

DePauw University

## Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University

---

Best First-Year Seminar Writing

Student Work

---

12-2022

### A Hidden Window: Love and Insecurity for Peter and Clive

Ian Smith '26

*DePauw University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.depauw.edu/student\\_fys](https://scholarship.depauw.edu/student_fys)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Smith, Ian '26, "A Hidden Window: Love and Insecurity for Peter and Clive" (2022). *Best First-Year Seminar Writing*. 12, Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University.

[https://scholarship.depauw.edu/student\\_fys/12](https://scholarship.depauw.edu/student_fys/12)

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Best First-Year Seminar Writing by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University.

Ian Smith

HONR 101A

December 2022

A Hidden Window:

Love and Insecurity for Peter and Clive

The concept that Peter Walsh's views in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* are a hidden critique of her fellow Bloomsbury member Clive Bell's incendiary essay *Civilization* is in no way innovative or groundbreaking, having been recognized and expanded upon by biographers and literary critics alike.<sup>1</sup> However, this comparison is deceptively easy to extend to realms in which it does not apply. Woolf is first and foremost a novelist, and Peter Walsh is first and foremost a character in a novel. As such, Peter's presence in *Mrs. Dalloway* should not be interpreted as a commentary on Bell's *Civilization*, but rather as a stand-in for Bell, whose relationship with Virginia Woolf echoes the foundations of love and insecurity on which Peter and Clarissa's relationship is built.<sup>2</sup>

In his attempt to define the essential attributes of civilization, Bell reinforces the importance of traditional and degrading gender roles and declares the treatment of women inconsequential to the establishment of a civilized society (*Civilization* 27). Bell's ideas regarding the role of women in society stem primarily from his examination of ancient Athens, a civilization he claims is more advanced than any before or after it, an assertion that seems impossible to reconcile with his recognition of the treatment of Athenian housewives as "highly respected slaves" (164). However, Bell is quick to point out that although the common housewife could not "belong to the highly civilized and civilizing elite" (164), the Athenians did place a tremendous value on "hetairae" (165), a distinct class of prostitutes, set apart from other prostitutes for their ability to offer intellectual stimulation in addition to sexual pleasure (166). Far from recognizing the gross hypocrisy of a society whose only claim to valuing women is in prostitution, Bell praises the Athenians for understanding how crucial femininity was to civilization.

While Peter Walsh does not explicitly endorse misogyny to the degree Bell does, in multiple instances throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* he fails to value women beyond their superficial qualities, strongly echoing Bell's conception of women's role in society. One such instance comes as Peter follows an attractive woman on the

streets of London, envisioning in this stranger the perfect lady, equipped with all the attributes he admires most: youth, beauty, innocence, and conversational wit (Woolf 53). Although Peter does not state outright that his mystery woman belongs to either the housewives or the *hetairae*, the qualities he fantasizes over mirror the priorities of the Athenians. Yet Peter is not a carbon copy of Bell's *Civilization*. Although he does describe women's rights as "antediluvian" (73), his past relationship with Clarissa reveals that his appreciation for women can extend beyond the superficial. In recalling the summer he spent at Bourton, he reveals that what made him fall in love with Clarissa was "not that she was striking; not beautiful at all; there was nothing picturesque about her; she never said anything specially clever; there she was, however; there she was" (76). Peter's love for Clarissa contradicts each quality he idolizes in the mystery woman, as it is based not on her beauty or wit but on something so elusive that Peter cannot name it. Through Peter's love for Clarissa, Woolf deconstructs the notion that he exists solely as a commentary on Bell's essay; she establishes his personality as far more nuanced than many of the ideas presented in *Civilization*.

Nuanced is the most apt, albeit vague word to describe Woolf's opinion of Bell, as it varied throughout her diaries and letters, both of which portray him as one of her closest friends and yet as the member of the Bloomsbury group least worthy of respect (Schaffer 82). In *The Bloomsbury Group*—a collection of correspondence, diaries, and memoirs between members of Bloomsbury—Virginia<sup>3</sup> explains that while Bell was often the member most willing to initiate conversation, "'No,' was the most frequent reply" (qtd. in Rosenbaum 49). This depiction of Clive as an eager yet mediocre conversationalist is contrasted in *The Loving Friends*, in which biographer David Garnett hypothesizes that "Clive's wide reading, quick wit and common sense was an essential ingredient in the brilliant talk to be heard in Bloomsbury" (qtd. in Gadd 110-11). Indeed, many anecdotes from *The Bloomsbury Group* seem to support not only Clive's general worth to the group, but also Virginia's own personal and academic admiration for Clive. She recalls interactions that range from lighthearted banter (Rosenbaum 55) to deep conversations over the emerging role Bloomsbury had on younger generations (59). In another diary entry Virginia says that while she cannot find a single tear to shed over the death of her friend Madge Vaughan, her life would lose meaning if the six people closest to her were to pass away; she named

Clive among those six closest friends (60). These anecdotes gathered in aggregate paint the picture of an invaluable friend and peer on whom Virginia could rely to discuss any subject, including the academic.

