

The Prose of Life:  
Narrative, Knowledge, and the Everyday in the Works of Virginia Woolf  
by  
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*for my parents*

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how Woolf's works of fiction explore the everyday and shape it into a narrative. Recent studies have taken up the issue of Woolf's portrayals of characters' experiences of the everyday, such as Liesl Olson's analysis of the representation of habit or "the cotton wool of daily life" and Lorraine Sim's book on the ways ordinary experiences can become extraordinary, but my study focuses on Woolf's construction of narrative out of the details of everyday life, a task that requires a revision of common forms of thought and traditional literary genres.

This study approaches Woolf's narratives of everyday life in alignment with the underpinnings of her own epistemology and other thinkers' theories of the everyday. Theorists of the everyday frame the everyday as experience unmediated by imposed structures of meaning and insists on personal experience and discovery. Woolf's epistemology concerning the perceptions of objects informs how individuals create meaning out of the ordinary. The introduction lays out and applies these epistemological and theoretical concepts to a reading of Woolf's short story "A Mark on the Wall," illuminating how extended engagement with ordinary objects can challenge assumptions about how we gain knowledge.

The first chapter focuses on the way *Jacob's Room* discards the traditions of the *bildungsroman* genre since they obscure representations of everyday experience. Since even the most ordinary objects can become sites of meaning making, the narrator of *Jacob's Room* struggles to account for the vast heterogeneity of possible subjects. Without a generic structure to hold the novel together, the narrator uses the physical spaces of rooms to organize her flowing and multiplicitous experiences of everyday life.

The second chapter reads Woolf's essay "Street Haunting" in tandem with her novel *To the Lighthouse* as revisions of the role of events in literature. Each of these works eschew typical narrative structures that hinge upon events to progress the narrative, and instead show that even the ordinary task of buying a pencil can act as an arbitrary yet effective basis of narrative. *To the Lighthouse* also demonstrates that the everyday can encapsulate experiences that are both extraordinary and ordinary.

In the third chapter, I explore Woolf's novel *The Waves* and how the characters Rhoda, Louis, and Bernard shape everyday experience through language. Focusing on Bernard, this chapter shows that *The Waves* depicts a conflict between narrative and everyday experience. More explicitly than the previous novels, *The Waves* depicts the necessity of inventing meaning out of and giving structure to everyday experience lest it dissolves into formlessness.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, the everyday, narrative, epistemology, knowledge, experience

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Short Titles

*BA: Between the Acts.* Harcourt Inc., 1941.

*DotM: The Death of the Moth and Other Essays.* Harcourt Brace and Company, 1942.

*JR: Jacob's Room.* W. W. Norton and Company, 2007.

*SH: "Street Haunting." The Death of the Moth and Other Essays.* Harcourt Brace and Company, 1942, pp. 20-36.

*TTL: To the Lighthouse.* Harcourt, Inc., 1927.

*W: The Waves.* Harcourt, Inc., 1931.

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## Introduction:

### **“a sandy cat filching a piece of fish”: Knowing the Ordinary**

“Truth, it seems, is various; Truth is to be pursued with all our faculties.”

-Virginia Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek”

In her essay “Modern Fiction,” Virginia Woolf asks her contemporaries to “examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day,” and she claims that this will lead to a recognition that “the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style” (160). This passage connects two seemingly unrelated ideas: the ordinary and new, modern art. Woolf’s novels and other narratives show that writing the everyday requires a Modernization of literature that results in “no plot . . . in the accepted style.” This study aims to illuminate how Woolf’s work captures the everyday, and how the everyday, in turn, influences the shape of her fiction.

At one of the high points in her writing career, Woolf writes in her diary in 1927, “I can make up situations, but I cannot make up plots” (*Diary* vol. 3, 160). Likewise, nearing the end of her life, she writes in her incomplete memoir *A Sketch of the Past* that she finds it easier to write “scenes” rather than to “disentangle” the “innumerable threads” that would allow her to come to some kind of “summing up” of her life (142). Resisting plot and summing up, Woolf’s novels expertly craft narratives that create a “symmetry by means of infinite discords”; they also, as Gillian Beer notes, “keep everything persistently elated, never completed” as she “eschews the authoritarian

inevitability of sequence implied by plot” (Beer, 13). Many first time readers—myself included—describe Woolf’s novels as books where nothing happens. Indeed, they evoke the sensation of innumerable “situations” or “scenes” that appear so commonplace that the inattentive reader might miss their significance. This thesis investigates how Woolf’s narratives appear to capture slices of life and the effects this has on her narratives.

I have enlisted the term “the everyday” to help elucidate this issue, since “the everyday” is strongly associated with uneventfulness. Other critics such as Lorraine Sim and Liesl Olson have examined how Woolf’s characters experience the everyday, but this study focuses on how the narratives themselves mimic everyday experiences. Thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau have theorized the everyday as a field of study, and their work guides the understanding of “the everyday” as a concept employed here. This introduction lays out Lefebvre’s theories of the everyday as an unstructured site of fluidity and change. As I use the term, “the everyday” signals a type of experience characterized by an attention to the ordinary objects and rhythms of life. Some critics such as Liesl Olson prefer to use the term “the everyday” to describe a state of a lack of attention, something that Woolf herself would describe as “the cotton wool of daily life” (*A Sketch of the Past*, 72). This is certainly one aspect of a person’s daily experience often described as “habitual,” but, like Lorraine Sim (and arguably Woolf herself), I am more interested in “the everyday” as a term that encompasses a wider range of experiences. What defines these experiences is their separation from organized structures of meaning. Indeed, Woolf’s work functions without theology or ideology to bring significance to a moment, and what this leaves is a distinctly *human* experience unmediated by grand systems. As Lefebvre puts it, “We fail to see [the human facts] where they are, namely in humble, familiar, everyday objects: the shape of fields, of

ploughs . . . . All we need do is simply open our eyes, to leave the dark world of metaphysics and the false depths of the ‘inner life’ behind, and we will discover the immense human wealth that the humblest facts of everyday life contain” (*Critique* vol. 1, 132). The everyday I discuss is the site of humanist creation of meaning out of the “familiar, everyday objects” that surround us; it is the endeavor to understand one’s firsthand experiences.

If, as Nietzsche tells us, modernity is characterized by a dead or absent God, then it may be said that this task of understanding one’s own unmediated experience is an essentially modern problem. Indeed, alongside the use of the term “modern” in art criticism, there also arose an attention to everyday experience. For context, it is helpful to understand that Woolf is not the first to tackle this difficulty, but rather, she is a part of a tradition of Modernist writing. The French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire makes use of the term “modern” in association with everyday experience in his famous 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life.” His essay aims to valorize the painter Constantin Guys, whom Baudelaire sees as an innovator of painting since Guys does not use traditional or classical models, but instead paints life on the street as he sees it. Guys’ paintings depict quotidian scenes quickly sketched in watercolor. One such painting is “Meeting in the Park” which pictures three men and two women grouped in a small circle, likely having an idle conversation, and not doing anything out of the ordinary. Guys was a master of hastily capturing subjects as his eye saw them, and so the figures wear the fashion of the time in contrast with the popular depictions of scenes from antiquity that many painters at the time favored. Instead of creating allusory paintings with idealized figures, Guys, as Baudelaire writes, captures “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the



Figure 1: "Meeting in the Park"  
From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

immutable" (Baudelaire, 13). Other artists had mastered "the eternal and the immutable" forms of classicism, but Guys found a wealth of unexamined material right before his eyes in the immediacy of Parisian life.

Guys becomes the image of the Modernist artist. In the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin looks back on Baudelaire's descriptions of Guys and coins the term "*flaneur*" as the archetype of a person (most often a man, although, as we will see, Woolf and many other examples demonstrate that this is an ungendered role) who wanders the streets and lets their curiosity guide them. Baudelaire characterizes Guys as a *flaneur* and a "passionate observer" for whom "it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and

the infinite. To be away from home and yet feel oneself everywhere at home” (Baudelaire, 9). The *flâneur* as an artist figure finds a way to make themselves “at home” amidst the “fugitive” and “infinite” phenomena of everyday life. They take inspiration from the here and now, those two qualities at the root of the word “modern” which comes from the Latin *modo*. Some readers may be hesitant to accept this description of the everyday as full of boundless possibility and “infinite” “ebb and flow of movement.” Indeed, much of everyday life is dominated by habits and the hum-drum banalities of getting on from one task to another. Yet it is the artist figure who, as the Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky would say, “defamiliarizes” these repeated perceptions and habits, exposing the wealth of meaning hidden behind appearances that our eyes glance over unquestioningly.

Shklovsky’s theory of “defamiliarization” is based on the idea that perception becomes automatic and thus unnoticed once it has become habitual. He notes that “if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree” that habitualization dulls sensation (Shklovsky, 11). For Shklovsky, art is the means of escaping and breaking habits. He writes that “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known . . . . *Art is the way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*” (Shklovsky, 12, emphasis original). Shklovsky shares with Baudelaire a valuing of the artist's unique perceptions over common or traditional depictions; this is an emphasis on the “sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.” The object itself is not important; art is an “experien[ce]” not a

depiction of objects. This poses a new dynamic within the work of art: the work of art is not a direct gateway to stable knowledge, but rather the embodiment of a type of experience from which knowledge might arise.

An emphasis on experience based knowledge of the new and modern is one of the defining characteristics of a work that depicts the everyday. A key characteristic of this type of knowledge, however, is that it is always provisional; this type of knowledge is contingent upon the context out of which it arises. We see this clearly in Woolf's short story "A Mark on the Wall." "A Mark on the Wall" depicts the most simplified version of everyday experience according to the framework used in this study: a narrator sits in a room and attends to a mysterious grey blotch on the wall. She does not know what the mark is, and instead of getting up to get a closer look, she chooses to dwell in uncertainty and to think about what it could be. Like Baudelaire's painter, the narrator finds that "triviality usurps attention," but she explores this even more profoundly than the Parisian streetwalker since she has only one object to attend to whereas the *flâneur* has an endless stream of objects on the busy city streets (Baudelaire, 16); the narrator can "think sitting still as well as standing up" ("A Mark on the Wall," 87). Incidentally, the word "trivial" has an evocative etymology useful for our understanding of how everyday narrative functions in this short story. "Trivial" comes from two Latin words, *tri* and *via*, which together literally mean "three roads." These "three roads" denote the center of a town, an actual common place where, oftentimes, three roads converge. In this sense "trivial" has a specific connection with the everyday and ordinary. It has also been used, however, to denote the *trivium*: the classical structure of liberal arts education beginning in antiquity which was made up of the three subjects: grammar, rhetoric, and logic (etymonline.com). The "trivial" encounter with an indiscernible spot

on a wall is both ordinary and commonplace, but also the site of a type of learning that challenges traditional notions of how one gains knowledge.

The tendency of this short story to emphasize knowledge gained through experience qualifies it as an “everyday narrative.” “Everyday narrative” is that which utilizes happenstance situations to drive the narrative rather than large scale events such as the marriage plot or *bildungsroman* which rely on social systems to generate their meaning. Such a narrative finds a comparison in Henri Lefebvre’s seminal, multivolume work *The Critique of Everyday Life* in which Lefebvre lays out the nature of the everyday as that which escapes categorization and systematization. In the *Critique*, Lefebvre observes the everyday from the perspective of a sociologist and theorist, giving accounts of his own personal observations while also situating everyday life within the context of Marxism. Lefebvre’s presentation of his theories has often confused readers, and in his introduction to the first volume of the *Critique*, Michel Trebitsch writes of Lefebvre’s style as being “between flexibility and vagueness, where thinking is like strolling, where thinking is *rhapsodic*, as opposed to more permanent constructions, with their monolithic, reinforced, reassuring arguments, painstakingly built upon structures and models” (*Critique* vol. 1, ix). Although this style may be bothersome to some readers, there is a reason for it. Lefebvre’s work is not “built upon structures and models” because the everyday is not structured or modeled. Lefebvre writes in the first volume of the *Critique* that “Everyday life, in a sense residual, defined by ‘what is left over after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis, must be defined as a totality. . . . [S]uperior activities leave a ‘technical vacuum’ between one another which is filled up by everyday life” (*Critique* vol. 1, 97). Everyday life is that which is “left over” after all other activities have been

categorized, and, therefore, unmediated by established systems of meaning such as state ideology.

