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Transmuting Grief: More Than One “Feat of Creation” in Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse

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Transmuting Grief: More Than One “Feat of Creation” in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf first encountered grief at an astonishingly young age. At 13 years old, she watched as Mrs. Julia Stephen, her mother and muse,¹ died a premature death (Spilka 6). As a young writer, Virginia² looked to words for consolation. As early as age 10, she was writing—she often made contributions to the family faux newspaper, *The Hyde Park Press* (Lee 33)—so when her mother died early on, Virginia drew from this loss in her fiction. Grief’s influence on her work only increased with time. As she grew older, her mourning changed shape: she began to suffer grief-induced hallucinations and lapses in sanity. This shift in her bereavement is reflected in her fiction; in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she modeled Septimus Warren Smith’s experiences on her own struggle—her grief directly influenced her portrayal of this WWI veteran, who lost his commanding officer and friend, Evans, in battle. The impact of her mother’s death emerges even more clearly in her novel *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay, a beautiful hostess and mother, is an echo of Woolf’s mother, whose grace and authority over family life are imitated in the novel. When Mrs. Ramsay dies suddenly, life stands still in the same way that Virginia felt that her mother’s death had interrupted everything. The absence of Mrs. Ramsay’s maternal spirit causes daily life to forget its natural balance, yet, in her absence, Lily Briscoe recognizes more clearly Mrs. Ramsay’s gift for creating harmony in the lives of both friends and family. As Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay, she is able to acknowledge her own grief: in a cathartic experience of calling out to her late hostess, Lily finally addresses her pain at Mrs. Ramsay’s death, and she begins to find a sense of relief. Similarly, Virginia was able to memorialize her mother as she wrote *To the Lighthouse*, an enlightening experience that liberated her from her mother's death. Virginia Woolf became accustomed to a terrible

grief, and its influence on her work is undeniable, yet transposing her grief into fiction enabled Woolf to gain a sense of freedom from the confines of her sorrow.

Directly after the death of Virginia's mother, the Stephen family was taken over and transformed by mourning. In her autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past," Virginia describes her mother's effect on family life: Julia had made family life joyous. However, after her death, that joy was replaced with "a haze of heavy emotion," family life for the Stephen family having become "sad, solemn, unreal" (*Moments* 93). Virginia goes on to convey the "tragedy of her death" not as a hardship that simply brought unhappiness to their family; rather, "it obscured. It dulled. It made one hypocritical" and "foolish and sentimental" (95). The Stephen family was not simply grieving. Thrown into a confusion of emotion, nostalgia, and hopelessness, the entire family felt the detrimental effects of Julia Stephen's death, and Virginia was especially affected by this loss. She recalls the day after her mother's death with vivid detail; she remembers seeing a type of vision of her mother: "When I see mother, I see a man sitting with her" (92). During the time just after Julia's death, she felt that "any hallucination was possible" (92); the hallucinations that haunted Virginia all her life began with this loss.

Virginia's grief exhibited itself in curious ways; rather than recalling her mother in sorrowful memory, she encountered her mother in moments of intense hallucination. During the year just after her mother's death, Virginia endured multiple visits from the family doctor, Dr. Seton, who tried to assess and remedy her "disturbed state" (Lee 173). Her struggle against this madness long outlasted her childhood; as an adult, she still felt the lasting effects of her intense grief. One morning in 1915, Virginia's husband, Leonard, watched as she began to speak to her dead mother: as her hallucination continued, she became agitated and her speech became incomprehensible (Bell 24). Within her mourning she endured more than a simple sadness, a period of confusion, or a bout of anger. She felt that her mother's death had made moments and memories "unreal" (*Moments* 92); grief afflicted Virginia with brief spells of madness.

Although Virginia experienced moments of hysteria, she did not let herself become a victim of her mad impulses. She endured her brief lapses in sanity with intelligence and bravery and made every

possible effort to increase her understanding of her illness. Refraining from “self-pity” (Lee 171), she used her grief—and its effects—as inspiration for her fiction. Her mother’s death forced upon her a change in perspective. Virginia recalls this shift, remembering, “my mother’s death unveiled and intensified; made me develop perceptions” (*Moments* 93). This shift in perspective allowed her to write her compelling fiction. Both intense and sincere, her writing skillfully refashions her own experiences through the lives of her fictional characters.