Yet if this picture of mutual scholarly respect seems hard to balance with Clive's *Civilization*, it is because beneath the banter and discourse the two might have enjoyed, lay a mild contempt for Clive's writing that Virginia never disclosed in her letters. In writing to Clive on his essay *Virginia Woolf*, she describes reading it as an "hour and a half of pure delight" (*Letters* 3: 69), and relays to him her peers' consensus that he was the "best journalist, possibly critic, of the day" (3: 441). Coming from a novelist whom Bell considered to be one of the "three best living novelists" (Schaffer 82), he must have considered such comments the highest form of praise imaginable. Woolf, however, did not limit her praise to Bell's work as a journalist and critic; in regards to Bell's essay *Civilization*—a book that does little to hide its misogyny and nationalistic rhetoric—she celebrated it, gushing that she "had been really moved and stirred" (*Letters* 3: 441). Thankfully for the premise of this paper, which would be demonstrably false if Virginia's effusive praise for *Civilization* were sincere, her true thoughts on the book are recorded in *Bloomsbury Recalled*, as she confessed to her nephew, Clive Bell's son, that "civilization was 'a lunch party at No. 50 Gordon Square'" (qtd. in Quentin Bell 35). Recognizing Woolf's quiet disdain for *Civilization* is necessary for a complete understanding of her relationship with Bell—a relationship that despite its importance, was never one of two intellectual equals.

An accurate portrayal of Woolf and Bell's relationship is a crucial stepping stone for an analysis of the connections between *Mrs. Dalloway* and the world of Bloomsbury. Up until this point, more has been disproved than proved in regards to comparing Peter's views with Clive's in *Civilization*, as his love for Clarissa is the perfect riposte to any comparison that attempts to equate his views on women with Bell's. Yet while more can be said about Peter's parodying the nationalistic rhetoric of *Civilization*—a correlation that Schaffer expands upon in his chapter "Civilization in Post-Great War Bloomsbury" (79)—Peter's relationship with Clarissa mirrors Clive's intricate relationship with Virginia. Schaffer lays the groundwork for this comparison in his observation that Peter "flirts with, might have married, and continues greatly to admire the Woolf-like character, Clarissa Dalloway" (97). However, the comparisons between Bloomsbury and *Mrs. Dalloway* are not limited to Peter's love for

Clarissa; they extend from Peter's and Clive's failures to live up to the success of their peers, to the jealousy that prevented both relationships from flourishing.

Both Clive and Peter share a feeling of inadequacy originating from those whose opinions they value the most. Clive, whose membership in the Bloomsbury group derived less from the brilliance and originality of his wit than from his friendly and intensely curious disposition (Gadd 111), is ironically paralleled in Peter, who despite feeling intellectually superior to Richard Dalloway is deeply insecure over his accomplishments in life. Where the two differ in intellect, they coincide in their desire for recognition from those they love and respect. Feeling close to tears in Clarissa's presence on his return from India, Peter tells himself, "And she would think me a failure, which I am in a sense. . . . ; in the Dalloways' sense" (43). As Peter and Clarissa, "sitting side by side on the sofa, challenged each other, Peter "assembled from different quarters all sorts of things; praise; his career at Oxford; his marriage; which she knew nothing whatever about; how he had loved; and altogether done his job" (44). His thirst for her admiration is palpable as he attempts to craft, from a rather unimpressive life, some semblance of success and happiness that Clarissa might envy. However, when left to ponder his past in solitude, Peter admits that "He had been sent down from Oxford—true. He had been a Socialist, in some sense a failure—true" (50). The ease with which Peter admits his own failings reveals that it is not the failure itself that he is unable to cope with but rather the judgments of his peers. For judge him they do; when Lady Bruton, Hugh Whitbread, and Richard Dalloway gather for lunch, they all remember "how passionately Peter had been in love; been rejected; gone to India; come a Cropper; made a mess of things" (107). Just as Peter is unable to accept that the prevailing sentiment among other members of high British society is one of pity, so was Clive discontent with the "reputation he enjoyed" (qtd. in Gadd 112). While many would rejoice at the opportunity to be a mere fly on the wall of a Bloomsbury group meeting, Clive was not perpetually content—as Virginia described it—to be amongst "a group of friends all abler and more gifted than he" (qtd. in Gadd 111). Clive's experience as the least intellectually recognized member of Bloomsbury has undeniable commonalities with the pain Peter feels in being subjected to the pity of his wealthier and more successful friends.