Lefebvre presents the study of the everyday as a type of anti-philosophy that avoids totalizing systems. In his preface to the second edition of the first volume of the *Critique*, he writes, “the professional philosophers generally ignored the book [the *Critique of Everyday Life*, volume 1]; for—starting with its title—it entailed relinquishing the traditional image of the philosopher as master and ruler of existence, witness and judge of *life from the outside*, enthroned above the masses, above moments lost in triviality, ‘distinguished’ by an attitude and a distance” (5). Although rarely attributed as such, Lefebvre’s work was among the contributions that would eventually lead to post-structuralist theory. Everyday life is, as Adorno might claim, the non-identity of philosophy; when philosophy imagines grand systems of organization, everyday details with their inability to be categorized disrupt those narratives and force one to attend to the facts of ordinary existence. One excellent image of everyday life disrupting philosophy is found in Woolf’s novel *The Waves* when Bernard thinks, “Let a man get up and say, ‘Behold, this is the truth,’ and instantly I perceive a sandy cat filching a piece of fish in the background. Look, you have forgotten the cat, I say” (*W*, 187). Philosophy does not account for sandy cats filching fish, but, as her short story “A Mark on the Wall” demonstrates, everyday narrative does. It is crucial to note that Woolf understands knowledge and experience as being unable to be summed up; narrative must detail individual encounters with ordinary objects so as to generate knowledge free from pre-established systems and to be rooted in the everyday.

“A Mark on the Wall” has no organizing system but the narrator’s own vigor. She refuses established systems one by one: regarding genre that does not deal with the here

and now but “sink[s] deeper and deeper, away from the surface,” she proclaims, “how dull this is, this historical fiction!” (“A Mark on the Wall,” 85); she rebukes the “Retired Colonels” who, “in correspondence with the neighbouring clergy,” abuse their position of power to keep the public in perpetual doubt about archeological evidence because it “gives them a feeling of importance” (“A Mark on the Wall,” 87); and most vehemently, she decries “Whitaker’s Table of Presidency” or Whitaker’s Almanack which is still published today claiming in its slogan to contain “Today’s World in One Volume” (“A Mark on the Wall,” 86). Woolf and her narrator are far too skeptical to believe in such a claim. The narrator aligns the almanack with “the masculine point of view which governs our lives,” a claim that corresponds with Woolf’s later feminist essays *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas* that present patriarchal power as ridiculous, discriminatory, and centered around war. The almanack is a physical manifestation of this power that prevents people from engaging with their own everyday experiences by telling them what to think and forming hierarchies of value such as the “Table of Presidency.” Woolf and the narrator’s skepticism concerning such totalizing systems stems from an epistemological understanding of a person’s perceptions of the world around them and how these perceptions are always shaped and altered by language.

Woolf’s epistemological understanding—as delineated by Ann Banfield in her formidable book *The Phantom Table*—justifies the narrator’s remark that “nothing is proved, nothing is known” (“A Mark on the Wall,” 87). This remark points to Woolf’s serious skepticism about the validity of knowledge gained from an abstracted point of view, an argument which Banfield associates with Woolf’s contemporary and family friend Bertrand Russell. The philosophical problem Banfield’s work examines is emblemized in the thought experiment posed by Andrew Ramsay who says, simplifying

the work of his father, Mr. Ramsay, in *To the Lighthouse*: “Think of a kitchen table . . . when you’re not there” (*TTL*, 22). The question is: does the table still exist when nobody observes it? During a time when solipsism was gaining validity, there was a serious possibility that the answer to this question could be “no.” However, Russell argues that the table does persist even without our observing it. To solve the riddle of the table, Russell follows a logic that necessitates that the table be understood as having two qualities: the logical and the sensible. Russell believes that the table exists while nobody looks at it because the table has a logical quality that is not tied to human perception; the table is, regardless of who is or is not looking at it, made up of atoms and matter. However, when nobody perceives it, it is a colorless object; it is “Matter . . . consist[ing] of colorless atoms or soundless waves” (Banfield, 258). The sensible table is the one visible to the human eye, which, with its rods and cones, interprets waves of particles as color. This epistemology imposes a limit on human understanding: we can only ever know the sensible table, and the logical table escapes understanding.

Our knowledge of the table is further limited by our tool for reckoning with it: language. As Megan Quigley points out in her book *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness*, the table is necessarily vague because the only way for humans to understand it is through words which are, as Woolf would say, “irreclaimable vagabonds” that always signify more than one concept at once (*DotM*, 205). According to Quigley and Woolf, language is an inaccurate tool, vague and erratic. As Woolf writes in her essay and radio talk “Craftsmanship,” words are “many-sided,” containing many different meanings at once (*DotM*, 206). This is not a failure, however, since the “truth they try to catch is [also] many-sided,” and, in fact, Woolf celebrates language’s inability to be pinned down

as she takes great pleasure in the associational power of thinking through language (*DotM*, 206).

This system of epistemology coordinates with theories of the everyday to inform narratives that refuse conventional structure or style in favor of sincere engagement with ordinary life. By turning away from systems of philosophy, theology, or ideology, these narratives discover new meaning in what is immediately at hand. The narrator of “A Mark on the Wall” lays out the importance of such engagement when she thinks:

And if I were to get up at this very moment and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really—what shall I say?—the head of a gigantic old nail, driven in two hundred years ago, which has now, owing to the patient attrition of many generations of housemaids, revealed its head above the coat of paint, and is taking its first view of modern life in the sight of the white-walled fire-lit room, what shall I gain? Knowledge? Matter for further speculation? I can think sitting still as well as standing up. And what is knowledge? What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits who crouched in caves and in woods brewing herbs, interrogating shrew-mice and writing down the language of the stars? And the less we honour them as our superstitions dwindle and our respect for beauty and health of mind increases. . . . Yes, one could imagine a very pleasant world. A quiet spacious world, with the flowers so red and blue in the open fields. A world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one’s thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the

water-lilies, hanging suspended over nests of white sea eggs. (“A Mark on the Wall,” 87)

This is one of Woolf’s most idealistic passages, and it is quoted at length so as to give the full scope of the argument Woolf presents. She begins this passage with an argument as to why it does not matter whether or not she knows what the mark is as she questions, “what shall I gain? Knowledge? Matter for further speculation?” It is true, that whatever the mark is, the narrator might perpetually speculate as to its origins, its purpose, its significance—the narrator has a mind on fire, deeply aware of its own ability to speculate and spin phrases *ad infinitum*. The mark cannot be known because words cannot satisfactorily pin down an object. Additionally, the term “snail” sounds ambiguously close to “nail,” the likelier option. The mind might play with this association, wondering how “snails” and “nails” relate, and soon it would be off again, flying into speculation. Furthermore, what is a snail doing on the wall? How did it get there? Where did it come from? The questions go on.

According to this passage, an engagement with these types of questions would lead to a greater “respect for beauty and health of mind” and would result in a world “without professors or specialists or housekeepers with the profiles of policemen” to dictate behavior as well as knowledge. Indeed, the passage highlights the value of dwelling within one’s own everyday experience, one’s own perceptions of ordinary objects. Such engagement is as smooth as “a fish slic[ing] the water with his fin”; the mind is free to take its own paths of inquiry free from what convention deems important or valuable. Indeed, the entire narrative of “A Mark on the Wall” structures itself around an inquiry into the everyday world free from dominating systems and what “Whitaker knows” (“A Mark on the Wall,” 88). The story ends with “someone” entering the room,

saying, “I’m going out to buy a newspaper,” and then pointing out the “snail on our wall” (“A Mark on the Wall,” 89). This character represents the opposite approach to experience; this is the factual vision that seeks information and knowledge as the newspapers and common sense dictate it. This character’s comment puts an end to the narrator’s exploration of everyday experience, obliterating it with society’s convenient yet inattentive explanations.

“A Mark on the Wall” is the most simple form of an everyday narrative: it focuses on the process of perception as a means of disputing traditional hierarchies or systems of meaning, and the narrative structures itself around these distinctly everyday occurrences that fall outside what conventionally constitutes event-based narratives. This study proceeds from here to study three different novels and their everyday narratives, demonstrating how the everyday as a force within Woolf’s fiction challenges narrative convention.

The first chapter analyzes *Jacob’s Room*, a novel that renegotiates the structure and focus of the *bildungsroman* genre. The protagonist of this *bildungsroman* is conspicuously absent as the novel implies that Jacob is still in the process of maturing and becoming a rounded character. Eschewing the established conventions of genre, *Jacob’s Room* structures its narrative—as the title suggests—around physical spaces and ordinary objects. This narrative construction leads to a new, everyday structure that avoids the generalizations and expectations of the *bildungsroman* genre.

The second chapter examines Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting” and her novel *To the Lighthouse*. Each of these narratives embodies an everyday narrative. In “Street Haunting” the narrator’s decision to buy a pencil acts as an excuse to wander through

the London streets, but also an excuse for the narrative to dwell on the everyday without obscuring it with conventional plot expectations; the reader is forced to reckon with the story as a narrative that redefines what constitutes an event in literature. *To the Lighthouse* enacts a similar plot, but one with more nuance. The lighthouse functions akin to the pencil, however, it is both ordinary and extraordinary, it is simply what it is but also a depository of human emotion. This novel raises up the ordinary, demonstrating that everyday experience can be meaningful even without organizing systems of meaning that dictate how it ought to be valued.

The third chapter dives into *The Waves*, analyzing the way different characters create their own narratives of the everyday. *The Waves* depicts characters who grapple with everyday experience in their own, distinct way. Observing Rhoda, Louis, and Bernard, this chapter shows three modes of everyday experience: the erratic, the poetic, and the prosaic. Each mode has its own strengths and weaknesses, but they all point towards language's ability to mediate and shape experience. Focusing primarily on Bernard and his final soliloquy, this chapter shows that the stylistic properties of narrative itself can bring meaning to the everyday.

## “Over him we hang vibrating”: Looking for Jacob Among His Things

“It is always an adventure to enter a new room.”

-Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting”

“always something to think about every moment and see it all around you like a new world”

-James Joyce, “Penelope” in *Ulysses*

In an entry dated to January of 1920, Virginia Woolf writes in her diary the ideas for her novel *Jacob’s Room*, stating, “this afternoon [I] arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in An Unwritten Novel . . . . I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist” (*JR*, 168). As the first novel that she and her husband Leonard published with their own press, *Jacob’s Room* is more experimental than Woolf’s first two novels, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*. It is, as she writes here, “a new form for a new novel.” *Jacob’s Room* has an everyday narrative that structures itself around the narrator’s perceptions rather than around the traditional turning points expected in a *bildungsroman*. The “new form” of this novel is based on perceptions of objects and physical space; as Woolf writes elsewhere in her diary:

I think the main point is that it should be free.

Yet what about form?

Let us suppose that the Room will hold it together.

Intensity of life compared with immobility.

Experiences.

To change style at will. (*JR*, 167)

These short phrases could be brief summations of everything this chapter aims to cover. Most importantly, the idea that “the Room will hold [the novel] together” is crucial for our understanding of *Jacob’s Room*. As the introduction shows, Woolf was skeptical of traditional forms that obscured everyday experience. *Jacob’s Room* renegotiates the priorities of the *bildungsroman* by not adhering to conventional narrative structures. Instead of a traditional event-based narrative, *Jacob’s Room* uses rooms and objects as narrative devices.

Later in the diary entry quoted above, Woolf compares *Jacob’s Room* to her short stories “A Mark on the Wall,” “An Unwritten Novel,” and “Kew Gardens.” These short stories were published in the collection *Monday or Tuesday*, which Woolf’s contemporaries saw as a turning point in her career. As already demonstrated with “A Mark on the Wall,” these stories explore characters’ perceptions of everyday life and prove themselves deeply skeptical not only of conventional types of meaning, but also of their own ability to narrate a story. The title of Woolf’s story “An Unwritten Novel” points to the very fact that the story told is *unwritten*, an act which occurs at the very end of the story when the narrator realizes that the fiction they have been inventing about the woman sitting across from them on the train has been a complete falsehood. The narrator has assigned the name “Minnie Marsh” to this woman whom they imagine is in conflict with her sister in law “Hilda,” but when the woman steps off the train and unexpectedly meets her son, the narrator’s story dissolves: “Well, but I’m confounded,” they say, and, “Well, my world’s done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That’s not Minnie. There never was Moggridge. Who am I? Life’s bare as a bone” (*Complete*

*Shorter Fiction*, 121). “An Unwritten Novel” does the same work as “A Mark on the Wall” by turning an everyday encounter into a site of creativity and also mystery as the narrator invents a story out of her perceptions of a stranger but discovers in the end that this type of knowing is based in personal speculation.

From *Monday or Tuesday* onwards, Woolf’s work pays closer attention to the fictions characters create in their minds. Woolf portrays these fictions not as failures of the human mind to ever know anything for certain but instead demonstrates this as a way of living life with an awareness of its flux. Even at the end of “An Unwritten Novel,” the narrator does not despair, but “floats . . . afresh” and the story ends with them fervently saying, “it’s you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it’s you I embrace, you I draw to me—adorable world” (*Complete Shorter Fiction*, 121). After their narrative breaks down, they immediately begin to “open [their] arms” to other possible figures that could be the subject of their next narrative exploration. They describe the crowded street and their own passion for following each individual by saying, “This, I fancy, must be the sea” (*The Complete Shorter Fiction*, 121). The ordinary life of the city is as vast and as fluid as “the sea,” calling to mind Clarissa Dalloway’s description of street walking where she thinks, “She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 8). For many of Woolf’s characters, everyday life is like a trip out to sea, and daily life becomes the site of discovery, wonder, and creation.

