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"You Find Us Much Changed": The Great War in *To the Lighthouse*

Megan Mondi

Had human character not already changed "[on] or about December 1910" as Virginia Woolf claimed, it would have changed on June 28, 1914, when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo (qtd. in Bradbury, "Modern World" 15). Like Modernism, the Great War demanded a new kind of writing. Because old assumptions about the past did not fit the postwar world, the survivors of World War I—both veterans and civilians—struggled to find new ideologies about the world and human nature in the aftermath. Virginia Woolf's solution, set down in "Modern Fiction," was to convey the "luminous halo" of life (154). In other words, she decided to write about "little daily miracles" because "[the] great revelation" which Lily so famously speaks of in *To the Lighthouse* "perhaps never did come" (Woolf 161). In *To the Lighthouse,* Woolf takes the disorientation and despair of the decade following the war and successfully turns it into one of her "matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (161). She addresses war in a new, poetic, and poignant way.

Woolf deliberately yet modestly incorporates war into her novel. Like Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, or other war poets of the early twentieth century, her primary goal was to create art for all generations. Where Woolf differs from the war poets is that she was not overtly political or historical. References to war in *To the Lighthouse*, therefore, can be easy to miss. "The Window" provides anachronistic hints of the destruction to come and simultaneously reduces warfare to child's play. Woolf transcends the limitations of language and subtly articulates the horrors and consequences of war in "Time Passes." Modernists themselves, the characters in "The Lighthouse" alleviate their frustration with the past by taking their knowledge and memories and creating something new. This postwar newness explains the distinctive aura surrounding the third section of the novel. Understanding how war is incorporated into each section of her novel and for what purpose provides readers with a fuller understanding of Woolf's masterpiece.

"The Window" suggests the imminent destruction that will result from war. As her children disappear from the dinner table,

Mrs. Ramsay deplores the "[strife], divisions, difference of opinion, [and] prejudices twisted into the very fibre of" her children (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 8). These characteristics she sees developing within them are the very same which lead to confrontation and war. She wants her children to remain content and innocent, for "[they] were happier now than they would ever be again" (59). She wants "never to see them grow up into long-legged monsters" (58). Mrs. Ramsay shows great wisdom and foresight in her worrying. It seems as though she knows a great change—such as the change brought about by war—is about to take place. For her, the waves on the beach "like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life" and fill her with terror (16).

Woolf also infuses terms and images into "The Window" that suggest war without specifically mentioning the Great War itself. Mr. Bankes and Lily are "allies" in understanding, for example—they share opinions on marriage, children, and even soup (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 18)! The boar's skull, which casts eerie shadows throughout the nursery, serves as a chilling memento mori that literally hangs over the Ramsay children's heads. Cam is frightened by it, but James insists that it remain on the wall. Mr. Ramsay and the children laugh at Mrs. Ramsay, forcing her to "dismount her batteries" and leave reform of the English dairy system to the next generation of women (103). When Mrs. Ramsay impatiently waits for the return of Paul, Minta, Nancy, and Andrew, she thinks for a moment that they could have drowned. She consoles herself by thinking ironically that "holocaust on such a scale was not probable" (79). Readers of Woolf's novel would know all too well that mass tragic death is possible. By the end of the war, 5,142,631 people died. Such statements and images in "The Window" anachronistically allude to the war's destruction and impart "reference points from which to gauge the *effect* of the war on prewar language—and on postwar thought" (Levenback 94). Had World War I never taken place, "The Window" would have been written quite differently.

Woolf "[punctures]...patriotic spirit" by parodying war through the actions of James and Jasper; James cuts out a fancy pocket knife and other objects from the Army and Navy Stores catalogue, and Jasper routs a flock of starlings (Phillips 113). Woolf mocks war by juxtaposing it with games children play. She

also parodies war by calling the trip to the lighthouse an "expedition," even though the voyagers are traveling in a tiny sailboat for neither the military nor scientific purposes. The patriotic spirit is further punctured by Mr. Ramsay, who considers himself to be "the fine figure of a soldier" proudly defending his accomplishments (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 36). He announces that he will stand proudly and bravely at Q until he dies. These actions of Mr. Ramsay, James, and Jasper make war ridiculous in "The Window." Woolf reduces war to a game and a vainglorious attempt to preserve one's own honor.