Woolf’s encounters with madness, in particular, are captured indirectly in *Mrs. Dalloway* when shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith experiences a kind of agitation that resembles her own. Writing the novel, Woolf hoped to depict the dissonance that she often struggled against, portraying “the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side” (*Diary* 2: 207), and she illustrated this contrast through Septimus. While he sits in Regent’s Park with his wife, he begins to panic as he feels the birds in the trees closing in on him, chirping his name and singing to him “piercingly in Greek words” (*Dalloway* 24). He then has a sudden vision of his dear friend: “Evans was behind the railing!” (25). Septimus’s alarming hallucinations are of his friend, whom he lost in the war; his traumatic experiences, paired with grief, bring on his spells of madness. His hallucinations are of the same nature as those experienced by Virginia Woolf herself. As she writes the scene, Woolf reports in her diary, “I write it by clinging as tight to fact as I can” (*Diary* 2: 272). In her own moments of hysteria, Virginia saw her mother; she clung to those moments as she wrote Septimus’s chapters. Just as Virginia saw her mother, Septimus sees his dear friend: their hallucinations are induced by the death of someone near to them. Woolf’s anguish finds a double in Septimus’s struggle; the influence of her grief on the novel, specifically on Septimus, is undeniable.

Because of her hallucinations, the family doctor visited Virginia repeatedly after her mother’s death in 1895. Sent to examine and treat her “nervousness, excitability, and depression” (Smith 312), Dr. Seton hoped to cure the ailments of her mind with medical prescription. Not only did the family doctor make repeated visits following Julia’s death, but medical professionals also observed Virginia closely after her father died in 1904. After Leslie Stephen’s death,³ Virginia experienced an “illness” in which

she remembers “birds singing in Greek choruses” (Woolf, *Moments* 184) just like Septimus as he sits in Regent’s Park. To treat her illness, Virginia was subjected to a commonly prescribed treatment dubbed the “rest cure,” an act of “medicalizing grief” that required her to rest in the country and forgo all commitments (Smith 312-13). Just as Virginia experienced this clinical remedy to her bereavement, she offers a horrifying portrayal of Dr. Bradshaw’s prescription for Septimus’s suicidal urges. Doctors Holmes and Bradshaw do not attempt to find a source of Septimus’s neurosis, but rather, coldly order him to retreat to a faraway home where he will be taught “to rest” (*Dalloway* 97). This humiliating diagnosis leads to a scathing paragraph about Bradshaw’s proposed rest cure that matches Virginia’s: in an effort to “invoke proportion,” Bradshaw orders “rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months rest” (99). The sense of “proportion” that he uses to justify his diagnosis is the same with which he previously “forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion” (99). Using ideas of “proportion” to strike down individuality, Bradshaw intends to address Septimus’s grief by eradicating his sense of self. This demoralizing rest cure is the same treatment that Woolf had endured; her experiences with the medicalization of her grief directly influenced her creation of Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Woolf writes of Septimus’s hallucinations and nervousness; however, she does not depict Septimus as mad. As she writes what she calls the “mad chapters” (Woolf, *Diary* 2:321), she establishes this distinction: within these chapters she provides context for Septimus’s hallucinations so that they may be viewed as a justifiable trauma response rather than a fully irrational ailment. Perhaps it is for this nuance that Woolf wonders whether she should have written the chapters at all (2:321). Within them Septimus endures inescapable visions and, upon receiving the results of ensuing medical examinations, eventually resorts to suicide in order to prevent the coercion of his identity.⁴ Woolf illuminates the cause of his neurosis and suicide so that, when Clarissa Dalloway empathizes with him as she steps away from her party, her empathy feels wholly justified. As Clarissa considers Bradshaw and his callousness toward

Septimus, she concludes that it is “men like that” who “make life intolerable” (*Dalloway* 185). She understands Septimus’s resistance to treatment, and she recognizes her own experiences in his affliction: she finds that “she somehow felt very like him” (186). Although Septimus’s behavior isolates him from others, Woolf’s thorough portrayal of his struggle makes his actions understandable and his alienation seem cruel. By providing context for Septimus’s suffering, exhibiting the thoughts that couple his behavior, and allowing Clarissa to empathize with his struggle, Woolf portrays Septimus not as insane, but as a man confined to the limits of a grief-induced illness. Through Septimus’s struggle, Woolf was able to paint her own ailment in an accessible and understandable light. Woolf explained herself in Septimus’s character, undoubtedly finding some relief from the alienation she experienced as a result of her intense grief.