The narrator of *Jacob's Room* is one of these characters that finds the everyday endlessly rich.<sup>1</sup> However, the narrator's attention to the everyday comes into conflict with the traditional form of the *bildungsroman* which structures the novel. In a traditional *bildungsroman*, the focus of the narrative is on the development of the central character as they mature and reach milestones in their life. *Jacob's Room* thwarts this convention in two ways. First, the novel ends with Jacob's death, thus unraveling the threads of the narrative which had begun to shape into the tapestry of Jacob's life. Second, the novel refuses the conventional techniques of character creation. The narrator of *Jacob's Room* doubts the validity of getting to know characters through description and reorients her attention towards capturing the atmosphere of everyday life and the knowledge she gains from her own perceptions. This understanding of *Jacob's Room* is related to but different from what Megan Quigley calls a "resolute reading" that acknowledges Woolf's texts as deliberately creating "nonsense" ("Reading Virginia Woolf Logically," 106). Like Quigley, I read Woolf's work as "skeptical about the desire to go beyond the here and now," and therefore refusing the "abstract theorizing" of traditional genre forms ("Reading Virginia Woolf Logically," 114). However, I read *Jacob's Room* not as a work of "nonsense," but rather as a renegotiation of the priorities of fiction.

The narrator questions the ability to know Jacob as a character according to the conventions of the *bildungsroman*. She says early on in the novel, "Nobody sees any one

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<sup>1</sup> The narrator is not quite a character but certainly some kind of entity within the book. As a person who cannot follow Jacob into the male-only quarters of Cambridge (akin to the woman who gets kicked off the college lawn in Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*), scholars have reasoned that the narrator is gendered as a woman (see especially Barry S. Morgenstern, "The Self-conscious Narrator in *Jacob's Room*"). This study follows in the tradition of naming the narrator a "she," however, admits that there is a fertile research avenue for studying how this narrator may be ungendered or ambiguously gendered.

as he is,” and “It is no use trying to sum people up” (*JR*, 22). One of the reasons for this is that when people try to sum each other up, they “see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves” (*JR*, 22). Subjectivity colors perception and words convey vague, multi-sided truths; language will never be able to capture the innermost identity of a character. In this novel, description—a hallmark of traditional character creation—does not capture identity; after a list of his physical attributes, the narrator admonishes herself, saying, “Then his mouth—but surely, of all futile occupations this cataloguing features is the worst. One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it?” (*JR*, 55). This question turns into the prevailing statement of the novel: the narrator cannot find the one word to convey Jacob’s character. From the first page, Jacob’s brother Archer shouts, “”Ja—cob! Ja—cob!””, and on the last page, Bonamy cries, “Jacob! Jacob!” (*JR*, 3, 143). The book begins and ends with characters searching for Jacob but never finding him.

*Jacob’s Room* breaks down conventional narrative, and, as Judy Little argues, Woolf uses the traditions of the *bildungsroman* only “to play havoc with them” (Little, 233). Little writes, “[The narrator] is continually sketching the novelist pattern that growing youths are ‘supposed’ to follow; then she suddenly provides a close-up of Jacob eating dates or finding in the cheap Florinda the emblem of all things Greek” (Little, 238). Eating dates or musing on Greece are two separate yet distinctly everyday activities that trouble the narrative that Jacob “should” adhere to. *Jacob’s Room* continuously makes use of the ordinary as an ironic subversion of traditional narrative in this manner, such as when Jacob visits Greece which he has idealized as the pinnacle of civilization, but finds it far more mundane and everyday than he was expecting:

For after washing at the hotel at Patras, Jacob had followed the tram lines a mile or so out; and followed them a mile or so back; he had met several droves of turkeys; several strings of donkeys; had got lost in back streets; had read advertisements of corsets and of Maggi's consommé; children had trodden on his toes; the place smelt of bad cheese; and he was glad to find himself suddenly come out the opposite his hotel . . . But what could he do after dinner? (*JR*, 109)

Jacob is "the very picture of boredom" (*JR*, 110). This sentence catalogs a list of things Jacob has seen and, like his own journey following the "tram lines a mile or so out" only to follow them "a mile or so back," the sentence goes nowhere. There is no grand epiphany that marks this moment in Greece, and everyday experience interferes crudely as children "trod" on Jacob's toes and there is a smell of "bad cheese." An excessive number of trivialities such as "droves of turkeys," "strings of donkeys," and the idle pleasures of "advertisements of corsets" replace the monuments, architecture, and history one expects to find in Greece. The narrator notes the "astonishing gift for illusion" that humans have from the day they exchange the fantasies around their "dolls" and "broken steam engines" in favor of "France," "Italy," and "India" (*JR*, 109). According to the narrator, "it is the governesses who start the Greek myth" (*JR*, 109). She summarizes, saying, "The point is . . . that we have been brought up in an illusion," and it is not only Jacob whose fantasies about Greece dissolve, but also the reader's illusions about the validity of the *bildungsroman* (*JR*, 110).

*Jacob's Room's* revision of traditional forms frustrated and confused many early readers. In an unsigned review titled "An Impressionist," a reviewer writes, "In *Jacob's Room* there is not only no story, but there is no perceptible development of any kind.

We get an outline of the kind of young man that Jacob was and of the kind of woman that his mother was, and very subtly and admirably are some of the features touched in” (*JR*, 214). *Jacob’s Room* continues to trouble readers who expect to come out the other side with some knowledge of Jacob and his life. The novel is too aware, however, that the knowledge of another person is speculation, that words fail to capture their subject, and that the generalities of established genres are nonsensical. After all, this is torn down, the novel can and must focus on the experience of everyday life.

The novel functions in a similar fashion to “An Unwritten Novel” in that both take up the point of view of an unnamed narrator as they perceive the world. In this sense, the novel is not about Jacob as much as it is about the perspective of the narrator who describes him as she creates meaning out of her everyday experience. Jacob is, in fact, often completely separate from the narrative, which hovers generally around him, but becomes distracted and interested in the many facets of everyday life that provide opportunities for the narrator to invent her own types of meaning. For example, when Jacob visits St. Paul’s Cathedral to rest for a while, the narrator does anything but settle down. She describes the phenomenon that people waiting outside St. Paul’s seem “miraculously provided with coat, skirt, and boots; an income; an object,” whereas, she notes, “If you look closer you will see that three elderly men at a little distance from each other run spiders along the pavement as if the street were their parlour, and here, against the wall, a woman stares at nothing, boot-laces extended, which she does not ask you to buy” (*JR*, 50/51). The narrator’s attention is split between polar opposites: the well-off people who are allowed into St. Paul’s, and those who are “A homeless people, circling beneath the sky whose blue or white is held off by a ceiling cloth of steel filings and horse dung shredded to dust” (*JR*, 51). These two focuses bookend a single

paragraph, and in the middle, there is Jacob, “carrying in his hand Finlay’s *Byzantine Empire*” and imagining himself separate from everyone because “he would at nine-thirty precisely, by his own fireside, open and study [his book], as no one else of all these multitudes would do” (*JR*, 51). Jacob thinks of himself as distinct, and while he is the protagonist of this *bildungsroman*, the narrator’s wandering gaze attempts to include everything, not only Jacob.

Each person is the possible subject of a story. When Jacob visits the opera house to watch *Tristan and Isolde*, the full audience overwhelms the narrator with possible subjects:

The two thousand hearts in the semi-darkness remembered, anticipated, travelled dark labyrinths; and Clara Durrant said farewell to Jacob Flanders, and tasted the sweetness of death in effigy; and Mrs. Durrant, sitting behind her in the dark of the box, sighed her sharp sigh; and Mr. Wortley, shifting his position behind the Italian Ambassador's wife, thought that Brangaena was a trifle horse; and suspended in the gallery many feet above their heads, Edward Whittaker surreptitiously held a torch to his miniature score; and . . . and . . . (*JR*, 53)

In the next paragraph, the narrator sums up: “In short, the observer is choked with observations” (*JR*, 53). The narrator here faces the task of capturing the atmosphere of the opera house, but its multiplicity is too overwhelming and too vast. She begins with “two thousand hearts in the semi-darkness,” an image of not only the large number of people with their own “hearts” and emotions that she might convey through writing, but also of their obscurity, the way that they are half covered by shadows which stop her from seeing all clearly. She goes into particulars and creates brief vignettes of different

characters with different lives such as Clara's heartbreak that the narrator compares to "death in effigy" or Mr. Wortley's critique of the player's voice. This becomes a long list that defers to ellipses to express its endlessness, and Jacob is merely one name among a crowd of people that vie for the narrator's attention. The narrative has been freed from the constrictions of following a single subject, but this freedom threatens to unravel the narrative entirely. This narrative of the everyday has no singular focus because, as we have seen from "A Mark on the Wall," anything can become meaningful when the observer pays attention. Yet it is possible for there to be *too much* meaning. In this sentence, there are too many possible subjects, and the sentence loses its thread as it unravels in a pair of ellipses: "and . . . and . . .".

The narrator finds a way to organize and narrate her experiences by dividing up her vision based on physical spaces:

Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification which is simplicity itself; stalls, boxes, amphitheatre, gallery. The moulds are filled nightly. There is no need to distinguish details. But the difficulty remains—one has to choose. (*JR*, 53)

"Stalls, boxes, amphitheatre, gallery," these spaces divide up experience so that the narrator is not "submerged by chaos." While "nature and society" do impose these limits, they still function as frames of everyday life. The room or box becomes the space where the narrator might limit her attention, but within these spaces, there is still a vast number of possible objects for speculation, for each person in each stall travels through their own "dark labyrinths." This is a fractal type of seeing that accepts limits only to prove that any single object is infinitely complex. Yet the difficulty is that "one has to

choose” which box to focus on. The richness of everyday life is inexhaustible, but for this reason, the narrator must limit herself, feeling the pain of excluding some parts of her vision as she says, “for wherever I seat myself, I die in exile” (*JR*, 53).

An example of this technique appears later when the narrator “flies into the air”—as Woolf described in a letter to Lytton Strachey concerning the novel—but then uses physical space to reorient her narrative (*JR*, 210). In a moment of second person narration, the narrator describes a policeman who gives directions, saying “Holborn straight ahead of you” (*JR*, 75). The policeman represents for Woolf—especially in her feminist and anti-war essay *Three Guineas* where she satirizes male uniforms<sup>2</sup>—the rigid structure of patriarchal society. Yet in contrast to the policeman’s directions to continue straight, the narrator makes an imaginative detour:

Ah, but where are you going if instead of brushing past the old man with the white beard, the silver medal, and the cheap violin, you let him go on with his story, which ends in an invitation to step somewhere, to his room, presumably, off Queen’s Square, and there he shows you a collection of birds’ eggs and a letter from the Prince of Whales’s secretary, and this (skipping the intermediate stages) brings you one winter’s day to the Essex coast, where the little boat makes off to the ship, and the ship sails and you behold on the skyline the Azores; and the flamingoes rise; and there you sit on the verge of the marsh drinking rum-punch, an outcast from

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<sup>2</sup> Concerning a photo of a man in uniform, Woolf writes in *Three Guineas*, “His eyes are glazed; his eyes glare. His body, which is braced in an unnatural position, is tightly cased in a uniform. . . . He is called in German and Italian Fuhrer or Duce; in our own language Tyrant or Dictator” (142).

civilization, for you have committed a crime, infected with yellow fever as likely as not, and—fill in the sketch as you like. (*JR*, 75/76)

Relying on the unstructured nature of everyday life, the narrator breaks out of a narrative mold and wanders through a myriad of topics in a single sentence. Ann Banfield describes sentences like these in Woolf's writing as "unfettered by logic," and as being "the prototypical structure of 'ordinary thinking' with its 'divided glance'" (Banfield, 353). After an ordinary encounter with a police officer, the narrator imagines what might happen if someone did not continue "straight ahead," but if they spoke with a man on the street, and through a series of events "(skipping the intermediate stages)" they found themselves far off from England, "drinking rum-punch" somewhere exotic. The narrator traces the events of another narrative or even a whole life in the space of one sentence. The everyday does not limit these types of explorations, and allows for the narrator to, as Woolf says, "change style at will."