Besides commenting on war itself, Woolf comments on past literary expressions of war. She believes that such expressions are inadequate because they are ultimately unsuccessful in conveying the reality they first attempted to communicate. The war dead, therefore, cannot be remembered or honored properly in a poem. They are at the mercy of those alive who remember them (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 174). Mr. Ramsay's recitation of war poetry throughout the novel and especially in "The Window" demonstrates that the war poetry of the past eventually loses some of the poet's original meaning. Mr. Ramsay repeats, "Some one had blundered," from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade," no fewer than six times in "The Window." The line is increasingly devalued until "it [sounds] ridiculous" and is recited "melodiously" and "without any conviction" (33). Tammy Clewell interprets Woolf's association of Mr. Ramsay with the Crimean War leaders who ordered the infamous suicidal charge at the Battle of Balaclava "as a maneuver by Woolf to challenge the idea that the dead endure in art" (216). Although the poem itself says otherwise, the glory of the dead soldiers *does* indeed fade, and the significance of the poem is altered when Woolf juxtaposes the memory of the dead soldiers with the needy old man who travels to the lighthouse and desires sympathy for not reaching R.

For Karen DeMeester, the repetition of "[s]ome one had blundered" suggests a general "lack of advancement in understanding" and, moreover, "establishes a rhythm of futility" (651). Mr. Ramsay does not fully understand the horror of the Battle of Balaclava, or else he would not have the audacity to compare the blunders of his present with the blunder of the officers. It indeed becomes clear that the words of former war poetry, which were intended to describe a particular moment in

history, have become interpreted in a different way when Mr. Ramsay "bears down upon" Mrs. Ramsay:

> He shivered; he quivered. All his vanity, all his satisfaction in his own splendour, riding fell as a thunderbolt, fierce as a hawk at the head of his men through the valley of death, had been shattered, destroyed. Stormed at by shot and shell, boldly we rode and well, flashed through the valley of death, volleyed and thundered—straight into Lily Briscoe and William Bankes. He quivered; he shivered. (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 30)

The fragments from Tennyson's poem, the use of first-person rather than third-person in "boldly we rode," and the interchangeability of the words "shivered" and "quivered," among other things, point to a loss or lack of understanding of the author's original intent and the historical moment. They also draw particular attention to the moment in the novel: it is here that Mrs. Ramsay realizes that "some one had blundered." The words had been meaningless to her until this point. Scholars seem to agree, then, Woolf attempts to transcend the limitations of traditional war poetry through her novel.

"The Window," then, serves as a vista through which Woolf can delicately present the subject of war to her readers. She uses wartime vocabulary and refers indirectly to the devastation which was looming on the prewar horizon. By reducing warfare to child's play and by incorporating war poetry of the past into the first section of her novel, Woolf addresses war without making it the central topic of her novel. That the war poetry which she incorporates into "The Window" has lost its meaning implies that Woolf seems to understand the danger of focusing a piece of literature around one subject that will mean different things to different generations over time. Instead, Woolf believes in the importance of writing about daily illuminations that can hold as much insight into the meaning of life as life-altering events such as war. For this reason, "The Window," a day full of "little...miracles [and] illuminations" in a time of peace, is the longest section of her novel (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 161).

"Time Passes," the middle section of the novel and the section in which World War I breaks out, marks a dramatic shift in perspective in *To the Lighthouse*, if not in literature. It contains

many references to war and shows a collapsing of the old order. War can be considered one of the events that "cracks open the 'oyster of perceptiveness'" and allows writers and readers to attain new insights about life and the world around them (Banfield 491). Gillian Beer believes Woolf tries to "hold within a single work...the experience of family life and culture, before and after the first world war" and that Woolf does so by separating the two worlds ("Hume" 77). Instead of being more explicit and political in "Time Passes," Woolf transcends politics by universalizing the experience of war on the home front, using brackets, placing distance between her readers and the battle fields, and referring to and personifying nature.

Interestingly, "Time Passes" originally contained more direct references to war. James M. Haule explains in "*To the Lighthouse* and The Great War: The Evidence of Virginia Woolf's Revisions of 'Time Passes'" that the holograph and recently discovered typescript of "Time Passes" show Woolf's thematic and cognitive progression (166).[1] He uses six examples from the holograph and traces their changes up to the 1927 publication. "The mindless warfare, the soulless bludgeoning" of the holograph and Woolf's side note, which states that the darkness is an image of the war, are deleted, for example (167). The "darkness" which Woolf describes in the second chapter is associated not with battle anymore but simply with night (168). Through his examples Haule reveals that Woolf drastically reduced direct references to war, particularly with regard to identifying war with male destructiveness, because Woolf hoped to modify traditional perceptions of war. "The final version... is... without the antimilitaristic, fiercely feminist condemnation of" the war because, according to Haule, Woolf wanted to transform her novel into a universal work of art, thereby transcending time, place, and circumstance (173).