Woolf depicted her personal experiences with madness and grief within *Mrs. Dalloway*, but, as she wrote *To the Lighthouse*, she was able to provide a detailed account of the specific events that surrounded her mother’s death and capture the grief and eventual revelation that struck her as a result of that loss. As Virginia thinks back to her childhood in “A Sketch of the Past,” she recalls her mother’s “astonishing beauty” (*Moments* 82) and great maternal influence. Calling her “the centre” of happy family life, the heart of merriment and bustle, Virginia remembers her mother as a vital member of the Stephen family. The vacancy left by Julia pained her daughter unceasingly; Virginia refers to her mother’s death as the moment when “everything had come to an end” (84). Woolf originally intended *To the Lighthouse* as a sketch of her father, comprised predominantly of “scenes” of “the Old Man” (*Diary* 3:3). As she lengthened the story to a “short” novel in which she planned to have her “father’s character completely done in it” (3:18), Mrs. Ramsay began to eclipse her husband in importance, and Woolf’s focus shifted to creating a full likeness of her mother. As she aimed to memorialize her mother in her book, she then considered separating *To the Lighthouse* from the genre of a “novel” and instead thought to call the book an “elegy” (3:34). A commemoration of her mother’s beauty and influence, *To the Lighthouse* is a lament to the dead.

Mrs. Ramsay, hostess, wife, and mother, is portrayed as a solicitous maternal figure. Six-year-old James feels a kind of “heavenly bliss” (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 3) as she speaks, comforted by her words, and Mr. Tansley looks to her and thinks, “she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen” (14). A gracious hostess and an empathetic maternal figure, Mrs. Ramsay guides those around her with ease. The commotion of the holiday—with people moving in and out, children playing and adults coming together and separating again—is quieted and controlled by Mrs. Ramsay so that time spent with her may be remembered fondly. When she dies, however, life halts; her death is followed by a section titled “Time Passes” in which the life has gone out of the house, and dismal silence replaces merriment.

Woolf portrays Mrs. Ramsay as overwhelmingly lovely; she gives her the same qualities of authority and grace that were held by the late Julia Stephen. Upon reading the manuscript of the novel, Virginia’s sister Vanessa Bell realized the resemblance: “it is an amazing portrait of mother,” she praises her sister in a letter (Woolf, *Diary* 3: 135).⁵ The portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay recounts their mother’s beauty, hospitality, and allure; Vanessa felt that the depiction was almost like a “rising of the dead” (3: 135). This impression was exactly what Woolf was trying to accomplish; she hoped that people would read the book and see “beautiful Mrs. Stephen in it” (3: 61). For this achievement, Vanessa calls the novel “an astonishing feat of creation” (Bell 128); she applauds Virginia for her extraordinary ability to capture such a striking likeness of their mother and portray the grief that accompanied her death.

Just as Mrs. Stephen’s beauty found a double in Mrs. Ramsay, so did the shock of her death. Mrs. Ramsay’s death seems to make the world stand still; her great influence and beauty disappear abruptly. The news of her death comes both suddenly and obliquely in a moment enclosed arrestingly by brackets: “Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty” (128). This one-sentence paragraph, its brackets relegating it to a further remove from even a parenthesis, magnifies the loss implicit in Mr. Ramsay’s outstretched arms. Never directly described, her death is only indicated by these mundane moments that long for her presence. Her role is suddenly left vacant, and her absence

makes everything feel incomplete. Using the same bracketing technique, Woolf also imitates the death of her half-sister Stella and that of her brother Thoby. When Prue Ramsay dies of “some illness connected with childbirth” (132), her death resembles Stella’s as she was delivering her own child in 1897. Andrew Ramsay’s death follows soon after, described as “instantaneous” at the explosion of a “shell” in France (133), an event whose timing resembles Thoby’s death in 1906 soon after Stella’s. Surrounded by brackets, their deaths convey the same dismal subtlety as Mrs. Ramsay’s. Like the Ramsays, the Stephen family experienced a surreal emptiness at the loss of their wife and mother; their grief is imitated by the Ramsays’ mourning.

Mrs. Ramsay’s death has a lasting effect; as Lily thinks back on her memories, she reflects on all that Mrs. Ramsay left as a legacy. Almost as a daughter would to a mother, Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay’s grace and gentleness, recalling how she “resolved everything into simplicity” (161). Lily discovers that some of her most vivid memories are of moments purposefully crafted by Mrs. Ramsay, and, as she begins to recognize the fullness of Mrs. Ramsay’s effect on those around her, Lily finds an overwhelming sense of peace. She realizes the purpose of Mrs. Ramsay’s efforts, and, at that revelation, Lily feels that all “was struck into stability” (161). By remembering Mrs. Ramsay and mourning her, she finally starts to understand her and to recognize her as a kindred spirit who, as in Lily’s own artistic endeavor, aimed to give “shape” to the “chaos” of ordinary life (161). As Lily realizes Mrs. Ramsay’s great impact, she feels her sorrow begin to subside; once more, Mrs. Ramsay pacifies “chaos” as Lily’s grief begins to calm.

