hermione Lee asserts, “it is evident that Virginia Woolf did mean Mr. Ramsay to be ludicrous” (12). He is a man for whom an excursion to the lighthouse is the closest he comes to a difficult journey. As an “awkward and ungainly” (Lee 10) man, Mr. Ramsay is hardly symbolic of the ideal masculine hero.

What stands out in Woolf’s depiction of Mr. Ramsay is the inordinate amount of time he spends reflecting on himself, something that sets him decidedly apart from Dalloway and Bradshaw. Throughout the majority of the novel, Ramsay is depicted as a man obsessed with his work, his successes and failures, and most importantly, his legacy as a philosopher and academic. Woolf writes, “He would always be worrying

about his own books—will they be read, are they good, why aren't they better, what do people think of me?" (118). He is consumed by his internal thoughts, his constant questioning of his place within academia, and his unyielding self-scrutiny. It is this constant focus on his insecurities that marks Ramsay as the polar opposite of men like Percival and Dalloway. Secure in their status and masculinity, those men see no need for self-examination and feel no sense of anxiety over how they are viewed by others. That Ramsay lacks that sense of security is a significant indicator that he should not be associated with the more traditional characters in Woolf's work.

As he spends his days lamenting that he is not a great man, Ramsay is often lost in an almost pathological self-denigration. "Mr. Ramsay repeated, never taking his eyes from her face, that he was a failure" (*Lighthouse* 37). While his favorite sycophant Charles Tansley is always there to boost Ramsay's ego, Mrs. Ramsay is the only person able to ease him back from the depths of his angst. "It was sympathy that he wanted, to be assured of his genius" (*Lighthouse* 37). Woolf continues, "Filled with her words, like a child who drops off satisfied, he said, at last, looking at her with humble gratitude, restored, renewed, that he would take a turn; he would watch the children playing cricket" (38). This characterization of their relationship is significant because it portrays Ramsay, not as the patriarchal man in charge of his household, but as another of the children desperately in need of a mother to swaddle and nourish him. In fact, he appears to be needier than his actual children. He is, in effect, the baby of the family, monopolizing the mother's time, leaving her less accessible to the older siblings. Booth observes, "He [Ramsay] is at once a baby bird—all mouth, all appetite, insatiable" (141). What seems clear is that Ramsay's constant self-loathing traps him in this man-child position, a pattern that does not change even after Mrs. Ramsay's death.

Critics like Bernice Carroll and Sheldon Brivic view Mr. Ramsay as simply a tyrannical patriarch, a man who “oppresses all of the women and children in the novel” (Brivic 8). But to simply group Ramsay with men like Bradshaw (as Carroll does) ignores the intricacies of his character. Ramsay is a man who expresses several gender aspects. He can be cruel and patriarchal while at the same time infantile, profoundly insecure and self-obsessed, elements of his performance that make him difficult to label as traditionally masculine. Taken as a whole, Ramsay has little in common with men like Dalloway or Bradshaw.

In *The Waves*, Bernard, Louis, and Neville are men presented not through their outward actions but through their individual interior monologues, speeches that chart the endless examination of their individual identities in relation to each other and other men they meet. Those thoughts lead these men to question constantly how they fit into a society so consumed with manliness. Peter Hühn points out, “The technique of unmediated verbalization in the soliloquies implies ... a consistently high degree of self-awareness with respect to their identity problems and their social as well as psychological circumstances” (341). The power and depth of their awareness marks Bernard and his friends as profoundly different from Percival, a character who lacks any sense of self-awareness, evident in his missing voice in the novel. Like Mr. Ramsay, these characters are extremely self-reflexive, persistently focused on their identities and their social place. Here again, Woolf uses reflexive thought to create a separation between traditional masculine characters and those with a more complex gender performance.

What is particularly interesting is how Bernard, Neville, and Louis perceive Percival the hero. As was previously stated, he is the model male figure, the ideal against which they assess themselves, the ideal to which they never quite measure up.

While their hyperbolic statements about Percival's heroism are designed to ridicule the culture's obsession with manliness, these statements also offer an interesting insight into these three men. Their worship of Percival is genuine and shows the depth of their own indoctrination into the cult of manliness. At the same time, they demonstrate a measure of envy toward the simplicity of traditional masculinity. Hühn writes, "the characters' admiration of Percival betrays a nostalgic longing for a pre-modern uncomplicated existence from the position of self-conscious insecurity" (343). Percival achieves inner harmony because he lacks all of the things that make Bernard, Louis and Neville so troubled. Percival is not complex; he is not reflexive; he does not question himself, his place in society, the directives of that society, or the implications societal decisions have upon others. Percival takes well to the tenets of manliness; he is able to do as society demands without the slightest difficulty, and for that, Bernard, Louis, and Neville are supremely envious because "Percival is the complete integration for which they hunger and search" (Graham 316).