Romantically, however, Virginia was on unequal footing with Clive, who was somewhat notorious for his charm and expertise in the field of courtship. Their flirtations began sometime after the birth of Vanessa and

Clive's son Julian, when the two bonded over a shared aversion to the noise and mess of babies. (Q. Bell, *Virginia Woolf* 132). In their conversations they found refuge from the chaos of newborns, and in this refuge Virginia discovered "her brother-in-law's good qualities: the real good humour which lay beneath his urbanity, the tenderness for other people's feelings which could make him appear fussy, his almost invariable good temper, his quick sense of the absurd, his charm" (Q. Bell, *Virginia Woolf* 133). Virginia's discovery represents a dramatic transformation of opinion for someone who had once wondered how Vanessa could marry "such an absurd little creature" (114). For her, Clive's flirtations were something new, as he combined an appreciation for her intellect and personality with an appreciation for her looks that was absent from the courtship of Lytton Strachey, a fellow member of the Bloomsbury group whose affection for Virginia existed despite her appearance, not because of it (135).

Ironically, Clive proved a valuable critic for Virginia, a role that seems a bizarre fit for someone whose writing Virginia held in low esteem. Clive's criticisms proved more serviceable than Lytton's, even though Lytton's literary accolades far outrivalled his own. Around Lytton, Virginia was perpetually on guard—her wariness inhibited any constructive dialogue over her work. Clive, on the other hand, posed no serious literary rivalry in Virginia's eyes; "with him she could let herself go and he was, therefore, able to offer some useful advice and to make a real contribution" (135) to the writing of *Melymbrosia*, the five stories that became the premise of her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). Yet despite Clive's holistic appreciation for Virginia, their relationship never evolved beyond flirtations, as Virginia's newfound admiration for Clive unearthed her jealousy of his marriage to her sister, which had previously been buried beneath a heap of unfounded ill opinions. Upon realizing that Vanessa's marriage was truly successful and happy, Virginia perceived not only how bland her current living arrangements with her younger brother, Adrian, were, but that none of her suitors at the time held even the potential of replicating "with her the same cheerful domestic blaze she envied at 46 Gordon Square" (134). Clive, for his part, was equally jealous of Virginia's multiple suitors, leading Quentin Bell to describe their flirtations as a game in which "all the participants were losers" (136). While Bell hints at other factors that might have inhibited their romance from progressing, such as Virginia's habit of abruptly disengaging from

conversations she found boring (136), the primary impediment was the foundation of jealousy on which their relationship was built.

While the jealousy that hampered Virginia and Clive's relationship was largely circumstantial, the envy in *Mrs. Dalloway* between Clarissa and Peter is the result of their deliberate attempts to arouse jealousy in each other. Peter's visit to Clarissa on his return to London demonstrates jealousy's insidious effect on them, as in the span of less than an hour, Clarissa fluctuates from viewing Peter as a man she could have once married (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 41), to viewing him as insufferably inconsiderate of her emotions (46). Clarissa's shifting assessment of Peter's pocket-knife fiddling is a humorous manifestation of this dramatic change in her opinion. At first she finds Peter's habit charming and nostalgic, but by the end of his visit Peter's act of trimming his nails incites in Clarissa an inner tirade: "it was his silly unconventionality, his weakness; his lack of a ghost of a clue what any one else was feeling that annoyed her, had always annoyed her" (46). This irritation originates from Peter's repeated references to his soon-to-be wife Daisy (45), which in turn originated from Clarissa's constant, albeit unintentional, reminders that she had chosen Richard over him (42-43). After Peter and Clarissa part ways, he regrets his behavior and realizes in hindsight that jealousy was the guiding force behind his spiteful actions (80). This realization, however, does nothing to alleviate the problem of jealousy that exists at the root of both his and Clive's relationship.

