On Not Knowing Death:
The Figure of the Soldier in the Novels of Virginia Woolf

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Abstract

I find that of all the things that drive Virginia Woolf’s work, war is most important. To understand war in her writing, I study the three soldier characters appearing in her novels: Jacob Flanders, Jacob’s Room (1922); Septimus Smith, Mrs. Dalloway (1925); and Percival, The Waves (1931). I find that all are characterized by a vague, fragmented style of writing and classical metaphor; all three are also based on Woolf’s brother Thoby Stephen and friend Rupert Brooke. I examine the arc of the soldier character throughout Woolf’s writing career—from brother figure to trauma victim to the glorified dead—and explore how each figure drives the storyline, reflects Woolf’s own fears about death and youth, and allows her to make a larger statement on the loss and futility that characterized the First World War.
But the best I've known,
Stays here, and changes, breaks, grows old, is blown
About the winds of the world, and fades from brains
Of living men, and dies.

Nothing remains.

Rupert Brooke, *The Great Lover*, 1914
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Chapter I

Introduction

By the time Virginia Woolf decided to end her life, the Second World War had already begun to tear it apart. In 1938, she wrote in her diary with quiet despair: “Nobody in their senses can believe in it ... the aeroplanes are on the prowl, crossing the downs. Every preparation is made. Sirens will hoot in a particular way when there’s the first hint of a raid. L & I no longer talk about it” (Diary, V, 167). In The Years, which she was writing during the time, she compares Europe to a “hedgehog ... bristling with guns, poised with planes,” its citizens panicked about “Death, or worse—tyranny, brutality, torture; the fall of civilisation; the end of freedom” (Bazin and Lauter, 36, 23).

In its April 19, 1941 article on Woolf’s death, The New York Times gives a brief synopsis of the Woolfs’ misfortunes during the onset of World War II: “When their Bloomsbury home was wrecked by a bomb some time ago, Mr. and Mrs. Woolf moved to another near by. It, too, was made uninhabitable by a bomb, and the Woolfs then moved to their weekend home in Sussex.” Housing wasn’t the only issue Woolf and her husband Leonard were dealing with. The long shadow of Nazism hung over Leonard, who was a Jew, like a knife, and the couple kept lethal doses of morphia ready in case of invasion (Bazin and Lauter, 23). Woolf’s staff struggled to make ends meet under a strict food ration system. Each night in Sussex, air raids sent the household scurrying into the basement, fearing for their lives. “All wallows & wavers in complete chaos,” Virginia wrote in 1938; “I suppose air raids may toss a bomb through the skylight. Growls go on overhead” (Diary, V, 138).
Times were difficult for everyone, but for Virginia, the pressure soon became unbearable. Woolf suffered from what would today be diagnosed as bipolar disorder, exacerbated by a childhood history of parental repression, incest, and sexual abuse, and all her life she had swung from sprees of mania and creativity through periods of depression, psychological breakdowns, and even episodes of psychosis. She had attempted suicide and been hospitalized several times since 1911; several of these episodes were brought on either just after her honeymoon or after returning to its location, implying some sort of sexual trauma (Bazin, Postmortem, 136-7). On doctors’ orders, she was relegated to the country for “rest,” and Leonard had assumed the role of her (often brutal and repressive) caretaker. For a feminist who saw war as a form of male aggression and ego gone out of control, the “tyranny of a patriarchal state” (Bazin and Lauter, 27), the onslaught of World War II would have heightened this sense of repression.

In addition to all this, the coming of war also inspired painful memories. The daily bombings and rations were a chilling reminder of the First World War, which had torn apart her homeland and impacted her writing and worldview forever.

Casualties of the First World War

The effects of World War I on the European psyche cannot be overstated. With over 17 million dead and 20 million wounded, it was the bloodiest war in Europe’s history until that point, and it decimated nearly an entire generation of men. Russia saw 1.7 million men killed and another 7.45 million injured or missing. Germany, France, and Austria-Hungary suffered catastrophically, with 65%, 76%, and 90% casualty rates respectively. Well over a third of Britain’s mobilized men suffered casualties—a million killed and over two million injured or missing (PBS).
In addition to the sheer number of men killed, the tone of the war itself wreaked havoc on the European consciousness. From the outset, nationalism reared its head across Britain. Citizens were pressured into service right away, “posters and advertisements sham[ing] men into enlisting, threatening their masculinity and citizenship” (Scutts, web). Writers extolled the glories of battle and a sure victory over the enemy, but what the soldiers found was very different: trenches plagued by rats, lice, and disease, men falling before machine guns, poison gas disfiguring faces, and other horrors. In addition, the causes behind the war were vague and unclear, more an upheaval of long-term political tensions between competing empires than a battle anyone could believe in.