Although Lily is not Mrs. Ramsay’s daughter, Woolf gave Lily “the daughter’s responses to and memories of her mother” (Lee 80). Lily remembers her in her fullness, recalling her purposeful actions that disguised themselves as unnecessary, and appreciating her unmatched beauty and grace. As she recalls and admires Mrs. Ramsay, she also feels the significant void left by her death. Lily finally allows herself to mourn for Mrs. Ramsay; feeling the tears as they “rolled down her cheeks,” she cries out, “Mrs. Ramsay!” (180). As she calls to her late hostess, Lily realizes Mr. Carmichael’s presence and feels that he can hear her thoughts; she hopes that, together, “if they shouted loud enough Mrs. Ramsay would return”

(180). As Lily grieves for Mrs. Ramsay, she also feels the pain of Mrs. Ramsay's death so that she may let her go. Like a daughter looking back on the memory of a mother, Lily mourns Mrs. Ramsay's absence but understands her impact more clearly now that she has died. Lily makes these observations about Mrs. Ramsay so that she may memorialize her; Lily moves, then, to complete her painting. Inspired by the peace she feels due to her reappraisal of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily completes her painting with new-found zeal and ease. She looks to her canvas and finds, suddenly, that "there it was—her picture"; what was once "blurred" begins to make itself "clear" (208-09). By allowing herself to mourn Mrs. Ramsay, Lily's perceptions—of Mrs. Ramsay, of life—shift. She gains clarity from mourning Mrs. Ramsay and uses that clarity to paint more freely; "she owed it all to her" (161): Lily feels indebted to Mrs. Ramsay for the relief she now feels and the ease with which she now paints.

The freedom Lily feels parallels Woolf's experience as she wrote *To the Lighthouse*. The detrimental effects of Julia's death on Virginia's psyche and her family life were great; however, Virginia was able to find a sense of relief as she acknowledged and examined her grief through her fiction. Virginia remembers how severely thoughts of her mother troubled her: "she obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four" (*Moments* 81). Virginia Woolf turned forty-four while writing *To the Lighthouse*;⁶ at this age, she acknowledged her grief in her fiction. She retold her understanding of her mother's death, from beginning to end, and, by that retelling, she could finally experience some relief from the grief that had disturbed her for so long.

As Virginia Woolf embarked on a remarkable writing career, she carried with her the weight of great loss. Thoughts of her mother's death marred her daily life: as hallucinations haunted her and memories often flooded her mind, their impression flowed directly into her fiction. In *Septimus*, she captures her struggle against the neurosis that resulted from her grief, and she illustrates the difficulty in looking to medicine for a remedy. In *To the Lighthouse*, she conveys her admiration for her mother and depicts the emptiness and grief she felt in her absence. Most importantly, perhaps, Woolf was able to find a sense of freedom from her grief as she relayed her experiences in her fiction. As she made

sense of her madness in *Mrs. Dalloway* and addressed her grief in *To the Lighthouse*, she succeeded in escaping her obsession with her mother and gaining clarity in spite of the hallucinations she endured (*Moments* 81). Virginia accomplished feats of creation as she transmuted her grief in her portrayal of Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway* and in her climactic tribute to Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*.

Notes

¹ I refer to Julia Stephen variously as “Julia,” “Mrs. Stephen,” and “Virginia’s mother.”

² I will refer to Virginia Woolf as “Virginia” in the context of her personal life, and “Woolf” while discussing her professional writing career.

³ Leslie Stephen—author, historian, and biographer—was Julia Stephen’s second husband and father to the four Stephen siblings, Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and Adrian.

⁴ Septimus’s suicide eerily foreshadows Virginia’s own death; the hallucinations that eventually lead Septimus to suicide are of the same nature as those that caused Virginia to take her own life on March 28, 1941. In a final letter to Leonard, she writes that she can “hear voices” against which she cannot “fight any longer,” and, upon leaving the letter on the mantelpiece, she drowned herself in the River Ouse (Bell 226).

⁵ For the full text of his mother’s letter, see Quentin Bell 128.

⁶ Lily Briscoe is “thirty-three years” (52) old in the first section of *To the Lighthouse*. The scene in which Lily mourns Mrs. Ramsay takes place ten years after this initial section, making Lily the same age as Woolf when she started writing the novel.

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