The physical space of Jacob's room reorients the narrative after this detour. As the narrator explains, there are frequent "chasms in the continuity of our ways" such as this narrative tangent, and yet "we keep straight on" (*JR*, 76). This statement resounds with her earlier sentiment that although there are two thousand people in the opera house, "one must choose" whom they will observe. The necessity of making choices is a key characteristic of the everyday. As Lefebvre writes in the *Critique*, "decisions may ripen like fruit on a tree, but they never fall on their own accord; we must always cut the stem, we must even choose the moment of choice" (*Critique* vol. 1, 18). The everyday presents endless opportunities to spiral off into investigations of one's own sense perceptions or imagination, and yet one must make decisions lest one is lost in daydreams. The narrator of *Jacob's Room* certainly is more caught up in the

daydreaming side of everyday life, yet they are aware that they are telling a story and that they must decide which space they will focus on:

Every face, every shop, bedroom window, public-house, and dark square is a picture feverishly turned—in search of what? It is the same with books. What do we seek through millions of pages? Still hopefully turning the pages—oh, here is Jacob’s room. (*JR*, 77)

“Every face, every shop, bedroom window, public-house, and dark square” is a distinct and physical space that the narrator might explore. The physical space of Jacob’s room provides the seemingly most important space, but the narrator treats it as though it were an afterthought. Regardless, this allows the narrator to focus on her perceptions so that she might find Jacob among his objects.

Watching Jacob in his room, the narrator presents Jacob’s character through the objects around him. The following passage takes note of Jacob as he “sat at the table reading the *Globe*,” as he “judged life,” and as he took out a pipe and sat with it “five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes” while reading a report on “The Prime Minister’s speech” concerning Home Rule in Ireland (*JR*, 77). The narrator cannot know for certain, but she speculates that “He was certainly thinking about Home Rule in Ireland—a very difficult matter” (*JR*, 78). Rather than stating it directly, the narrator shows Jacob becoming involved with the political issues of the day. Furthermore, she implies that this is born out of the need to feel like he belongs when she mentions later, “Jacob’s walking-stick was like all the others” (*JR*, 86). His “walking-stick” is “like all the others” as he puts on the costume of a responsible male citizen. Through surface details of Jacob’s appearance, the narrator reveals a development in Jacob’s character.

The tragedy at the end of the novel, however, is that Jacob has nothing but these objects to convey his character. The novel ends in Jacob's room, but he himself is not there since he has died in the first world war. Objects still carry the narrative, but now they convey elegy. In the last line of the novel, Jacob's mother Betty Flanders holds "out a pair of Jacob's shoes" as she asks, "What am I to do with these?" (*JR*, 143). Like the shoes which are now empty containers that Jacob's feet will never fill again, or the room which he will never live in again, the objects here signify the absence of Jacob. As a young man who had not yet accomplished much in his life, these objects in his room are the only traces of himself that Jacob leaves behind. War and death drain significance out of the everyday populated by objects conveying loss and emptiness.

In this way, *Jacob's Room* is not only an anti-war novel, but also an endorsement of the values of the everyday in opposition to war. In a glittering passage, the narrator writes:

Sunlight strikes in upon shaving-glasses; and gleaming brass cans; upon all the jolly trappings of the day; the bright, inquisitive, armoured, resplendent, summer's day, which has long since vanquished chaos; which has dried the melancholy mediaeval mists; drained the swamp and stood glass and stone upon it; and equipped our brains and bodies with such an armoury of weapons that merely to see the flash and thrust of limbs engaged in the conduct of daily life is better than the old pageant of armies drawn out in battle array upon the plain. (*JR*, 131)

Everyday life is a shimmering assemblage of sights and sounds. This is "better than the old pageant of armies," and it is enough. Indeed, in this passage, everyday life provides a counterpart to war in the description that the "summer's day . . . equipped our brains

and bodies with such an armoury of weapons.” A theme that will be taken up in the following chapters, the everyday has its own battles that are more worthwhile than the wars of nations.

**“on a level with ordinary experience”: Searching For Significance**

“Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end.”

-Walter Pater, “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*

*Jacob’s Room* was the first effort at creating a new narrative form suitable for depicting the everyday, and Woolf’s following works “Street Haunting” and *To the Lighthouse* further develop this form. Both published in 1927, “Street Haunting” and *To the Lighthouse* have similar yet not identical narrative structures. “Street Haunting,” an essay resembling a short story, employs a narrative structure based around the narrator’s decision to buy a pencil; the narrator leaves their home, has several encounters, buys a pencil, and then returns home. This is, of course, a cursory treatment of what happens in the essay, however, it makes this point: most of the important events in “Street Haunting” occur within the narrator’s mind. This narrative is, in the narrator’s words, an “excuse” for writing about a mind’s interactions with the everyday world around them, and the pencil itself is beside the point. I pair this essay with *To the Lighthouse* which employs a similar narrative structure that revolves around the Ramsay family’s trip to the lighthouse. A key difference between these two texts is that the lighthouse is far more significant than the pencil. The lighthouse has a dual quality: it is both ordinary and extraordinary. This nature of the lighthouse demonstrates a paradoxical facet of the everyday in that the extraordinary can also become ordinary through a technique which Gillian Beer describes as “post-symbolic.” This functions in a way akin to Lily’s experience of completing her painting in the novel when she thinks

that she wants “to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (*TTL*, 202). Lily’s intense grief over Mrs. Ramsay’s death resolves itself when it “too became part of ordinary experience, was on a level with the chair, with the table” (*TTL*, 202). This novel shows that narrative does not need to create constrained symbols, but rather, opening objects up to an everyday type of experience allows freedom while also conveying significance.

To understand how the pencil and lighthouse function as key structural aspects of narrative, we need to understand the role of “events” in narrative. The flow of the everyday manifests itself in fiction as the space between what narrative theorists such as Michael Sayeau and Peter Hühn term narrative “events.” Events make up the essential plot of a work; a story is made up of one thing happening after another. A key characteristic of the everyday, however, is its *uneventfulness*. As Sayeau explains, the everyday is always ongoing and events disrupt this flow; an event is “a moment of change and development that opens an alternative and/or signals the arrival of new meaning. The everyday, on the other hand, is the temporal ground where the event occurs and which it breaks” (Sayeau, 13). Franco Moretti calls this space in between events “filler,” and claims that it serves the purposes of heightening realism by giving the contextual details of a character’s life and “rationaliz[ing] the novelist universe” by making characters appear to be products of their setting (Moretti, 381). Woolf does not use filler the same way Moretti explains it, and, in fact, so-called “filler” becomes the main import of her fiction.

Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting” uses the purchase of a pencil as the main event of its narrative, and, having set up an ordinary plotline, the essay focuses on the narrator’s

experience of everyday life as they go about the process of buying the pencil. The essay begins: “No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner” (*SH*, 20). All narrative needs events in order to function, and as Sayeau notes, “it is literally, even structurally, impossible for something *not* to happen in a work,” and that even the most extreme attempts at creating an everyday, non-event based piece of literature still “retain an evental structure” as seemingly insignificant occurrences take on meaning within the work (Sayeau, 12, 13). In this essay, the mundane task of buying a pencil is transformed into a major narrative event. No preexisting genre sets readerly expectations, and the essay is free to wander in whatever direction it chooses as long as the narrator eventually buys their pencil. The narrator even describes that “when the desire comes upon us to go street rambling a pencil does for pretext” (*SH*, 20). The essay is conscious of its own trick; the pencil is nothing but an excuse for “street rambling,” which refers to the essay's depiction of a narrator wandering through the streets, but also its own tendency to ramble or talk at length without any linear argument. Instead of following a strict argument, the essay embraces the random, chance encounters of the narrator as they walk down the street. The narrative rambles from topic to topic as they wonder about the nature of the human eye to “rest on beauty” and the “islands of light” of the London street (*SH*, 21, 23). Whereas the narrator of *Jacob's Room* felt compelled to uncover Jacob's character and felt distracted by the vast amount of possible subjects of narrative, the narrator of “Street Haunting” has no central thread that they must adhere to.

The narrator keeps a superficial relationship with everyday life that keeps the narrative from resting in one place for very long. They peer into a stranger's house, immediately becoming fascinated with the life of its inhabitants, and begin to imagine the story of the woman who lives there when they cut themselves off, saying, "But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root" (*SH*, 23). This sentiment marks a different type of attention from that of *Jacob's Room* or "A Mark on the Wall." These texts are interested in making the most out of trivialities, whereas "Street Haunting" takes delight in simply amassing perceptions. The narrator notes, "we are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks" (*SH*, 22). "Resting, pausing," these are not the words of an event driven narrative, but rather one that wanders for the sake of wandering. These lines point to the narrator's type of attention which does not search for "buried treasure" or deeper meaning, but rather "glid[es] smoothly" as if everyday life were a "stream." We have seen that the unstructured nature of the everyday allows for a mind to generate its own knowledge out of experience, but here we see a narrative that uses this freedom to expand like a rhizome as it incorporates a plurality of perceptions for their own sake.

This lighthearted pleasure of the everyday becomes play. As the narrator goes on "merrymaking," they describe their eye as "sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances" (*SH*, 27). "Sportive" and ludic, the narrator engages in play with the world around them, "adorn[ing]" and "enhanc[ing]" the ordinary world with their imagination. They "furnish" a house in their mind only to "dismantle it in the twinkling

of an eye”; they think about what would happen if they were to “indulge” themselves in buying pearls, and imagine that if they put them on then “life would be changed” and they would be on a “balcony” at “two and three in the morning” (*SH*, 27). The style of the essay itself is relaxed as the essay continues on conversationally, referring to “Lady So-and-So” and incorporating the audience as it repeatedly says, “Let us put off buying the pencil; let us go in search of this person” (*SH*, 33). It passes from topic to topic with nonchalance, cataloging observations such as in the long sentence:

Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only—the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses; the carnal splendor of the butchers’ shops with their yellow flanks and purple steaks; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists’ windows. (*SH*, 23)

The narrator’s gaze is tinged with the colors “yellow,” “purple,” “blue,” and “red” as the world becomes delightful in its simplicity. This sentence does not limit itself to one topic, and chooses to include as much as possible through its complex use of punctuation as a means of extending a stream of thought through em dashes and semicolons. Nothing has to be deeply meaningful, but the narrator vivifies their perceptions with the descriptions “glossy brilliance” and “carnal splendor.” The narrator addresses the everyday with lighthearted and insouciant play, taking in life not for the sake of reaching some end, but simply for the enjoyment of the experience.

The narrator constantly shifts in identity, asking “what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men?” (*SH*, 35). Echoing the opening lines of

Dante's *Inferno*,<sup>3</sup> the image of a forest occupied with beasts pushes the prose towards a transfiguration of the everyday. Indeed, the essay becomes almost mystical in the narrator's assertion that "Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others" (*SH*, 35). Unlike the opening of Dante's poem where the poet feels lost and in need of some force to reorient himself, the narrator here delights in her fragmented and wandering experience. The essay would go on exploring everyday experience if it were not for the fact that convention and the essay form require an end.

The narrator recognizes that "Circumstances compel unity; for convenience' sake a man must be a whole. The good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be a banker, golfer, husband, father; not a nomad wandering the desert, a mystic staring at the sky, a debauchee in the slums of San Francisco, a soldier heading a revolution, a pariah howling with skepticism and solitude" (*SH*, 29). This sentence implies that people are not truly "whole," but rather more like the "nomad wandering the desert" who has no direction. It is only for "convenience' sake" that "the good citizen" appears unified. That is, as a citizen and member of the state, a person must have some role, perform some task that is identifiable and useful. As the narrator realizes the expectations of society to become a complete and whole citizen, they also realize that the narrative must come to some end. Nearing the end of the walk, the narrator notes a force inside their mind that says "Really I must—really I must" (*SH*, 32). The narrator thinks:

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<sup>3</sup> "Midway through the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost" (Translation by Robert and Jean Hollander).

Without investigating the demand, the mind cringes to the accustomed Tyrant. One must, one always must, do something or other; it is not allowed to one simply to enjoy oneself. (*SH*, 32)

The accustomed “Tyrant” whom Woolf had also written of in “Modern Fiction” compels the narrator to put an end to wandering. “[I]t is not allowed to one simply to enjoy oneself” the way the narrator has in their nonlinear “ramble.”

The pencil serves as the narrative device that holds the narrative together, but it is itself insignificant. The narrator refers to it mockingly as they describe it as “the only spoil we have retrieved from all the spoils of the city” (*SH*, 36). In a way, this is true; the pencil is the only thing they can hold onto permanently after their evening of wandering. But also, the narrator hardly conveys any interest in the pencil itself. Indeed, the entire trip manifests itself as incredibly trivial: the narrator needed to leave right at the moment they did to buy *one* pencil? The other treasures gained—their perceptions and ideas—are transient; these experiences exist only for a moment before becoming the past. But also, the representation of experiences comes closer to catching the essence of character which Woolf characterized as that “spirit we live by, life itself” (“Character in Fiction,” 436).

This narrative represents character as a set of experiences, and, if we are to believe Woolf’s words in “Character and Fiction,” it comes close to capturing something eternal amidst the fleeting. The essay spins out a web of perceptions, shifts in identity, and flows of thought in an imitation of unstructured everyday life. Borrowing words from Lefebvre, one might say the essay “does not purify the everyday; and yet it clarifies its contradictions” (*Critique*, vol. 1, 23). We are left with a cohesive yet complex narrative that represents everyday experience without simplifying its contradictions.