Lisa Marie Lucenti observes, "each of the characters spends an immoderate amount of time searching for some delineation of 'self' on which to stand secure" (2). The underlying question of the novel is, as Bernard states, " 'What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that' " (*Waves* 54). Bernard and his friends are in a constant search for some sort of tangible, definable self. Bernard thinks to himself, " 'I am not one and simple, but complex and many. Bernard in public, bubbles; in private, is secretive' " (54). Neville ponders the same questions later in the text. "As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody—with whom?—with Bernard? Yes, it is Bernard, and it is to Bernard that I shall put the question, Who am I?' " (59).

What dominates these characters is their overwhelming desire to find a definable, recognizable identity that can be categorized socially. The culture Wolf

describes is a place of categories, subcategories and divisions based on what an individual is and is not. Yet each man is made up of various gender elements that collectively do not reflect the rubric of acceptable gender expectations of their society. They yearn for Percival's simplicity because he so accurately echoes those expectations. They, on the other hand, embark on a life long search for that acceptable gender performance.

The conflict these characters face simmers just under the surface of what they present socially, a presentation designed to reflect a level of stability. Bernard, the writer, "attempts to define his identity by ascribing to himself a meaningful and coherent story and communicate it to a listener" (Hühn 344). Similarly, Neville attempts to insure some sense of "order and permanence through the roles of poet and (homosexual) lover and he seeks unity with himself through the sharpness of his intellect" (Hühn 341). Hühn goes on to point out that Louis "models himself on traditional authority in the powerful role of a businessman" (342). Yet what their thoughts reveal is that these presentations lack any substance. Rather, these men are in a constant state of change and therefore lack Percival's unchanging stability. Hühn comments that Bernard's "self-observation intermittently forces him to become aware of the manipulative nature of these [narrative] descriptions and see through their artificiality" (344). For Bernard, an identity based on being a writer evolves into something that makes him a manipulator of others and of their stories, a quality he comes to find repugnant. By the end of the novel, Bernard no longer trusts language as a means of establishing his identity. "Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half sheets of note paper. I begin to long for some little language ... broken words, inarticulate words ... I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph" (*Waves* 176). Hühn observes that

Bernard's misgivings "compels him to transcend language, as it were, in his search for more substantial other-reference in order to re-stabilize his identity" (344-345), stability he never achieves.

Much of Neville's identity is colored by his homosexual desire. Like Septimus and Peter, Neville is emotional, unafraid to express his love for Percival. As a result, Neville is a character unlikely ever to be accepted in a homophobic society obsessed with masculinity. Louis, the son of a Brisbane banker, finds himself in the same position as Peter Walsh, a product and victim of colonialism. His feelings of "exclusion and alienation from the social world of his peers" (Lucenti 2) places him, like Peter, between two worlds without ever actually settling in one place entirely.

None of these men can find an appropriate place for themselves within British society. Their desperation for stability within the existing system of acceptable gender performance develops into an obsession fed by their frustration as social outsiders. Peter Hühn argues, "in the end the characters invariably feel dissatisfied and at variance with their ascribed identities" (342). He continues, "Thus the selves in *The Waves* perceive themselves as split, fluid and changeable with time and social context" (342), clearly a significant departure from the completely stable identity of Percival. These are men who seek to find space within the framework of acceptability, not to tear it down. That they cannot fit into that system, however, forces Bernard, Neville and Louis, as well as Woolf's readers, to question those very social rubrics that dominated Britain at that time.

The men in *The Waves* face the same challenge as most of Woolf's more intricate male characters in that they are essentially indefinable in a society that only accepts a narrow view of male gender performance. As Woolf describes these men, she repeatedly draws on specific personality traits to help her present a more complex



understanding of gender. These men are self-obsessed, prone to emotional public outbursts, involved in homoerotic relationships, jealous of others, and they are desperately afraid of failure — professional, personal, and cultural. Moreover, these men show that their various characteristics are fluid and often overlapping, occasionally incorporating aspects of traditional masculinity. Men like Septimus and Mr. Ramsay can be both manly and infantile within the same scene. What is crucial to understand about these characters is that, as has been noted with Septimus Smith, Woolf's depictions are not the product of one individual's imagination. Rather, Woolf is drawing from social elements well established within her culture, aspects of male gender performance that have been given no socially acceptable space within British society. As a result, Woolf's characters give voice and meaning to those facets of gender that have been socially ignored because they do not fit within the accepted structure of manliness.