Woolf accomplishes this in part by making the empty summer home of the Ramsay's the focus of "Time Passes." The war years literally and fundamentally change the house; World War I destroys the home figuratively. "The decomposition of the Ramsay household has its parallel in the collapse of world order"—the wallpaper flaps and fades, plaster falls, [and] the books grow mold" (Wussow 167). The wind gives off "an aimless gust of lamentation" in response (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 127). With

her use of the house, Woolf demonstrates that the war affects domestic as well as political life. She emphasizes the home front because it is often forgotten about, and in doing so, she deemphasizes and somewhat degrades the front lines by virtually ignoring them. The house also functions as a representation of the shared experience of all the countries at war: war empties homes and leaves home fronts in disrepair. Kathy J. Phillips argues that Woolf makes good use of the empty teacups in her description of the house: Woolf "brilliantly punctures the pretensions of strong warriors" by signifying the destruction of war through the cup (112). The teacups are cracked and empty. Woolf implies through the teacups and the house that the only thing the war accomplished was damaging the home.

Once the disintegration of the home has been firmly established and war is understood as a cause of domestic neglect, the charwomen enter to "[tear]... the veil of silence" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 130). They attempt to restore the home and recover the prewar world in the process. In performing the ordinary task of cleaning a house, the women embody Europe's struggle to endure and return to a routine after the war (Olson 60). Moreover, their hard work represents an end to the leisure that was central to "The Window." Pain and loss is addressed through their struggle to clean and "reestablish a sense of continuity and security" (61). Despite their efforts to restore the house, Mrs. Bast knows that the family will "find it changed" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 140). Even though Mr. Carmichael thinks the house looks "much as it used to look," it is fundamentally different (142). A sense of normalcy in the house returns only when readers are informed parenthetically of Lily's return: "at last...quiet spread, [and] the wind settled," Woolf writes. " (Lily Briscoe had her bag carried up to the house late one evening in September)" (141). Nevertheless, the house seems to have changed. On her first night back at the Ramsays', Lily must "clutch... at her blankets as a faller clutches at the turf on the edge of a cliff" (143). War has forever altered the home.

Although the home is the focus of "Time Passes," the narration continues within Woolf's carefully-situated brackets. Among other things, readers learn about the deaths of various members of the Ramsay family. Relative to the thousands of battlefield deaths, the deaths reported in the brackets are supposed to seem insignificant. After all, "every one had lost some one

these years" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 136). Expounded in this way, however—"[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]"—the deaths are particularly painful and sad, because the readers have come to know the Ramsays intimately (133). The traumatic deaths are subordinated and presented as a piece of public news rather than a personal experience. Indeed, Roger Poole explains that the use of brackets functions as "a new kind of Modernist mimesis" because "it *corresponds* to... [the] arid refusal of common humanity that the Field Service Post Card represents" (87). The Field Service Post Card was filled out by checking off blunt and banal statements such as, "I am quite well," and, "I have received your letter." The post cards were hardly enough information about a soldier's well being to temporarily relieve his family from worrying. The brackets, too, are impersonal and leave the readers unsatisfied.

The brackets demonstrate a shift in consciousness similar to the "new journalism" that tidied up the shocking and gruesome events of the war (Fussell 170). Life and death, Poole explains, "are reduced to an item of news, the personal and the intimate detail are reduced to a matter of public knowledge and speculation" (84). Woolf's ambiguous statement that twenty *or* thirty men died with Andrew reveals that the information in brackets is incomplete. This, coupled with the times during which Woolf uses the phrase "they said" without specifying the source of the information (as in "everything, they said, had promised so well") indicates that Woolf's abstractions are deliberate (*Lighthouse* 132). She is trying to emphasize how difficult it is to recount the war. The brackets, then, emphasize the devastation of war, the impersonalization of the wartime deaths, and the difficulty of providing a sufficient account of war.

Although Woolf reveals the effects of war on civilians and the home front, she distances the readers from the battlefield and so further fails to provide them with an accurate account of the war. "Time Passes" calls perspective into question. She deflates the war and in some ways trivializes it by referring to it indirectly. War becomes "the thud of something falling," what "loosened the shawl," and even "a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 133-34). These references to war, according

to Phillips, "are indirect but grim" (111). By distancing the readers from the battlefields, Woolf prevents them from glorifying the battles in any way.