This representation, however, does come at a cost. The pencil has no significance other than as an excuse for the experience of walking; indeed, as the title suggests, the narrator's experience is "haunt[ed]" by their perceptions which appear suddenly like specters that disappear just as quickly. The pencil is a trivial telos, and while this functions well in this essay with its unnamed, nearly egoless narrator, Woolf demonstrates in *To the Lighthouse* that the minds of characters can also add their own significance to the ordinary. This leads to a narrative that raises up everyday experience without warping that experience to fit into a symbolic system of significance.

Similar to "Street Haunting," *To the Lighthouse* revolves around a simple act: the Ramsay family will go to the lighthouse. In a letter to Roger Fry, Woolf writes, "I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together" (Lee, 472). Woolf denies the lighthouse's status as a symbol and instead claims that it is simply a narrative device "to hold the design [of the novel] together." Having set up on the first page of the novel that the family hopes to go to the lighthouse, the narrative, like the narrative of "Street Haunting," is free to wander. There are other events within the novel, but this journey is the "line down the middle" which provides the endpoint of the narrative. Part one of the novel takes place in the evening of the day before the family hopes to take their trip to the lighthouse. This section of the novel hinges around the event of a dinner that Mrs. Ramsay has planned. The characters Paul and Minta become engaged in this section, but the novel avoids representing this event. Pushing this classical narrative event to the side, the narrative favors the processes of signification that can function "on a level with ordinary experience" (*TTL*, 202).

There are several different intensities of signification in *To the Lighthouse*. The first is an entirely anti-symbolic and flat representation of the ordinary as ordinary. In a paragraph-long sentence, *To the Lighthouse* amalgamates objects without adding extra significance:

Disappearing as stealthily as stags from the dinner-table directly the meal was over, the eight sons and daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay sought their bedrooms, their fastnesses in a house where there was no other privacy to debate anything, everything; Tansley's tie; the passing of the Reform Bill; sea birds and butterflies; people; while the sun poured into those attics, which a plank alone separated from each other so that every footstep could be plainly heard and the Swiss girl sobbing for her father who was dying of cancer in a valley of the Grisons, and lit up bats, flannels, straw hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, beetles, and the skulls of small birds, while it drew from the long frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a smell of salt and weeds, which was in the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing. (*TTL*, 8)

In this sentence, we find a complete resistance to the process of symbolism. Everything in the sentence has equal syntactical weight; the "Reform Bill" and "sea birds and butterflies" both belong as just one of many items in a long list. As the sentence moves from object to object, there is no time for any one of them to become symbolic. The sentence even eschews perspective as there is no discernible character speaking these words. Gillian Beer argues that all language "can never be anything but anthropocentric," and while this is true, this sentence attempts to get as far away from

that as possible as it becomes indifferent to the objects that a novel like *Jacob's Room* would explore in detail or that human subjectivity might invest with symbolic meaning.

The form of this sentence displays a comfort with the complexities of the everyday. Rather than losing itself in details, the sentence allows the varieties of the everyday to stand beside each other, creating an intricate web of associations. There is a harmony in the Swiss girl's dying father and the "skulls of small birds," each reminding the reader of the presence of death; there is tension between the politics of the "Reform Bill" juxtaposed against natural "sea birds and butterflies"; the sun both idyllically "poured into those attics," but also "drew from the long frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a smell of salt and weeds." There is no urgency here to draw out the deeper meaning behind these objects, and while the reader certainly can hover over this passage and tease out its many layers, the narrative itself moves on, content with the simple noting of details.

As the sentence crafts this neutral catalog, it comes to embody the attic itself. Semicolons quarter off sections of the sentence, forming, perhaps, rooms within the syntax. These rooms, like the rooms of the children, provide for the reader "fastnesses," or places of stability and respite. Each space between semicolons functions as its own syntactical room in which the reader might rest for a while, but just as the children's rooms are not necessarily fully separate entities but cordoned off spaces in the attic "which a plank alone separated," the semicolons themselves are also grammatically permeable "planks" that divide up the larger room of the sentence. This sentence not only shows the attic, but it embodies the form of the attic.<sup>4</sup> As an attic, it is inhuman and

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<sup>4</sup> The attic is a more than fitting space for Woolf to execute this ranging sentence that combines the textual with the spatial. Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* that the attic is "the brain of the house," and Woolf herself did her studying as a child in

as far away as it can get from imbuing objects with subjective ideas. It moves with complete impartiality and also with lightness as it does not warp ordinary objects to fit into a narrative mold, but represents them in a casually undirected sentence.

This sentence is a kind of controlled disorder that, in Woolf's words, "achieve[s] a symmetry by means of infinite discords . . . achieve[s] in the end, some kind of whole made of shivering fragments" (Bell, 138). The form of the sentence facilitates "infinite discords" by representing the attics and their contents, which are rich with potential energy and tension. Woolf writes in her essay "A Letter to A Young Poet" that poetry fails when "Something has worked in which cannot be made into poetry; some foreign body, angular, sharp-edged, gritty, has refused to join in the dance" and so "the common objects of daily prose—the bicycle and the omnibus" are "left . . . to the novelist" (*DotM*, 213, 214). This sentence proves the point she makes about prose by including all the "rough and tumble of daily life"—as Lily Briscoe later puts it—that Woolf sees poetry fail to incorporate (*TTL*, 199). Indeed, this sentence read alongside "A Letter to a Young Poet" makes us aware that it is consciously absorbing as much of life as possible, including the "angular, sharp-edged, gritty" as it adds one thing after another such as "the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing" which appear at the end of the sentence as if the narrative wanted to list just one more thing. These heterogeneous facts of everyday life find unity in the form of the sentence which contains them as attics contain objects and dirt.

This is one way Woolf crafts sentences in *To the Lighthouse*. She also writes, as Beer notes, anthropocentric language that acknowledges itself as a construction of

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the attic; the attic provides the perfect arena for Woolf to play around with thought experiments in form (28).

human consciousness. Beer explains that in part two of the book Woolf's sentences use personification and colloquial language to point to the absence of human presence when the house has been left and the objects within in decay. This section of the book points towards an anxiety about what happens when objects are left unattended—when nobody is there to see the kitchen table. The narrative notes:

In spring the garden urns, casually filled with wind-blown plants, were gay as ever. Violets came and were as strange as the chaos and tumult of night, with the trees standing there, and flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible. (*TTL*, 135).

Nature's indifference strikes terror into the narrative voice. "Violets" become, in a sense, violent as they signify the absence of humans and the "chaos and tumult of night" which is characterized elsewhere as having "no light of reason"; in the darkness of night chaos reigns "in idiot games until it seem[s] as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself" (*TTL*, 134, 135). In this case, both the violets and the night evoke primordial chaos and void. A voice lies within these lines, especially in the last judgment of the flowers, "eyeless, and so terrible." The voice mourns the lost vividness of the house seen through human eyes, but through this voice or "discourse" as Beer names it, the narrative retains shape. Indeed, the language here acts—akin to Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast who put the house back in order after years of desertion—like "a force working; something not highly conscious" (*TTL*, 139). This human sounding voice becomes the voice that holds together this section about absence and emptiness. But as Beer argues, in this section of the novel, the house becomes

merely an object of “lexical play”; language appears to function independently from humans.

Without any characters inhabiting the house, it is completely free from all structures of meaning including the human significance found in the everyday, and as such, meaning itself falls into a state of decay and entropy. Woolf highlights the absurdity of ordinary objects claimed by nature when she writes:

Let the wind blow; let the poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage. Let the swallow build in the drawing-room, and the thistle thrust aside the tiles, and the butterfly sun itself on the faded chintz of the arm-chairs. Let the broken glass and the china lie out on the lawn and be tangled over with grass and wild berries. (*TTL*, 138)

In these descriptions, nature and ordinary objects mix together and result in the destruction of both the house itself but also semantic meaning. Indeed, the passage goes beyond rational sense when Woolf writes “let the poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage.” Freed from human sense making, nature is capable of impossible acts. Nature’s irrational disorder is antithetical to the everyday which is an essentially human experience.

*To the Lighthouse* demonstrates that everyday experience is, like language, anthropocentric. Near the end of part one, the Ramsay family and their guests settle into dinner. It begins cumbrously and awkwardly, as Mrs. Ramsay thinks that “nothing had shaped itself at all. It was all scraps and fragments,” and she, Charles Tansely, and Lily feel “bored by this talk” (*TTL*, 90, 95). This changes, however, the moment the candles are lit:

Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily. (*TTL*, 97)

And then, in the next paragraph:

Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (*TTL*, 97)

Suddenly, the group of bored and separate characters becomes “a party round a table” as they become aware of the way that their gathering opposes the night where things appear uncertain and unknown. The narrative itself associates with the group as it says “here, inside the room,” as if it were an entity among them. When set up like this, the everyday—dinner parties around tables and rooms sheltered by glass—is a site of respite; it is a bastion against the chaos of the cold universe which does not adhere to human rationality.

The everyday is, then, a human construct. The dinner itself is merely a convention that the characters have agreed to participate in, and even though Mrs. Ramsay has “a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything,” she still prepares, organizes, and orchestrates the dinner with equanimity:

Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it, and so, giving herself the little shake that one

gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking—one, two, three, one, two, three. (*TTL*, 83).

A few sections earlier Mrs. Ramsay had felt completely detached from the world as she thought “All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others” (*TTL*, 62). It seems unlikely that someone with such a perspective would care to take part in the trivial customs of everyday life, but perhaps this is exactly why Mrs. Ramsay invests her energy into the dinner. She does so with artistry. The “old familiar pulse” that Mrs. Ramsay enacts as though the rhythm of the dinner is like a waltz that goes “one, two, three, one, two, three.” The dinner is like a dance that she puts on akin to the dance facilitated by Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out* where each person feels “ennobled” and able to dance any way they want (*The Voyage Out*, 170). Both Mrs. Ramsay and Rachel provide structures that guard against the insensibility of the universe but still allow freedom of movement and expression within them.

After having set the conversation in motion so that it runs without her needing to participate, Mrs. Ramsay detaches herself from the dinner, and, mysteriously, encounters eternity. After she reaches “security,” she thinks:

[S]he hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness (she was helping William Bankes to one very small piece more, and peered into the depths of the earthenware pot) seemed now for

no special reason to stay there like smoke, like a fume rising upwards,  
holding them safe together. (*TTL*, 105)

The dinner mixes with Mrs. Ramsay's feeling of being "suspended" and encountering a "profound stillness." It is a moment of bodily experience as she feels a somatic "joy" that fills "every nerve of her body fully and sweetly." This moment of being, as Woolf would describe it, encapsulates the whole spectrum of experience; Mrs. Ramsay "peer[s] into the depths of the earthenware pot," a sentiment both suggestive of the depths of the self that she had experienced earlier in the novel, but also entirely mundane. Another spectacular line notes: "It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity" (*TTL*, 105). The syntax of the confuses the "piece" of the Boeuf en Daube that Mrs. Ramsay serves to Mr. Bankes with a "piece . . . of eternity"; the everyday and the eternal flow into each other in a single moment that breaks down the semantic barriers between the two terms. Indeed, the narrative imbues small comments such as these two with profundity; Mrs. Ramsay thinks, "Of such moments . . . the thing is made that endures," and then immediately after assures Mr. Bankes, "Yes . . . there is plenty for everybody," as if not only the Boeuf en Daube was "plenty" enough for all to share but also eternity.

As shown here, the significance of the everyday arises out of the narrative itself which is tied up with Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts. There is a way to write the everyday as a heap of objects without any symbolic significance as demonstrated earlier by the sentence beginning with "Disappearing as stealthily as stags . . ."; there is also a way to represent ordinary objects without the presence of humans, leading to a destruction of the everyday; and finally, as shown in the winding syntax of the sentences quoted in the

previous paragraph, there is a way to represent the everyday in a way that makes it profoundly fulfilling without becoming a symbol of any specific concept.

The significance of the everyday arises out of character. Mrs. Ramsay finds herself in a state of detachment as she “hover[s] like a hawk” above the scene, finding a feeling “of peace, of rest” (*TTL*, 105). Mrs. Ramsay likens this moment to one she “had once today, already” when, in a moment between attending to her son James and soothing her husband, she had felt that “she could be herself, by herself” (*TTL*, 105, 62). This is the moment briefly noted already where she feels herself to be a “wedge shaped core of darkness” as she gazes at the lighthouse and its beam. She thinks:

Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw . . . . Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at—that light, for example. (*TTL*, 63)

The words “peace,” “rest,” and “eternity” appear both here and in the dinner scene. As she looks at the lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay loses a sense of rigid personality akin to the times in “Street Haunting” when the narrator feels their identity intermingle with the objects and people around them; the narrative in both cases blurs the line between subject and object.

