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**The Epistemological Questions In Virginia Woolf's
Mrs. Dalloway and *To The Lighthouse***

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Virginia Woolf is credited with a great many accomplishments in respect to the modern novel and her unique style in delving into pertinent issues is the forefront in feminist writing. However, her greatest accomplishment, as will be explored, is her intertwining methods of presenting greater meanings of life in the portrayal of people. In her novels, Woolf examines the connections and relationships, both superficial and profound, and how this is applied to the greater epistemological questions of being and life. In her two novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf examines these questions, leaving the ultimate question of life unanswered and the merely ambiguous clues as to her possible revelation. To possibly answer these questions and find Woolf's focus, one must search her reoccurring themes of human relations throughout these two novels to perhaps see that the very process is possibly the answer.

There are three essays within which are found poignant clues to the answer of life's meaning via Woolf. In "The Terror and The Ecstasy," Patricia Matson reviews *Mrs. Dalloway* and the implications of her narrative structure in forming the relationships of her characters. In Diane Cousineau's "Towers in the Distance," we see the critic explore the meaning of the lighthouse and its representations of human connections and rifts. Finally, in Jane Fisher's "Silent as the Grave", one detects the importance of death and life in Woolf's narration.

In *Mrs. Dalloway* the matter of life and death in conjunction with the character's emotional and mental associations is a pertinent theme. A theme in which Woolf addresses the meaning of life and how to live it successfully, a matter philosophers have explored since Socrates. Woolf balances the importance of individual self and the communication of that individual self with other human beings through the portrayal of a

set of often ambiguously interconnected characters. The question of life and death is conveyed with complete straightforwardness throughout the novel, contained within numerous characters. When the main character, the society lady Clarissa Dalloway, goes out to buy flowers for her party, she queries over the meaning of being and the inevitability of death while intermingling these ideas with her supposed trivial social matters. Her melding of the two into one fluid force becomes the proposed hypothesis throughout the rest of the work:

"but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself"

(Mrs. Dalloway⁹).

This statement, this thought of being ever present in other's lives while retaining some sense of individualism, becomes the premise on which Woolf's philosophy on the meaning of life and death begins.

The importance of being in harmony with others while impressing the significance of the individual self is expressed especially through Woolf's heroine, Clarissa Dalloway. It is made clear through her character the importance of the privacy of emotions; however, Clarissa also explores the healthy balance of this privacy in connection to the social strata. Woolf creates Clarissa Dalloway as a older woman who has married Richard Dalloway, a conservative government official and someone obviously representative of a

strict social establishment, but all the while she has retained the intimacy of her inner self, "For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 8). This isolation of self is then contrasted to the misfit character of Peter Walsh who, in loving Clarissa so passionately and interfering with her intimate relations to Sally Seton, left no room for her private self, "But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 8). This fluidity of thought between Clarissa and Peter is seen at various junctions throughout the novel, however, Clarissa maintains that while it may be direct and ever present communication of feeling, even love, it is not positive and actually insists on its detrimental quality to herself and Peter's lives, "And it was intolerable, and when it came to that scene in the little garden by the fountain, she had to break him or they would have been destroyed, both of them ruined" (8). A similar idea is found in Clarissa's love for Sally Seton, where Clarissa feels the mixture of both passionate emotion and the necessary privacy to express this emotion, hence the upsetting scene in the garden with Sally and Peter. Clarissa's life is balanced by her tendency to love wild, passionate, and overly-communicative people and her reserve in expressing her tendency, as seen through her marriage to Richard Dalloway and her social positioning.

Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked WWI veteran, who is often seen by scholars as Clarissa's counterpart in the novel, is someone who recognizes his emotional feeling as well but refuses to cater to the social world's establishment to an extreme degree. His private emotion is revealed to the world, such as when he talks to the dead or revels in the beauty of unrestrained being, and therefore, he is decidedly too defiant and is

oppressed by members of the "establishment". His eventual suicide reveals that he is willing to "take the plunge" and spurns the counterpart lift of emotions connected with the integration and compromise of self for society(*Mrs. Dalloway* 3). On the other hand, Clarissa engages in both spectrums of emotion, "What a lark! What a plunge!" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 3). His suppressed emotions were finally uplifted by his plunge, when he delves into the unknown world of death, wherein Septimus can become part of all the world with which he has had contact. Matson hypothesizes that Woolf uses the character of Septimus Smith to represent " the crushing of the human spirit as a consequence of dogmatic patriarchal authority" (Matson 174). His refusal to stifle his fears and agony about war and pain is a source of social embarrassment and concern for proportioned individuals and further separates him from the realm of society, connecting him to the individual portion of the spectrum.