These characterizations are vital to Woolf's larger social argument because she makes the insufficiency of traditional gender expectations self-evident and unquestionable. Woolf's more intricate male characters establish that there are few men who are completely masculine, compelling her readers to question traditionally accepted gender expectations and to begin thinking about a new, more inclusive conception of gender. What is evident from her descriptions is that manliness is often one aspect of a larger continuum of gender performance options. Woolf does not attempt to negotiate space for these men within the current system of British masculinity because she seems to recognize that the traditional view of gender must be discarded, not restructured. Woolf's work advocates for a new understanding of gender as the only significant step toward the ultimate goal of gender equality.

## CONCLUSION

### A CULTURAL AWAKENING

Virginia Woolf asserts through her novels that a radical shift away from a traditional view of manliness is the only way to transform a social system preoccupied with enforcing a narrow ideal of behavior. The alternate view she presents clearly interprets gender as repeated acts performed by the individual. But Woolf's characters display a wide range of performances that encompass a variety of personality traits, necessitating an organizing structure to help contextualize the performances in her novels. Writing about *Mrs. Dalloway*, Alex Zwerdling observes that "The characters in the novel can be seen as ranged on a sort of continuum with Bradshaw at one end and Septimus at the other" (75). Zwerdling makes an important contribution to a reading of Woolf's other novels as well in that he provides a frame for examining Woolf's desire to restructure society in more egalitarian terms. What is pivotal about the idea of a gender performance spectrum is that such a concept provides the social inclusiveness advocated for in Woolf's work. A gender spectrum encompasses all of the various gender performances in her novels, from the most traditional to the least. Additionally, there is nothing within the spectrum that distinguishes any set of performances as more acceptable than any other. Rather, men like Richard Dalloway and Peter Walsh operate along the same continuum regardless of the obvious differences in their performances.

The end points Zwerdling sets for his 'continuum' are interesting to note. By designating Bradshaw and Septimus as opposing boundaries, he posits an extremely traditional performance in contrast to an extremely unconventional performance, an

opposition that seems appropriate given the nature of the characters described in the novels. Certainly, characters like Richard Dalloway, Percival, and Hugh Whitbread would occupy the same space as Bradshaw: men who represent extreme examples of traditional British masculinity. But ranged along that spectrum would be men such as Peter Walsh, Mr. Ramsay, and Bernard, characters presenting unique combinations of personality traits that result in distinctive gender performances. While many of Woolf's male characters are not as extreme as either Bradshaw or Septimus, they display aspects of those extremes within their overall performances. As has been noted, men like Mr. Ramsay, Peter Walsh and others often display characteristics of traditional manliness combined with varying degrees of self-reflexivity, emotional outburst, and childishness. Each performance is distinct to that character, yet significantly, each operates within the boundaries of that gender spectrum Zwerdling describes.

The concept of a gender spectrum is important to Woolf's work because it represents a much more accurate depiction of the multilayered society existing in Britain at the time the novels were written. Acknowledging the diversity of that society sets aside the categories and social exclusions that dominated that culture. Instead of attempting to ignore, suppress, or conceal shell-shocked veterans or homosexuals, for example, a gender spectrum recognizes those performances as viable, acceptable ways of being. Within such a society, Richard Dalloway could tell his wife that he loves her without the burden of guilt caused by masculine expectations. Dr. Crane would be free to pursue a more diverse array of professions should he so choose. Moreover, Septimus Smith would have the freedom to acknowledge the multiple emotional and psychological traumas that drive him to madness and suicide.

What must always be remembered is that Woolf was not solely concerned with emancipating men from the tyranny of this patriarchal system; she was interested in freeing all people from the oppressive nature of the gender norms of her society. Margaret Blanchard points out that Woolf strongly believed that “Male/female roles had to be radically redefined before significant numbers of women could even choose to work for political and economic reforms” (293). Woolf’s work clearly offers those radical redefinitions she deemed crucial to the emergence of significant gender reform. Recognizing gender as a culturally influenced performance rather than a biological determination represents that radical redefinition of traditional gender roles. The construct of a gender spectrum helps to further shape how those gender roles are understood socially. The acceptance of more progressive conceptualizations of gender would provide for the exact type of gender freedom Woolf advocates for in her novels. Men and women would be free to develop a unique gender performance regardless of their biological categorization. Furthermore, it seems fair to assume that any society enlightened enough to adopt such a progressive reworking of gender roles would also be enlightened enough to foster and protect gender equality among all of its citizens. As a result, the radical redefinitions Blanchard mentions may be, in and of themselves, enough to bring about the sort of reform necessary in Britain during this period.