The comparisons between Peter and Clive extend beyond their problems and into their shared solution, as Peter's fantasies of becoming an author (157) are lived out in reality through Clive's publishing of *Civilization*. Gadd notes, in his biography on Bloomsbury, that Clive's reputation as the jovial misfit of the Bloomsbury group prompted within him "the need to produce some major work that should establish him in the eyes, not only of Bloomsbury but of the intellectual world at large, as a genuine heavy-weight" (112). Clive wrote *Civilization* to fill his need of a magnum opus and thus finally to garner the academic renown befitting a member of the Bloomsbury group. However, tragically for Clive, not even Virginia, to whom he dedicated his masterpiece, could profess more than a polite review of his book, which never surpassed his earlier book, *Art* (Gadd 112).

Clive's failure to meet the standards of his academic friends unveils one last truth he shares with Bell: that only in distancing themselves from those whose opinions matter to them can their confidence flourish. This truth

proves itself in a rather humorous way for Peter, who undergoes a dramatic shift in bearing as he eats dinner in his hotel. While Peter's inner turmoil and self-pity created the image of a man entirely devoid of self-confidence, now in the presence of sightseers, who presumably are of a lower social class than himself, Peter appears as the picture of poise and composure (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 159-60). His gentlemanly presence is so impeccable that when he orders "Bartlett Pears" (160), those sitting closest to him feel an inordinate amount of respect and lawful reverence for him. Admittedly the degree of respect given to Peter purely for his order of pears is comical, yet it is the perfect display of how Peter's demeanor changes when around people he believes should value his opinion, as opposed to those whose opinion he values. Clive, on the other hand, found confidence in descending from the realm of highbrow intellectual literature into the consumer-focused, elitist magazine that was *Vogue* in the 1920s. Clive's position as the lowest member of the Bloomsbury group did nothing to discredit his articles; instead, in a publication devoted to the commodification of modernity, sophistication, and art (Garrity 33), Clive's mere association with the Bloomsbury group was proof enough to validate his writing. In addition, far from receiving criticism for his failure to incorporate into his writing "new ideas about and attitudes toward women" (34), Bell's promotion of traditional gender roles was a massive endorsement for *Vogue*, a magazine that derived its main revenue from the beauty and lifestyle products it advertised to women. Bell also failed to see the irony inherent in the juxtaposition of his contempt for consumerism with *Vogue's* blatant and unabashed commercial objectives (45-46). As with Peter, when the criticism of his peers vanished, so did Clive's insecurity, allowing his confidence to reappear and transforming him into an authoritative, albeit negative, influence on British culture.

To repeat the warning proffered in the introduction, that the comparison between Peter Walsh and Clive Bell should not be exaggerated, seems amusing in light of the contents of this essay. Yet confining the analysis of Peter to *Civilization* would be to ignore the broader narrative of how Peter and Clarissa's relationship in *Mrs. Dalloway* mirrors many aspects of Clive's relationship with Virginia. So rather than viewing Peter as a tool Woolf used to criticize Bell, I have chosen to view him as the excellently written and nuanced character he is, whose unrequited love and academic insecurity serve as a hidden window into Virginia Woolf's world.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Brian Schaffer, Lucio Ruotolo, and Philip Henderson have all, to some extent, researched the comparisons between Peter Walsh and Bell's *Civilization*.

<sup>2</sup>Brian Schaffer's *The Blinding Torch*, especially his chapter "Civilization in Post-Great War Bloomsbury," provided an inspiration for this paper.

<sup>3</sup>Throughout this essay I oscillate between referring to Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell by their first names and surnames: I use the former to refer to their personal lives and the latter to analyze their literature.

## Works Cited

Bell, Clive. *Civilization, an Essay*. Harcourt, Brace, 1928.

Bell, Quentin. *Bloomsbury Recalled*. Columbia UP, 1995.

---. *Virginia Woolf: A biography*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.

Gadd, David. *The Loving Friends: A Portrait of Bloomsbury*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.

Henderson, Philip. *The Novel Today: Studies in Contemporary Attitudes*. John Lane The Bodley Head, 1936.

Rosenbaum, S. P., editor. *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*. U of Toronto P, 1995. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctvcj2pxx>.

Ruotolo, Lucio P. *The Interrupted Moment: A View of Virginia Woolf's Novels*. Print ed., Stanford UP, 1988.

Shaffer, Brian W. *The Blinding Torch: Modern British Fiction and the Discourse of Civilization*.

U of Massachusetts P, 1993.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Mariner, 1990.

---. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Volume 3, 1923-1928*, edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 6 vols., Harvest Books 1980.