Matson, on the other hand, insists that the character Sir William Bradshaw, the dreary physician who is convinced he holds the key to Septimus's recovery, is the ultimate representative of this establishment, a self-serving and oppressive authority, "Woolf shows us that his notions of an acceptable social impulse are discursive fabrications that keep at bay whatever threatens to disrupt the order that serves him so well" (Matson 174). Sir William, described with the gray drabness of mediocrity, is the extreme of domination and power, and therefore, finds the expression and communication of any sort of emotion other than dullness quite reprehensible(*Mrs. Dalloway* 94). He responds to Septimus Smith by planning to take him away and secluding him in a far away hospital in order to secure his favoring governing order which made him so successful. In doing so, Sir William forbids Septimus Smith from communicating, " Try

to think as little about yourself as possible,'" (98). However, as shown with Clarissa Dalloway, this attempt to delve oneself completely into others or oneself and always marginalizing oneself to communication acceptable to others is the downfall of man and ends up killing the self.

While Matson reveals the chaos in which Woolf places her characters, it must be acknowledged that Woolf does give them options to survive, exploring each one until she finds one that seems to work well with the self and the world, "Posing, as it does a challenge to authority in all its various forms without ever becoming prescriptive" (Matson 163). While she may not ultimately pinpoint one specific point of view, Woolf obviously empathizes towards Clarissa's thoughts and feelings, since she seems to have a close and personal insight on Clarissa's individual self, such as seen in her thoughts of sexuality and philosophies of life. In addition, Clarissa seems the most well-rounded individual of the characters in that she balances in the center of the line. In a way, Woolf is leading the characters, and therefore the audience throughout the question of being and self. Matson elaborates, "The spectator's (reader's) quest is not simply to accept the writing process but also to translate that process into 'some ultimate word'" (166). This 'ultimate word' is something that is perhaps the summary of self and life; the meaning of relations and love and society and death all in one. The barrier to this discovery, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is the patriarchal suppression of the self and the marginalization of personal emotions and interests for the good of the whole and the benefit of the powerful. Woolf's search for this is evident, as Fisher explains, "she attempts to bridge not only the gap between the living and the dead but a more stubborn discipline between the living and the living" (95).

This search also extends into her other prolific novel, *To The Lighthouse*, which expounds upon her previous topic in further depths. The characters in this novel continue to represent the ends of the spectrum; however, Woolf does not supply an exact middle-ground heroine, such as in *Mrs. Dalloway*, perhaps suggesting that this answer is not as simple as previously theorized. While the opposite ends of the spectrum are easily identified, the characters balancing the center are much more of interest in the question of being. In the essay, "Towers in the Distance," Cousineau delves into the experience of this extreme emotional spectrum as well. Her argument uses gender issues to pontificate, however, another angle can be taken from her hypotheses. Mr. Ramsay is seen as the logic-bound philosopher who is creatively inspired by his beautiful and domesticated wife and the vision of his "perfect" family. Mrs. Ramsay is seen as a muse-mother who feels as though her duty is to perform her role to make everyone happy and protected from the harsh reality of life. In Cousineau's essay, she views the lighthouse as the representative of the human genders, "From the base of broad receptivity, the tower grows narrower as it ascends, suggesting that the containing female vessel is finally to be transcended at a point that is exclusively male and isolate" (54). Although, as Cousineau points out, Woolf decidedly use gender as a main theme in their expression and idea it is clear that there is a broader, more enveloping issue involved. While it cannot be denied that gender is a concurring and simultaneous issue, this idea of the tower can also be viewed as the representation of human identities searching for the right place in the spectrum of life's happiness and content. In addition, while the tower line itself is separated into gender, it is more and more ambiguous in gender identity towards the center of the scale. The "creative force" at the base of the tower represents the social realm, the idea of self-