The society that Woolf envisions is considerably different from the one in which she lived and worked when creating these novels. It is important to note that, while Woolf’s work may espouse a sound theoretical argument for achieving gender equality, any notion that some or all of her suggestions would have been considered practical solutions is unrealistic at best. To transform Britain of the 1920’s into something closer to Woolf’s vision would have required a massive restructuring that

likely would have been considered ridiculous at the time. As Barbara Andrew states, “Relinquishing patriarchal paradigms requires renouncing the desire for domination and possession” (7). In effect, Woolf’s society would have to completely renounce manliness and nearly all aspects of that ideology, including the “desire for domination.” The consequences of such an idea are far reaching. For example, such a radical cultural change would require the complete overhaul (if not outright dismantling) of the British public school system, along with the various extra-curricular activities designed to develop manliness, such as scouting. It would also be necessary for Britain to divest itself of its extensive colonial holdings, ceding territorial control to the native peoples, presumably with the government’s deepest apologies. While it is clear that post-war Britain was in a state of change, due in large part to the catastrophe of World War I, to expect that sort of massive cultural conversion is totally unrealistic. The political and social will for such a significant transformation simply did not exist. The society that Woolf envisions, one that totally redefines gender in order to achieve equality, is a utopian dream, one constructed out of sound theoretical principles but lacking any practical viability.

Elizabeth Clea Lamont argues that “Woolf goes to great lengths to present a historical London in great transition both at home and in the colonies” (165). It may be more accurate to say that the England presented in Woolf’s novels is going through an awakening, a recognition that the ideal of masculinity that had been thought infallible and irrefutable for generations does not hold true against reality, exemplified by the shell-shock epidemic. The word “transition” suggests that the people of post-war Britain recognized the substantial flaws inherent in their society and were ready to effect significant change aimed at addressing those problems. Yet the society Woolf depicts is nowhere near that point. Influential men like Dr. Bradshaw and

Richard Dalloway represent those patriarchs who still hold some measure of social power, dwindling though it may be. Clearly the impact of shell shock had helped bring about this awakening, “yet shell-shock as a metaphor for unmanly behavior ... held well into the second world war” (Mosse, 107), suggesting that the ideal of masculinity continued to remain socially relevant in Britain well into the following decades. The failure of manliness in battle seemed to rouse those in Woolf’s society out of the paralyzing indoctrination many had been subjected to in their youth. But it is unrealistic to imagine that at such an early stage of awakening, Woolf’s society would be so quick to reject an ideology that had been central to their culture.

To say, however, that Virginia Woolf was ready for a transformation *is* an accurate statement. Woolf’s novels make this point clear. Between 1925 and 1931 Woolf publishes *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, three novels that target the British obsession with manliness as one of the most critical social issue facing her country. Woolf had long since “awakened” to the social and political realities of masculinity in her society. By the time the war ends and pointed social questions develop in light of the shell-shock epidemic, Woolf is already beginning to propose arguments for sweeping cultural change.

At a time when Britain was viewed as one of the most powerful societies in the world, Virginia Woolf saw it as one of the weakest, a society compromised by its obsession with manliness, the driving force behind the social rubrics that oppressed both men and women. Through her work, Woolf confronts that system, pointing out how an erroneous understanding of gender created a repressive patriarchal society where gender equality was difficult for many to imagine. Woolf’s writings endeavor to address that. “She observes, describes, connects, provides the materials for a judgment about society and social issues: it is the reader’s work to put the

observations together and understand the coherent point of view behind them” (Zwerdling 69). She is not a political propagandist looking to overtly overthrow society; rather, Woolf wants her readers to recognize what she has understood for a long time, the oppression under which they all struggle. In her effort to make that point clear, Woolf presents her readers with a portrait of their culture, a description that accentuates the imperfections, the cruelties, and the repression. In so doing, Woolf provides those who look closely enough with a new understanding of gender, one that recognizes and accepts people as they are, rather than as a false ideal. It is unlikely that Woolf was so naïve as to think her culture would make the profound changes she advocates in her novels. However, I believe Woolf hoped her observations and criticisms could help influence this cultural awakening by prompting her readers to consider the treatment of Britain’s most marginalized groups. Her novels offer an important social voice, one unafraid to challenge her culture in pursuit of universal gender equality and freedom from oppressive social norms.

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