Even though Woolf distances the readers and the action of "Time Passes" from the battlefields, traces of war's carnage, such as the purplish stain, can still be found on the shores of the Hebrides. Nature proves to be indifferent to the destructive human action around it:

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

Woolf seems to be disappointed with nature. She believes it is awful that so much destruction can occur without nature acknowledging or reflecting it: nature no longer "[supplemented] what man advanced.... [The] mirror was broken" (134). Because the natural order does not mirror the human one, Woolf superimposes human action onto nature. She personifies the winds as "great armies," for example (139). Despite "a basic human longing...for kinship with a world capable of overcoming death's finality," Woolf refuses to let her readers find solace or solidarity in nature: the landscape is instead "emptied of compensatory potential" (Clewell 211-12). Nature is still and bright, although chaos and tumult surrounds it. Now "those who...go...down to pace the beach and ask" for consolation no longer find "comfortable conclusions" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 133-34). Similarly, artists cannot find "pure aesthetic inspiration in nature" during war: the ashen-coloured ship and the purplish stain taint the pure aesthetic which the artist is attempting to capture and be inspired by (Goldman 165).

"Time Passes," then, "serves as a symbol of the shattering change that took place in the early years of the twentieth century" (Van Buren Kelley 105). At the beginning of the section, Mr. Carmichael reads Virgil, who leads Dante through hell in *The Divine Comedy:* Woolf leads her readers through war, a hell of a different kind. Although Woolf edited most of her direct references to the war out of the section, she judiciously draws

attention to the war by infusing words such as "allies" and "enemies" when the airs muse over how long the objects in the house will last (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 126). Similarly, the sentence in which she declares, "[One] by one the lamps were all extinguished," strikingly resembles British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey's metaphor for war in 1914: "The lamps are going out all over Europe" (125; Hussey, "Notes" 229-30). "Time Passes" shows a disintegration of the old order which is difficult to articulate. Simultaneously, it transcends time through her use of universals such as nature.

"The Lighthouse" reveals a postwar world that is perceivably different from that of "The Window." Mr. Ramsay greets Lily by saying, "You find us much changed" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 148). Serving as a grotesque reminder of death, the mutilated mackerel that continues to surface in brackets is a testament to the change. Moreover, it quickly becomes apparent that Lily is unable to express herself. She holds her tongue with the misogynistic Tansley in "The Lighthouse," but she does so by choice. Now, there is "nothing that she could express at all" (145). "[How] could one express in words these emotions of the body? express that emptiness there?" she asks (178). Even a change in Mr. Carmichael is noted: "He looked the same—greyer, rather. Yes, he looked the same, but somebody had said, she [Lily] recalled, that when he had heard of Andrew Ramsay's death (he was killed in a second by a shell; he should have been a great mathematician) Mr. Carmichael had 'lost all interest in life.' What did it mean—that? .... but she felt it in him all the same" (194). The war and its effects continue to haunt the characters who survived it. The end of the war has begotten a new battle—a battle to cope and survive in the postwar world.

Karen L. Levenback explains that each character reaches the lighthouse, "an archetypal symbol of personal epiphany," in a different way (112). "Cam Ramsay denies the past altogether and embraces the immediate present," which happens to be the lighthouse (112). Embracing the present appears to be a coping mechanism for her. While going to the lighthouse, "Cam could see nothing....the lives they had lived there [in the summer home], were gone; were rubbed out; were past; were unreal, and now this was real" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 166-67). Although she dashes toward the future as she did in "The Window," she now seems to

race forward to forget the things of the past. Ten years later, she is still afraid of boars' skulls and other reminders of death. There was no greater reminder of death during her time than the war years.

For Lily, the lighthouse is the object which helps her come to terms with the present. Until she draws the line down the center of her painting, Lily is preoccupied with the death of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily wants to make sense of the world. She asks herself, "[what] does it mean then, what can it all mean?" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 145). The war years have left her without her close friend and without answers. Moreover, "the war had drawn the sting of her femininity" (159). Lily sees the war as having stunted the growth of the feminist movement and therefore of her own personal and professional development. The upheaval is not entirely bad for Lily, however. Alice Van Buren Kelley explains that it provides Lily with the "chance to gain that distance... [she needs] to see in perspective the past" and her relationship to it (103). She ultimately achieves a balance between the past, present, and future which enables her to survive in the postwar world. Her brushstroke down the center of her canvas divides the pre- and postwar worlds and illustrates her awareness of a difference between the two. She is able to make something new out of her suffering and memory of the prewar past. Through Lily most obviously, Woolf is able to work through the "obliterative experience of the first world war" in "The Lighthouse" (Beer, "Hume" 77). Lily survives, relinquishes the past, and creates a new vision in the much-altered postwar world. Viewed in this way, "The Lighthouse" is about (re)creating. It is the part of Woolf's unique novel which synthesizes the sentimental thesis presented in "The Window" and the elegiac antithesis presented in "Time Passes."