influencing and being influenced by others. Towards the peak of the tower, it becomes more and more transcendental and personal, leaving the person alone and dealing with more intellectual ideals and less with "trivial" matters such as children or marriage plans. Along with Cousineau, it is evident that Mr. Ramsay's character is determined to find in his gallant and intellectual quest the meanings of the letter 'R' which have made him a representative of the patriarchal and linear visions of oppressive society; however, while he is overbearing, he has redeeming qualities, but it seems he is just trapped within the mindset of the male-dominated universe, which again melds the ideas of position with gender. Woolf's description of Mr. Ramsay in the first few pages of the novel make his character a solid position representing the patriarchal peak of the tower, " He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness" (*TTLH* 4). Mrs. Ramsay expresses a different view, however, one of the shielding and inspiring force, "To pursue truth with such an astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that, without relying, dazed and blinded, she bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked" (32). Mrs. Ramsay's concerns are mainly of a social and relational aspect, creating an atmosphere which provided comfort and inspiration for others. These two main and apparently opposing

concerns are met in the middle by numerous character elements contained within the children and Lily Briscoe.

Woolf makes an effort to explore and, often times, refute certain arguments which could resolve the conflict between the two views. She makes it perfectly evident that the marriage of these concerns to one another is not an answer, something that Woolf explores through the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, where they only seem to make one another weaker, but also through the marriage of the younger and more modern couple, Minta and John. The dominance of one over the other in any way makes the other dependent and weak, wasting each other where they could be producing the fruits of their labor. The oldest children who follow in their parent's footsteps are led to their demise, concluding that both ends of the spectrum are destroyed. Prue Ramsay dies in childbirth one year after her "happy" marriage, "Which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well" (132), while her brother, Andrew, dies in the Great War, significant of man's intellectual idealism bringing on its own destruction (*TTLH*133). Clearly, Woolf is definitely making a point that these roles do not provide the answer to life, and in fact, will destroy the life itself. These deaths bring about the importance of life and the import of living it the way it is most productive and beneficial to both the individual self and the social realm. Fisher believes it is crucial to the search to Woolf's meaning, "Yet in its destructive capacity, death also guarantees the defeat of these searches for a stable absolute that can resist time" (*TTLH*100). This search for an ultimate meaning once again has surfaced and attempts, where marriage has failed, to unite in a productive sense, the two ends in a balance. Fisher, however, believes that Woolf has twisted the traditional find into something much more complicated and

ambiguous, "Although the goal is unattainable, the novel portrays that the effort to reach such a goal is heroic" (*TTLH* 101). On the contrary, it is evident that the process itself, the struggle for balance of self and others is the meaning, leading to the answers which Woolf has struggled to convey, as Fisher claims, "What life means finally cannot be separated from how it achieves meaning" (*TTLH* 102). In this, the readers see Woolf's call for moderation and the essentiality of productivity of the human self. While Mrs. Ramsay attempts to keep windows, perhaps windows of communication, open, she finds a problem, "Every door was left open" (*TTLH* 27). This over-production of communication leaves her unable to express herself privately, because she is too open to giving and letting others into her personal realm. Mrs. Ramsay's inability to have a private self eventually leads to her death, leaving Mr. Ramsay unable to produce without her muse-like inspiration. In this sense, their marriage was a failure because neither could either relate to their private selves nor social atmospheres in the long run, left completely lost or destroyed. In addition, their way of life created a destructive role model for the others that they influenced in their respective strength, therefore, they passed on and created a chain of destruction which is represented in both failed relationships and the advent of the war.

The salvation of humanity and the meaning of life then becomes an integral part in the discovery of self and others and the dynamic of these in these two particular novels. Characters who alter or cross these heavily pressed upon boundaries in the spectrum become closer to achieving the productive communion between self and others. Lily Briscoe is a prime example of this androgynous and balanced self. She is struggling to find her place in life and her attempts at great artistry can be seen as attempts at immortality, a desire to continue influencing life long after her end through painting.