In these moments, objects are not so much transfigured or defamiliarized, but rather they become coexistent with character. Mrs. Ramsay thinks:

It was odd . . . how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover. (*TTL*, 63, 64).

Mrs. Ramsay herself is inactive—her needles are “suspended,” paused—as the “inanimate things” around her seem to “express” her, to “know” her. The things even carry their own syntactical autonomy as they stand without verbs in the short phrase “trees, streams, flowers.” Mrs. Ramsay does not will herself to attend to objects, but rather, having “lost the fret, the hurry, the stir,” she allows herself to exist in harmony with the objects she sees and let go of her ego. Like the sentences in the dinner scene that blended eternity and ordinary objects, here, the opposites of subject and object also blend in an “irrational tenderness.” What is most notable here is that Mrs. Ramsay “Los[es] personality.” Becoming one with the objects she sees, she disappears into her perceptions.

Yet she does not become completely objective. Language still mediates her experience, a fact that Woolf draws attention to when in the middle of this scene Mrs. Ramsay thinks, “We are in the hands of the lord” (*TTL*, 63). This slip is akin to the workings of the unconscious mind that Freud writes about in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* where a person's words reveal a psychological complex. Here, as John Whittier-Ferguson notes, we see the power of the Judeo-Christian tradition assert itself

into Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts as she temporarily falls into conventionality (14). She does, however, immediately feel "annoyed with herself for saying that," thinking that "she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean" (*TTL*, 63). Personal meaning takes on a greater significance than conventional or religious systems as Mrs. Ramsay then begins "searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie" (*TTL*, 63). Her short meditation has taken the validity out of several "lie[s]" as she searches deeper and deeper into herself, finding her own meaning and sensation as a "core of darkness." Conventional wisdom dissipates, but she has gained her own knowledge about the nature of herself as she exists alongside objects.

The narrative itself mimics Mrs. Ramsay's ability to eschew systems of knowledge in favor of individualized knowledge. The significance of the lighthouse as the endpoint of the novel dissipates; it becomes, like the pencil in "Street Haunting," an object which is more important as a narratological device than it is as a symbol. As Beer argues, the end of the novel is a grand demystification; at the moment when we expect grandiloquence—when the remaining members of the family reach the lighthouse—we receive flatness (Beer, 45). After anticipating the trip to the lighthouse from the first page of the book and waiting through ten years of childhood to reach this moment, James thinks when he finally sails close to the lighthouse, "So it was like that . . . the Lighthouse one had seen across the bay all these years; it was a stark tower on a bare rock" (*TTL*, 203). The arrival at the lighthouse is the key event of the novel, but this moment dissolves grand significance. The wishful aspiration to visit the lighthouse has been unresolved in his life for ten years, and so finally reaching it brings that aspiration to a conclusion. But what the significance of that conclusion is can hardly be stated as



Figure 2: Godrevy Lighthouse, Woolf's inspiration  
From: John Whittier-Ferguson

anything more specific than “some feeling.” Symbolism dissipates; the lighthouse becomes, as Woolf herself described it, simply “a line down the middle to hold the design [of the novel] together.” It need not be more.

*To the Lighthouse* demonstrates that conclusion can have the most simple or ordinary justifications. Among the several threads it ties off, the lighthouse puts a rest to Mr. Ramsay's character. Having modeled Mr. Ramsay after her own father, Woolf felt that writing *To the Lighthouse* put her thoughts of him and her mother at ease: “writing *The Lighthouse* laid them in my mind” (*Diary*, III, 208). Yet even without this biographical detail, we see Mr. Ramsay himself alter and find peace. In the first part of the novel, he obsessively thinks over his studies and philosophy, neglecting to engage

with everyday life. In a poignant scene, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay walk together, and while Mrs. Ramsay points out the flowers to her husband, he seems “born blind, deaf, and dumb . . . to the ordinary things,” and he “never look[s]” at what she points out (*TTL*, 70, 71). He pursues “truth” as though his mind were structured like the alphabet and he had reached “Q” but strove to reach “R” and finally arrive at “Z” where only “One in a generation” makes it (*TTL*, 33, 35). By part three, something has shifted inside him. Perhaps death has altered his perspective; his own death is probably on his mind as he grows older, but also the death of his wife seems to have had an effect on his priorities. Indeed, he tells Lily that “he had a particular reason for wanting to go to the Lighthouse. His wife used to send the men things” (*TTL*, 151). His journey is, in part, an homage to his wife and the things she used to do, but it is also simply “to send the men things.” Mr. Ramsay sets aside the theorizations of philosophy as he turns towards the simple pleasure of sharing a meal with others.

Mr. Ramsay’s arrival at the lighthouse is an assertion of the value of ordinary experience. His children James and Cam expect him to mutter one of his characteristic phrases when they arrive (“We perished, each alone”), but he does not (*TTL*, 207). All that Mr. Ramsay says when he arrives at the lighthouse is, “Bring those parcels . . . . The parcels for the Lighthouse men” (*TTL*, 207). His language is flat and matter of fact; he does not sensationalize the moment, but rather accepts it as it is. Indeed, James interprets his father’s motions as if he were saying “There is no God,” and Cam sees him “as if he were leaping into space” (*TTL*, 207). The novel does not reveal his thoughts, but it appears as though he has left behind his seriousness as he jumps “lightly like a young man” (*TTL*, 207). And so the concluding moment of Mr. Ramsay’s character is not an

arrival at a grand philosophical system of understanding, but rather a turning away from such knowledge and an opening up to ordinary experience.

While Mr. Ramsay finds peace in the ordinary as ordinary, we see in other characters, that there is a paradox at play here as the ordinary and extraordinary coexist. As James puts it, “nothing [is] simply one thing,” and here, it would be unfair to remark that the lighthouse is only “a stark tower on a bare rock” (*TTL*, 186). Indeed, for James, “the lighthouse confirmed some obscure feeling of his about his own character,” and it is not entirely meaningless, nor does it signify absence the same way Jacob’s shoes did (*TTL*, 203). The lighthouse functions in the novel as Woolf claimed it would for her readers:

I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to [the lighthouse], but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit of their own emotions. (Lee, 472)

In line with her own epistemological understanding, the lighthouse is an object up for interpretation, or, more specifically, an object ready for people to “make it the deposit of their own emotions.” It functions in this “vague” way as an ordinary object that is extraordinary to those who imbue it with emotion (Lee, 472).

### “the daily battle”: Shaping Experience

“Little funny things ceaselessly happening.”

-Hope Mirrlees, “Paris: A Poem”

“If I could catch the feeling I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness and silence from the habitable world; the sense that comes to one of being bound on an adventure.”

-Virginia Woolf, *Diary III*

In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf explained that she was writing *The Waves* “to a rhythm and not a plot” (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 247). By this point in her career, Woolf had mastered her control over narrative so as to make her narrative structures almost invisible. Woolf called *The Waves* a “play-poem” in her diary, and, indeed, the book is structured as a series of soliloquies delivered by six characters. The fact that the entirety of the narrative save several interludes is narrated by the internal thoughts of these six characters appears to make *The Waves* Woolf’s most cerebral novel. As Gillian Beer writes, “the characters inhabit a world in which all that is traditionally central to narrative has been peripheralised or obliterated: Percival’s adventures in India, Bernard’s family, Louis’ city career, Jinny’s lovers, even the crisis of Rhoda’s madness and the love affair between her and Louis are present only as fragmentary allusion” (Beer, 56). Typical narrative events are “peripheralised or obliterated” in *The Waves*, leaving only that which escapes categorization: the everyday.

As Bryony Randall has argued, *The Waves* might be Woolf’s most everyday novel. It is everyday in the sense that we have understood the term here: it depicts characters making meaning out of their own immediate experience. As Randall argues, *The Waves*’

“stylistic features model what frames and structures our experience of everyday—daily—life, in its temporal and psychological aspects” (“The Waves and the Everyday”). I would add to Randall’s notion of experience in “its temporal and psychological aspects” that *The Waves* also highlights our experience of the everyday as linguistic. Indeed, the characters in *The Waves* “talk their lives,” and are constantly in the process of shaping experience through language (Lee, 569). Each character has a different way of experiencing the everyday which is tied to their linguistic shaping of it.

The characters Rhoda, Louis, and Bernard provide three differing perspectives of everyday experience. Louis and Bernard represent the poetic and the prosaic, respectively, and Rhoda embodies an erratic and wild perspective without any sense of habit. Each of these modes has its benefits and drawbacks: Rhoda sees everything as extraordinary and fantastic, yet this becomes tiresome and even unhealthy; Louis is able to distill meaning, but at the cost of excluding details; Bernard finds joy in cataloging life and all its specificities, but he struggles with the aimless narrative that this type of attention creates. Bernard’s struggle becomes the most illuminatory since Bernard’s final soliloquy elucidates the difficulties of representing the everyday as Bernard vacillates between representing his own experience as it really happens and giving a narrative shape to his story that might obfuscate his engagement with the small details that make up everyday experience. Altogether, these three characters demonstrate that everyday experience is variegated and dependent on a character’s linguistic framing.

Rhoda’s everyday experience is the most fraught of these three characters as her life is constantly overwhelming in its sights, sounds, and potential meanings. She is taken to daydreaming and often plays with her perceptions of the landscape around her,

such as in a moment as a young child when she invents an “armada” out of the materials floating in a basin:

All my ships are white . . . I do not want red petals of hollyhocks or geranium. I want white petals that float when I tip the basin up. I have a fleet now swimming from shore to shore. I will drop a twig in as a raft for a drowning sailor. I will drop a stone in and see bubbles rise from the depths of the sea. (*W*, 18)

Her young mind creates a fantasy in which flower petals are ships and twigs are rafts. Soon, the scene becomes dramatic as a “drowning sailor” materializes. Even in this short passage (not cited in full), we see how Rhoda’s imagination begins to point towards unsettling themes as evoked in the last phrase where she sees “bubbles rise from the depths of the sea.” She repeatedly has the sensation of drowning throughout the novel, and even as a young girl, her imaginative experiments begin to threaten her and make her feel unsafe in even the most ordinary settings.

Rhoda experiences the everyday as a site where fixed meaning perpetually unravels and recreates itself: she thinks that during a regular morning breakfast when “your husband” comes to sit down, “You [the ordinary person] say nothing. You see nothing. Custom blinds your eyes. At that hour, your relationship is mute, null, dun coloured” (*W*, 213). Yet the experience is the opposite for Rhoda, as she thinks, “Mine at that hour is warm and various. There is no repetition for me. Each day is dangerous . . . Each sight is an arabesque scrawled suddenly to illustrate some hazard and marvel of intimacy” (*W*, 213). For Rhoda, “there is no repetition” as she experiences nothing habitually as an ordinary part of everyday life, and, rather, “Each sight is an arabesque,” everything she sees is transformed in her mind to something expressive and significant.

She demonstrates that the everyday need not be ordinary unless our mind allows it to be so.

Bernard later imagines that, for Rhoda, “Perhaps one pillar, sunlit, stood in her desert by a pool where wild beasts come down stealthily to drink” (*W*, 252). He earlier describes Rhoda by saying, “Rhoda was wild—Rhoda one never could catch” (*W*, 247). In both descriptions, Rhoda is associated with the “wild” and with “beasts,” and indeed her vision is wild and creative. There is a possible allusion here to the Fauvists, a group of painters who experimented with intense and bright colors and whose name derives from the French word meaning “beasts.” Indeed, Rhoda’s vision is akin to a Fauvist painting which represents the world as exploding with color, “arabesque[s],” and as “warm and various.” The metaphor of the “desert” returns from “Street Haunting,” and here, akin to the narrator in “Street Haunting” or “A Mark on the Wall,” Rhoda wanders in her mind, and only something like the pencil, the snail, or a “pillar” in Rhoda’s case provide a base for wandering and wondering.

Rhoda, however, often fails to find this objective fixity to balance her subjective perceptions. As a child, she feels, “I myself am outside the loop . . . The world is entire, and I am outside of it” (*W*, 22). Her imagination takes her beyond reality such as when she feels a mix of wonder and terror as her mind works while she tries to fall asleep. She says, “I am above the earth now . . . All is soft, and bending . . . Out of me my mind can pour” (*W*, 27). She is only lying in bed, but her imagination has taken her “above the earth,” and “All is soft, and bending” as she perceives that the “corner of the cupboard” and “the nursery looking-glass” “stretch” and “elongate” (*W*, 27). She imagines that “Mrs. Constable” and her “aunt” chase her as she runs away “over the tree-tops” (*W*, 28). The name “Constable” with the word “stable” hidden inside it contrasts greatly with

Rhoda's imagination which is characterized by fluidity and the sensation that her mind can "pour" out of her as if it were liquid.