That Woolf describes war uniquely in *To the Lighthouse* is in part due to the fact that traditional ceremonies of mourning and remembering the dead were no longer sufficient after World War I: mass casualties on such a scale had been unfathomable, and the grim realities left people disillusioned and unable to cope with such death. Woolf believes that mourning must now be an ongoing experience. Individual soldiers can be buried, but the Great War itself cannot and should not be buried. Woolf does not seek closure—she "compels [readers] to refuse consolation,

sustain grief, and accept responsibility for the difficult task of remembering the catastrophic losses of the twentieth century" so that conditions can change and so war will not break out again (Clewell 199). For this reason, Lily's eyes fill with tears, and she "[demands] an explanation [of] why ... [life is] so short ... so inexplicable" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 180).

Woolf attempts to demonstrate how best to explain the inexplicable. Like Lily, who wants to see Mrs. Ramsay with fifty pairs of eyes, Woolf looks at war (and indeed almost everything in her novel) in many ways. Because Woolf believes in the value of multiple perspectives, she chooses not to focus on any one aspect of war or any one character's reaction to it. Even James realizes that "nothing was simply one thing" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 186). When he finally approaches the lighthouse he has dreamed of since his youth he finds that it is different from what he has imagined.

With mutability as the new and acknowledged rule, Woolf astutely chooses to arrive at the truth about war through multiple voices and perspectives. She takes advantage of the fact that war is difficult to describe, that it is "at once personal and social, emotional and political" (Clewell 199). Like Lily, Woolf knows that attempting to fully describe events or feelings about war is futile because a disparity exists between words and the actual world they are signifying. "Like everything else," Lily muses at the breakfast table, "the words became symbols" (147). Truth, Lily continues, can only be found by arranging words into a sentence. Rather than presenting war by giving a direct account of it, then, Woolf *represents* it by providing impressions of it. She incorporates a house, brackets, and the painting of a canvas instead of writing an account such as Tennyson's in hopes that the amalgamated impression provides as truthful and as enduring a rendering as possible.

Because everything changes and "nothing stays," Woolf was careful to not be overtly political in her novel (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 179). She wanted her fiction to withstand the test of time. However, readers can uncover through close reading various fragments of her personal thoughts on war. Woolf believed that World War I forever changed and sentimentalized the way people look at the past. She reveals her conviction while illustrating that war is childish and permanently damages the home.

Even so, the historico-political reality of World War I is suggested indirectly in *To the Lighthouse*. It is not intended to be a focal point of her work. Being the radical Modernist she is, Woolf undermines methods of traditional history by "[transposing] history from a metaphysical explanatory narrative to an exploration of multiple human states" (Cuddy-Keane 60). Memory and reality, or history, become representation because Woolf was cognizant of the fact that literature is perpetually in dialogue with the present (73). Woolf wanted her novel to speak to all generations. To accomplish this, she uses ambiguities that "blur the lines between peace and war; civilians and combatants; survivors and victims; and, most basically, life and death" (Levenback 27). She also achieves this by placing the action away from the fighting and by refusing to represent it precisely. Woolf transcends realism for the sake of art.

To create her masterpiece, Woolf had to make war an illuminating "match struck...in the dark" and an "oyster of perceptiveness" (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 161; qtd. in Banfield 491). She was determined to use war as a vehicle through which she and her readers could gain fuller insight into her ever-evasive question: "What is the meaning of life?" (Woolf, *Lighthouse*161). "Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small," she explains in "Modern Fiction" (155). Although there are few things as consequential as war, she carves war up into digestible pieces in hopes that all readers—whether they have lived through the horrors of war or not—can process her text and somehow connect with it. Just as Lily declares while pausing from her painting, "[in] the midst of chaos there was shape," Woolf hopes her readers will perceive a particular shape, or revelation, in the chaotic war-torn world and aftermath she describes (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 161). It is only by finding such revelations that life is meaningful and worth living.

Note

[1] The typescript of "Time Passes" was published in the French periodical *Commerce* in the winter of 1926.

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