This type of communication is similar to Clarissa Dalloway's idea that she is part of everyone and everything she has known or come into contact with throughout her life. However, Lily also acknowledges the limitations of this ambiguous communication, "It would be hung in the servant's bedrooms. It would be rolled up and stuffed under a sofa" (158). It is perhaps indicative of the importance of the social realm on art which something that is a personal expression of self. This recognition of the importance of both areas of being is a clear sense of revelation, in which Lily finds herself completing her work of art; however, she does it with great difficulty. Her "inherently" social female consciousness and her uncharacteristically male habits, such as choosing to remain unmarried, aide her in this process.

Cam and James, portraying the future of human process, are also foreshadowing a attempt at a balance of self and others. Both are deeply connected to their mother in early life, who is representative of the social side of the spectrum, while it is seen that there is an extremely large rift between Mr. Ramsay and themselves, "But they vowed, in silence, as they walked, to stand by each other and carry out the great compact- to resist tyranny until death" (163). However, they are both influenced by their father and his representation of individuality embodied by the poetry line, "We perished, each alone" (191). This clear sense of individualism and responsibility for self is something which tips the scales into balance towards the ends of the novel, as they travel towards the lighthouse. According to Cousineau, the lighthouse contains both the "male" features and "female" features, perhaps again granting it an androgynous status. Cousineau claims that Woolf purposefully did this in order to grant the reader a glimpse into the answers of life,

somewhere no one has thought to look in a dominantly patriarchal society, "In place of unified and coherent subject and linear time, she insisted on fragmented moments of subjectivity lived simultaneously in the present, past and future" (Cousineau 56). This look at the meaning through a different angle gives Woolf an advantage in exploring this idea of self in a new way, which perhaps is symbolic of the way in which people receive the meaning in life. Woolf does not play the part of the omnipotent narrator and leaves much open to question; however, in doing so, she explores many options without pinpointing a particular answer, something which would become as problematic as the opposite spectrum beliefs of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. In this sense, it becomes the way of thinking and finding which becomes most important in the discovery of life and meaning in self. Woolf attempts to create her characters in imitation of the life that one lives, not in a linear model, therefore the central balance is necessary for the reader. Unfortunately it is unable to be pinpointed exactly because it is no longer on a linear spectrum. This leaves the search for answers in life and death the actual fulfillment of self because it is easily recognizable that one can only know death is in store for all in the end. Fisher describes this idea, "The valorization of process arises from the novel's awareness of temporal inevitability and a teleology that leads only to death" (101). Mr. Ramsay also becomes an important figure in this discovery, because while he is formerly an agent of individuality, he must learn after Mrs. Ramsay's death to adhere to relational needs himself and not have them provided for him. This, while apparently difficult at first, connects Mr. Ramsay with his children and gives him an ultimate sense of balance which promises a new future for his offspring and himself. As they approach the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay's children, although reluctantly, seem to be affected by his presence, "for she was

safe, while he sat there; safe, as she felt herself when she crept in from the garden, and took a book down, and the old gentleman, lowering the paper suddenly, said something very brief over the top of it about the character of Napoleon" (*TTLH* 191). This sense of security comes with balance of Cam's social characteristics and her yearning for the individual intellectual atmosphere which she so seems to crave from her father. James also seems to accept his father's compliments, although they must reach the island of the lighthouse before this occurs, " He was so pleased that he was not going to let anyone share a grain of his pleasure" (*TTLH* 206). Although in the end they leave the island of their childhood to arrive with their father at the tower, a phallic symbol, they do not depart without the effect of the origin of their being. The relational need of humans is evident, even when they are needing to express their individual selves.

Woolf has deftly maneuvered to supply the reader and her characters with what Matson called "subversive keys" to her vision of life and its meaning (164). This balances the crucial nature of both relational and individual exploration and dependence. In order to live and live fully, one must develop these parts equally, for each is vital to the other's flourishing. This idea is explored in both her primary novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*. With these scholar's three essays one is provided with the necessary input in the argument. Matson explores this in a narrative way, balancing Clarissa Dalloway's self between domination and chaotic rebellion. Cousineau examines the significance of gender and the spectrums of this, while Fisher examines death and Woolf's provision of process as connections between past, future, and life. Thus, Woolf's attempt to explain humanity's ultimate purpose is found in an ambiguous balance between oneself and others in the realm of intellectual and social achievement.

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