Her mind is overactive in its creation of meaningful everyday experiences, and even objects become transfigured. At first, she stretches her "toes so that they touch the rail at the end of the bed," so as to "assure [herself] of something hard" (*W*, 27). And later, she says, "Oh to awake from dreaming! Look, there is the chest of drawers. Let me pull myself out of these waters" (*W*, 28). The "rail" and "chest of drawers" provide evidence of a reality outside her imagination that can bring her back to the bedroom where she lies. These are, in Woolf's terminology, pieces of granite that serve as factual evidence of reality, and balance out rainbow and the imagination. In this case, the chest of drawers fails to offer respite, and Rhoda feels that "All is soft and bending" and physical objects "stretch" and "elongate" (*W*, 27). She appears to drown in her perceptions as she feels "waters" "heap themselves" on her and "sweep [her] between their great shoulders" (*W*, 28). She has no sense of habit to ground herself as she constantly shapes her experience into extraordinary images, not allowing anything to remain ordinary or fixed.

Rhoda embodies an experience of the everyday in line with Walter Pater's ideas about the necessity of breaking or not forming habits. Woolf knew Pater's daughter and had read his work, so it is possible that she could have had his ideas in mind when she wrote Rhoda's character. Indeed, as a character for which "There is no repetition," she experiences no habits at all. In his conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Pater condemns habits, saying, "In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike" (2). In his

formulation, habits are negative and result in a “stereotyped world.” Perhaps the most famous line from the conclusion, Pater writes, “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (Pater, 2). Woolf values the ability to challenge common perceptions, but she also demonstrates with Rhoda that to “burn always” is dangerous and self-destructive. Bernard says of Rhoda in his final soliloquy that she “[left] us, flying past us, to the desert” (W, 266). She mysteriously disappears from the later part of the novel, and Bernard reveals that “she had killed herself” by throwing herself in front of an omnibus (W, 281). Like Septimus Smith who kills himself in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Rhoda experienced life as overwhelming since even among her friends her mind was always inventing new meaning and never feeling at home. The danger of having no habits at all was something Pater himself knew, and he omitted the conclusion from the second edition of *The Renaissance* fearing that “it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall” (2).

Louis is the only character in *The Waves* with whom Rhoda reaches some level of companionship. Twice in the book she and Louis separate themselves from the other four characters and become “conspirators” (W, 231). Both characters feel like outsiders among society, but their approach to daily experience differs greatly. Loosely based on T. S. Eliot, Louis exemplifies Woolf’s conception of the modern poet. In her essay titled “A Letter to A Young Poet,” Woolf describes the poetic mind as that which looks “within and not without” (216). According to Woolf, many modern poets fail to include the details of everyday life, as they “cannot write about the actual, the colloquial, Mrs. Gape or the Channel boat or Miss Curtis on the omnibus, without straining the machine of poetry” (*DotM*, 218). According to Woolf, the task of incorporating the messy fragments and details of modern life into their poems often induces poets to turn inwards and

write only about “a self that sits alone in the room at night with the blinds drawn” (*DotM*, 218). Woolf’s advice to poets writing in this manner is to turn outwards, to find a way to unite their emotions with the world around them:

All you [the poet] need now is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts into another, until the taxis are dancing with the daffodils, until a whole has been made from all these separate fragments. I am talking nonsense, I know . . . [L]et your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows—whatever come along the street—until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole.  
(*DotM*, 221)

The poet must “open and shut, open and shut” their “rhythmical sense,” which here appears as the unification of subject and object into a work of art or a “harmonious whole.” This rhythmical sense wanders as it “wind[s] itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows,” and it rides along with the flow of everyday life, surrendering itself to fluidity rather than attempting to control it.

Louis cannot find this rhythmical sense because of his feeling that he does not belong in English society. He is self-conscious of his Australian accent which sets him apart from others. Sitting in a restaurant, Louis thinks, “I feel, too, the rhythm of the eating house. It is like a waltz tune, eddying in and out, round and round” (*W*, 94). Like the dinner in *To the Lighthouse*, the meal is compared to a “waltz” with “edd[ies]” and flowing movements. Louis sees the “waitresses, balancing trays, swing in and out” as if they were dancing; the customers, “average men,” include the waitresses’s “rhythm in their rhythm” (*W*, 94). Everyone in the restaurant participates in a dance with each

other and the objects around them except for Louis, who feels he is “not included” (*W*, 94). He thinks that if he speaks, those around him will “prick their ears” as they try to place him from either “Canada or Australia” (*W*, 94). He “desire[s] above all things to be taken to the arms with love, an alien, external,” and he wishes: “to feel close over me the protective waves of the ordinary” (*W*, 94). He never does feel at home among the rhythms of English society.

Poetry provides an escape from the world around him and allows Louis to shape his experience so that he feels at home in the everyday albeit at the cost of details of the world around him. He would rather sink into his own world, becoming “the companion of Plato, of Virgil” (*W*, 95). He thinks: “I will not submit to this aimless passing of billycock hats and Homburg hats and all the plumed and variegated head-dresses of women” (*W*, 95). His word “submit” designates the multiplicity of ordinary life as his enemy, and, indeed, he “oppose[s]” this variety by stating twice in the scene: “I will reduce you to order” (*W*, 95). To Louis, the common “rhythm is cheap and worthless,” and he seeks a way to “reduce” or distill it into “some perfect statements” and so “remove your aimlessness” (*W*, 95). His everyday experience is a constant refusal of “excess” and “flux,” and so ordinary objects are reckoned as a hindrance to his private visions of order. He retreats into himself as he thinks of themes common to poetry but separate from the world around him: “I have yet heard rumours of wars; and the nightingale; have felt the hurrying of many troops of men flocking hither and thither in quest of civilization like flocks of birds migrating seeking the summer” (*W*, 95). Wars and nightingales are themes closer associated with classical and Romantic poetry but not the modern world. Louis even goes so far as to make a private joke for himself when he slips his tip for the waitress under the edge of his plate so that “she may not find it till

[he is] gone” (*W*, 97). Unable to participate in the common order, he makes his own, and disregards the objects and people around him which inhibit his private systems of meaning.

It may seem that Rhoda and Louis both utterly fail to obtain a satisfactory experience of everyday life. But, as Bryony Randall claims, *The Waves* “is founded on the principle that everyday life cannot be articulated” (“*The Waves* and the Everyday”). Rhoda and Louis demonstrate how different types of attention lead to different experiences. Rhoda’s constant imaginative detours lead to an everyday where meaning flourishes but also where experience is overwhelming. Louis refines everyday experience into “order,” but this comes at the cost of details. Even the third subject of this study, Bernard, demonstrates that capturing the everyday in language is no easy task. While Rhoda exemplifies the erratic or wild mind and Louis appears as the poetic and orderly mind, Bernard embodies a prosaic experience of life. His experience is prosaic in both senses of the word: he is an aspiring prose writer who keeps a notebook full of phrases he plans to use in a novel, and he also often (but not always) experiences life as commonplace and lacking extraordinary significance.<sup>5</sup>

Akin to how Louis embodies a poetic vision, Woolf’s conceptions of prose writing are essential to Bernard’s character. In her essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” Woolf writes of “the democratic art of prose; its freedom, its fearlessness, its flexibility” (*Granite and Rainbow*, 20). She writes, “prose is so humble that it can go anywhere; no place is too low, too sordid, or too mean for it to enter. It is infinitely patient, too, humbly acquisitive. It can lick up with its long glutinous tongue the most minute

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<sup>5</sup> The etymology of “prosaic” shows a connection between these two meanings of the word directly linked by the fact that prose writing often contrasted with the heightened language of poetry, thus making it appear plain and commonplace.

fragments of fact and mass them into the most subtle labyrinths” (*Granite and Rainbow*, 20). Prose’s flexibility is perfectly fitting for everyday life in the modern world and its constant flux; it is able “to deal with the common and the complex,” and there are no limits to what it can amalgamate. (*Granite and Rainbow*, 20). Likewise, Bernard searches for “a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights—elm trees, willow trees, gardeners sweeping, women writing” (*W*, 255). He is a lover of universal life who tries to gather as much of life as possible through his note taking.

Bernard’s tool for cataloging life is his notebook. As a child, he thinks, “When I am grown up I shall carry a notebook—a fat book with many pages methodically lettered” (*W*, 36). The notebook is a storehouse for pieces of a narrative that Bernard collects and hopes to eventually put into a story, but as he reaches middle age, he begins to question the project: “I have made up thousands of stories; I have filled innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when I have found the true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer. But I have never yet found that story” (*W*, 187). Bernard seeks “the one story” which will contain all his notes of the random scenes that he has collected throughout his entire life. This imagined novel would be the story of his own life from beginning to end with all the innumerable details accurately represented. He senses the impossibility of such a task when he asks, “Are there stories?”

Bernard is concerned about the ways in which coherent narratives distort experience. Continuing his meditation on stories, Bernard notices a man having difficulty with his mule, and although he knows he could shape it into a story, he thinks “But why impose my arbitrary design? Why stress this and shape that and twist up little figures like toys men sell in trays in the street? Why select this, out of all that,—one

detail?” (*W*, 188). Bernard understands the violent nature of narrative to misshape and alter the preverbal experiences rooted in everyday life. He likens language’s treatment of objects to that of a street vendor selling cheap “twist[ed] up little figures” as if language and narrative were a way of turning experience into a product to be consumed by others.

The only way to resist this distortion of experience is to include as much of it as possible. Bernard is similar to Lefebvre’s description of the theorist of the everyday who refuses to be a “witness and judge of life *from the outside*” (*Critique* vol. 1, 5). Bernard prefers to take part in life, rather than see it from some vantage point beyond it; he thinks, “it is the panorama of life, seen not from the roof, but from the third story window that delights me” (*W*, 242). Watching from the “third story window,” Bernard is close enough to see the street and hear the people speak; he can observe the intricacies of ordinary life rather than see only the vague, general outline. As I noted in the introduction, whenever a man stands up and “say[s], Behold, this is the truth,” Bernard notices the detail that escapes this man’s knowledge; he sees “a sandy cat filching a piece of fish” (*W*, 187). However, as he includes as many facets of experience as possible, Bernard discovers that such writing threatens to become shapeless and to lack coherent narrative.

Bernard’s final soliloquy considers how much of everyday experience narrative can incorporate before it falls apart due to the incompatible details. The soliloquy takes place in a restaurant where Bernard addresses the reader, saying, “Now to sum up. Now to explain to you the meaning of my life” (*W*, 238). A sense of futility haunts these words. Bernard knows that this will be impossible for him as he thinks that “If it were possible, I would hand [my life to] you entire”; he admits “Of story, of design I do not see a trace” (*W*, 238, 239). Despite his acknowledgement of the impossibility of telling

his life story, he attempts it anyway, saying, “meanwhile, while we eat, let us turn over these scenes as children turn over pages of a picture-book and the nurse says, pointing: ‘That’s a cow. That’s a boat.’ Let us turn over the pages, and I will add, for your amusement, a comment in the margin” (*W*, 239). Bernard is, perhaps, literally turning over the pages of his notebooks and going through the phrases he has jotted down. He aims to give cursory explanations of each section akin to a nurse who simply points out the pictures to a child, but, as we will see, the “comment[s] in the margin” become substantial detours in the narrative.

The soliloquy begins with an lavish catalog of details:

. . . there was the garden and the canopy of the currant leaves which seemed to enclose everything; flowers, burning like sparks upon the depths of green; a rat wreathing with maggots under a rhubarb leaf; the fly going buzz, buzz, buzz upon the nursery ceiling, and plates upon plates of innocent bread and butter. All these things happen in one second and last forever. (*W*, 240)

At this point, Bernard could be reading phrases directly from his notebook. Semicolons act as bridges between phrases that flow into one another to create the sensation that this is all part of one scene that Bernard has taken notes on. Bernard’s vision has a wide range as it includes sundry details of both the beautiful (“flowers, burning like sparks”) as well as the putrid (“rat[s] wrestling with maggots”). The language is evocative in its form: Bernard writes “buzz, buzz, buzz” to imitate the repetitive drone of a fly, and the adjective “innocent” used to describe the alliterative “bread and butter” idealizes childhood. This paragraph is rich in imagery and inventive in its use of form as it brings

depth to a scene that “happen[s] in one second.” If Bernard can create all these phrases out of one second of time, then the narrative stands no chance of ever reaching an end.

Indeed, the narrative resists the general in favor of the particular. At times, Bernard appears to philosophize and create bits of wisdom, but these moments are always cut off by the particularities of his experience. In the following passage, Bernard creates abstract meaning out of a haircut, but he loses track of his argument in favor of a fascination with “surface” details:

I felt myself powerless to stop the oscillations of the cold steel . . . We are cut, we are fallen. We become part of that unfeeling universe that sleeps when we are at our quickest and burns red when we lie asleep. We have renounced our station and lie now flat, withered and how soon forgotten! Upon which I saw an expression in the tail of the eye of the hairdresser as if something interested him in the street.

What interested the hairdresser? What did the hairdresser see in the street? It is thus that I am recalled. (For I am no mystic; something always plucks at me—curiosity, envy, admiration, interest in hairdressers and the like bring me to the surface.) (*W*, 280)

Trivial details fascinate Bernard and drag him away from philosophical musings. It is important to note that ordinary life also pulls Bernard out of a sentimental tone. His language had been an exaggeration of the tragedy of human fate with the phrase about “that unfeeling universe” and the exclamative “how soon forgotten!”, but when Bernard shifts his perspective towards the street, the tone also shifts towards a matter-of-fact attention to “the surface” details. He leaves behind the insubstantial world of thought in favor of solid objects.

The attention to each particular moment and facet of his experience makes it difficult for Bernard to keep his narrative straight. He sees with his “wandering and inquisitive eye” an overwhelming amount of detail:

But then like the lost and wailing dove, I find myself flailing, fluttering, descending and perching upon some curious gargoyle, some battered nose or absurd tombstone, with humour, with wonder, and so again watch the sightseers with their Baedekers shuffling past, while the boy’s voice soars in the dome and the organ now and then indulges in a moment of elephantine triumph. How then, I asked, would Louis roof us all in? (*W*, 282)

Bernard comes to no conclusions, but “flails” like a “wailing dove,” lost in the variegated multitude of life. The question turns to narrative and artistic construction: “How then . . . would Louis roof us all in?”; how does one organize the everyday in a work of art? As we saw, Louis would “reduce” everything until it fit into a mold. But as Bernard says in the first draft of *The Waves*, “The prose of life is enough. We need not whip this prose into poetry” (372). This line makes it into the final draft in an altered version (“Heaven be praised . . . we need not whip this prose into poetry”), and shows that from an early stage, Woolf was considering the costs of poetry which Bernard says “confine[s] us” (*W*, 263, 282). But there is a reason for why Woolf alters this line: in order to create a narrative, the prose of life might *not* be enough.

*The Waves* ends with a twist on what a reader might expect from Bernard. Rather than ending prosaically, the last paragraph reads as poetic and heroic. Bernard proclaims, “Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s when he galloped in India. I

strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (W, 297). These ending lines are replete with metaphor, simile, and invocation—the techniques of poetry. The poetic character of the passage acts as a way for Bernard to conclude what is the otherwise inconclusive narrative of everyday experience. And yet the text displays a sense of the fact that this ending might not be all that conclusive. The last words themselves depict activity as Bernard “will fling” himself against death—the future tense indicating an act that occurs beyond the final page. And leading up to this moment, he describes the feeling of “the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again” (W, 297). The poetic language appears to bring the novel to a close, but reading closely reveals an emphasis on the ongoing and incomplete nature of the moment.

This last paragraph displays a mind in control of its own experience and aware of language’s ability to create illusion. In a Modernist move akin to the work of Wallace Stevens, Woolf uses the sound of language to create the artifice of an end but without truly concluding. Indeed, the novel ends, counterintuitively, at sunrise while “A redness gathers on the roses” and “A bird chirps” (W, 296). As Randall remarks, “Even the day of death begins as just another day” (“*The Waves and the Everyday*”). And as another day, it too must be part of what Bernard terms “the daily battle”:

I jumped up, I said, ‘Fight.’ ‘Fight,’ I repeated. It is the effort and the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering and piecing together—this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit. The trees, scattered, put on order; the thick green of the leaves thinned itself to a dancing light. I netted them under with a sudden phrase. I retrieved them from formlessness with words. (W, 270)

Capturing or “nett[ing]” his experience with language shapes Bernard’s daily life. Situating this in theories of the everyday, we see that language acts as the medium of experience, and it is one that requires “effort” and “struggle.” As *The Waves* shows, there may never be an end to this battle, and life may always be this “absorbing pursuit.” *The Waves* thus challenges the need for finality and points towards the perpetual process of retrieving experience “from formlessness with words” as the only constant.

### Coda:

#### “The mud became fertile”: Finding an End

“The end gives its vividness, even its gaiety and recklessness to the random daily life.”

-Virginia Woolf, *Diary V*

Now to sum up. This study has examined different embodiments of the everyday in Virginia Woolf’s narratives. We began with *Jacob’s Room* and observed how its focus on everyday experience reoriented the conventions of the *bildungsroman* genre and invented a new narrative structure based on rooms rather than events. In chapter two, we saw how Woolf used the trivial act of buying a pencil as the central narrative structure in “Street Haunting,” allowing for both the narrator and for the narrative itself to wander. This structure compares to the narrative of *To the Lighthouse* which also uses a trip as a central throughline, but in this case, the narrative’s post-symbolic characteristics demonstrated narrative’s ability to represent everyday experience as both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. The third chapter shows *The Waves* to be possibly Woolf’s culminating experiment in everyday narrative form as it illuminated how narrative and rhetoric shape experience.

As we saw at the beginning of this study, understanding the everyday rests on experiential learning. In all three chapters, I emphasized the ends of each text because the ends prove to be the most consequential to the representation of the everyday. If the everyday is always an ongoing process, then coming to a conclusion presents a difficulty: how does one end a narrative that does not believe in conclusion? There is never a moment in Woolf’s texts where philosophy or a system of meaning takes center stage to

pronounce the ultimate truth, bringing solidity and order to the universe. *Jacob's Room* ends with the unraveling of significance as ordinary objects become elegiac. *To the Lighthouse* rejoices in the human ability to make significance out of the insignificant. And *The Waves* ends with a rhetorical mask that seems to conclude the book, but truly opens it back up to everyday experience.

In the spirit of “the daily battle” of creating meaning out of the vast material at hand, let us turn to one final example, and end, like *The Waves*, with one last act of gathering, summoning, and creating even though it may last for only this next moment. Let us turn to Woolf's final novel *Between the Acts* which depicts a pageant in the English countryside held in the open air at the house of the Oliver family and attended to by the surrounding village people. As the title implies, the novel is about what happens between the acts of the pageant, as well as what takes place between the historical acts of the two world wars.

*Between the Acts* presents a version of the everyday vastly different from Woolf's other representations. As John Whittier-Ferguson notes, Woolf's late fiction reacts to the sense of the impending crisis of a second world war, and “[t]he shape of her sentences will change utterly; the aesthetic finish of her prose will be deliberately marred by repetition, misplaced rhyme, broken rhythms” (15). Throughout *Between the Acts*, characters feel “[t]he doom of sudden death hanging over us” and that “[t]he future shadowed their present” (*BA*, 114). All hope of the future is fraught, and the coming event of the war leaves its mark before it has arrived.

Against the threat of war, the value of the everyday seems to pale—what can the everyday do to mitigate such a disastrous loss of life? No work of Modernist literature prevented either of the world wars in the twentieth century: not *To the Lighthouse*, not

*Ulysses*, not *The Waste Land*, not *The Cantos*, not *Tender Buttons*, and not *Spring and All*. In his seminal work *Mimesis* written during the second world war, Auerbach ends his study of a version of the western canon with an analysis of *To the Lighthouse*. He concludes that the “random moment” of everyday life as depicted in *To the Lighthouse* “concerns in a very personal way the individuals who live in it, but also (and for that very reason) concerns the elementary things which men in general have in common” (552). He claims that through an appreciation of random moments, we might arrive at the “common life of mankind on earth” (552). He is extremely hopeful in his belief that an appreciation of everyday life will allow us to see what makes us similar as opposed to what makes us different, and will bring about world peace.

Auerbach’s argument could be a satisfying place to end this study, but it would be contrary to Woolf’s writing of the everyday that we have discovered here which constantly thwarts generalization and overarching statements. *Between the Acts* is a clear example of Woolf’s understanding of the relationship between the everyday and grand narratives. In *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe puts on a pageant of English history. The pageant takes place outside in the open air, subject to the interruptions of the weather, “Swallows, cows, etc.,” planes flying over, and the audience’s misinterpretations of the play and their own role in it. It is a play intentionally open to the disruptions and distractions of Auerbach’s so-called “random moments” of ordinary life.

Allowing the randomness of ordinary life to enter into a work of art is a risky move. At times, it interrupts the play. Muttering “Reality too strong,” Miss La Trobe realizes that the ongoing world around her disrupts the pageant, and her narrative dissolves like “[a] cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon” (*BA*, 179, 209).

The pageant stands metonymically for any grand narrative of history which, when exposed to the open air of ordinary experience, loses its validity as *the* narrative. Despite the totalizing narratives of history embodied even in the name “world war,” everyday experiences complicate, contradict, and delegitimize the claim that these narratives present the whole picture.

In fact, a valuable aspect of everyday life is its disorderliness that allows for humans to generate their significance free from domineering systems. Early in the novel, the characters dwell on the figure of Antaeus who is mythologized as gathering his strength from the ground he stands on. With the ground and dirt being analogous to the crude features of everyday life, Antaeus is a fitting figure for the person who draws their own meaning out of their immediate surroundings. The play itself does this when the cows “bellow” between two acts and “annihilate the gap; bridge the distance; fill the emptiness and continue the emotion” (*BA*, 141). Similarly, later in the play, a burst of rain falls and bridges the transition a second time, influencing Miss La Trobe to think that “Nature once more had taken her part” (*BA*, 181). Unscriptable and unplanned, the regular occurrences of a rural setting produce meaning and narrative transitions for the play.

The fleeting moments of meaning found in everyday life may not be a unifying force that prevents all future war, but it is always a counterforce—a creative force—against the limited narrative of history. In her last diary entry, Woolf writes:

A curious sea side feeling in the air today. It reminds me of lodgings on a parade at Easter. Everyone leaning against the wind, nipped & silenced. All pulp removed. This windy corner. And Nessa at Brighton, & I am imagining how it wd be if we could infuse souls. Octavia’s story. Could I

englobe it somehow? English youth in 1900. Two long letters from Shena and O. I cant tackle them, yet enjoy having them. Leonard is doing the rhododendrons . . . (*Diary* vol. 5, 359).

Those last ellipses trail off into an unrecorded moment, one that is likely entirely uneventful as she watches Leonard work in the garden, yet powerfully disruptive of the sensationalized narratives of the end of Woolf's life. With an attention to the ordinary it becomes clear that amidst winter, war, and death, there were also flowers.

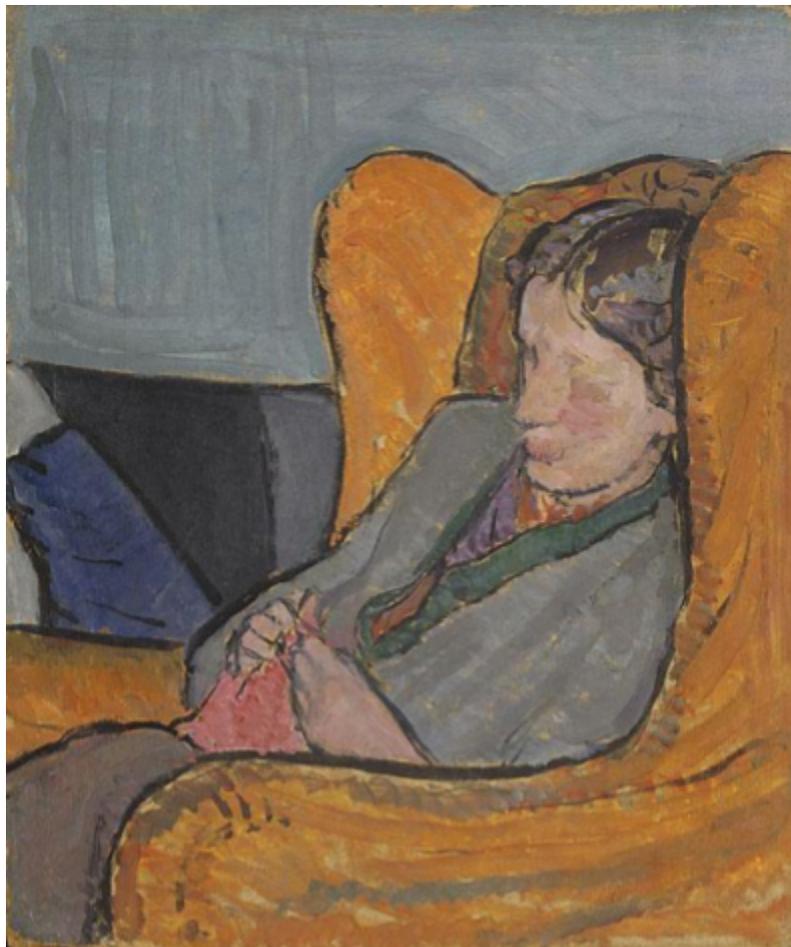


Figure 3: Portrait of Virginia Woolf by Vanessa Bell  
From: National Picture Gallery

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