Once the agony of war and its futility became apparent, the collective European consciousness grew bitter and broken. A widespread disillusionment with leadership and the establishment gripped the Continent, and this soon spread to a distrust of technology and even a loss of belief in God. The artistic world erupted in rebellion, declaring the old forms dead and experimenting with new ways of seeing and describing. Modernist writers bitterly struggled to describe the pain of losing their friends, their faith, and their understanding of how to live. The war came to represent, for those of Virginia’s background, a political and spiritual failure on the part of the entire world.

The Second World War’s commencement was like that of the first coming back to haunt battle-weary Europe. Indeed, Woolf’s writing suggest that she sees it as a nightmarish repetition of the first war, “1914 but without even the illusion of 1914. All slipping consciously into a pit” (Diary, V, 170). The years between the wars seemed to have meant nothing, the world descending once again into insanity; in her entry on the start of World War II on September 5, 1938, she writes underneath the date that it may as well be August 3, 1914.
England’s Noblest Son

During the First World War, Woolf was in her early thirties. By 1915, she had published a few short pieces as well as her first novel, *The Voyage Out*. It received lukewarm reviews, critics “almost universally describ[ing] it … ‘a remarkable failure’” (Hussey, 340). Just a month after its publication and rather disappointing reviews, Woolf received another blow: the news that well-known poet Rupert Brooke had died.

Brooke and Woolf had been friends since childhood. Their parents had moved in the same literary circles, and Rupert, Virginia, and their siblings had played together as children on summer holidays at the beach at St. Ives. In 1906 he attended King’s College, where he studied the Classics and later English. He soon settled outside Cambridge at Grantchester on an estate known as the Old Vicarage, where he and his friends went barefoot and spent their days and nights roaming the outdoors—“neo-pagans,” as Virginia affectionately referred to them (Maybin, web). Brooke immortalized the natural beauty of the place in his poem *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*:

```
Oh! there the chestnuts, summer through,
Beside the river make for you
A tunnel of green gloom, and sleep
Deeply above; and green and deep
The stream mysterious glides beneath,
Green as a dream and deep as death.
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Virginia’s visits to the Vicarage seemed golden, filled with literary talk and long days in the sun: “The garden room was strewn with scraps ... and fragments of verse. Probably the guest had brought with her an early chapter of *The Voyage Out* to revise while Brooke was reading or writing stretched out on the grass” (McCrum, web). They were also exhilarating. In 1911, Virginia later confided to a friend, “One warm night there was a clear sky and a moon and they walked out to the shadowy waters of Byron’s Pool. ‘Let’s go swimming, quite naked,’ Brooke
said, and they did” (McCrum, web). Brooke immortalized his nude swimming escapades with his lady friends in *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*:

His ghostly Lordship swims the pool  
And tries the strokes, essays the tricks,  
Long learnt on Hellespont, or Styx.

Whether or not there was any romance between Brooke and Woolf, being his friend was reason enough to brag; he was widely known to be incredibly handsome, with a glowing complexion and sideswept blonde hair. W.B. Yeats would later describe him as “the handsomest young man in England” (Scutts, web), a sort of Peter Pan with “his boyish ebullience, animal magnetism and romantic good looks” (McCrum, web). In a recently released memoir, his one-time lover Phyllis Gardner describes sitting across from him on a train for the first time, sketching him on her notepad, and falling in love with him before ever speaking to him. She describes their later affair at the Vicarage steamily in her letters: “Naive and ecstatic ... she was entranced by his rhetorical ardour. ‘I could not believe that real life could be like this,’ she wrote later” (McCrum, web).

Handsome or not, the poet needed to find himself. During the following years, Rupert underwent a series of changes as he navigated his tumultuous youth, traveling throughout Europe, the United States, and the South Pacific and leaving a series of doomed romances in his wake. From America he penned his essay *An Unusual Young Man*, which explored his own feelings on the rising tensions with Germany. He clearly didn’t grasp the significance of what was to come, seeming annoyed that he “might have to” neglect music and camping outdoors to undertake military service. His character tries to imagine war, slashing at cartoonish enemies “in a stagey, dimly-imagined battle. Ridiculous. He vaguely imagined a series of heroic feats, vast enterprise, and the applause of crowds” (Brooke, *Letters*, 176-8). However, soon after war had
been declared, he returned to England and enlisted. He remarked lightly to a friend, “Well, if Armageddon is on, I suppose one should be there” (Maybin, web).

Brooke spent 1914 in Brussels, where he never saw action but was close enough to it to pen his famous “war sonnets,” five poems that extolled the virtues of dying for one’s country. In the first, *Peace*, he thanks God for the opportunity to fight for his country:

```
Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power
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He urges men to leave behind the “little emptiness of love” and other mundane happinesses of their lives to attain glory; he cannot understand those “sick hearts that honour could not move” to join in the fight. His poem *The Soldier* skyrocketed to popularity, in particular its opening lines,

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If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.
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Brooke’s sonnets were printed in the newspapers to fuel the campaign urging young men to fight, and he was lauded as Britain’s new romantic hero. His work even gently influenced policy, leading to a shift toward individual graves for the dead in foreign fields instead of mass graves (Scutts, web).

In 1915, he was deployed to the Dardanelles. He and his fellow officers, who were classically trained, saw it as a capital improvement over their time in Brussels, the sort of romantic adventure they had been born for: “Homer and Herodotus were his guides, Brooke wrote to his mother, as he sailed over the ‘sapphire sea, swept by ghost of triremes and quinqueremes’” (Scutts, web). However, soon after he arrived he contracted a blood infection from a mosquito bite and died. He was buried in an olive grove on Skyros two days before the beginning of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign.
His death created a firestorm. All of England mourned the young poet, his youth and beauty taking on godlike proportions. Robert Delany mournfully suggested that the gods had murdered him out of jealousy: "Had not Phoebus Apollo, the golden-haired god of poetry, struck down Marsyas for boasting that he could sing as well as the god?" The location of Brooke’s death and his history of romantic trysts in his own Byron’s Pool were not lost on his readers, and this brought about sweeping comparisons to Lord Byron and his elevation to the voice of a generation (Poetry Foundation, web). Winston Churchill wrote Brooke’s obituary for The Times, extolling him as the very embodiment of youth:

Joyous, fearless, versatile, deeply instructed, with classic symmetry of mind and body, ruled by high undoubting purpose, he was all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in the days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is that which is most freely proffered (Churchill, 1915).

However, these glowing tributes to Brooke did not sit well with much of the public. Churchill’s obituary left a bad taste of political agenda in some readers’ mouths, and it was not lost on readers that it just happened to be printed above a notice urging men to enlist (BYU Library, web). Brooke’s work began to be derided by the public as the scribbles of a naïve youth, a “posh idiot nationalist” (Scutts, web) willing to be crushed under the wheels of the empire.

Whichever side readers were on, Rupert had transcended mortality. He was now a figure representative of something much larger, something with two sides: one a youthful golden hero, and the other the epitome of senseless loss and propaganda.
Loss of a Brother

To add to its tragedy, Brooke’s death paralleled the fate of someone else Woolf had been close with: her brother Thoby Stephen. Thoby and Virginia had grown up close; she and her sister Vanessa had adored him and competed for his attention from the time they were children. After a time, they also became friends and companions on a deeper philosophical level. When Thoby returned from his first year at school, he and Virginia would walk up and down the stairs having “odd shy” conversations, him telling her tales of the Greeks, of “Troy and Hector and a whole new world which captured her imagination” (Bell, I, 27).

In his biography, Virginia’s nephew Quentin Bell writes that Virginia’s childhood talks with Thoby inspired her great interest in the Greeks, and her realization that they belonged more to him and the male-dominated world of education than her planted the seeds of feminism in her mind. This would inspire her later essay On Not Knowing Greek, published in her book The Common Reader, which manages to both take aim at the patriarchy and describe what Greek means to Woolf artistically:

We are impressed [in Greek literature] by something different, by something perhaps more impressive — by heroism itself, by fidelity itself. In spite of the labour and the difficulty it is this that draws us back and back to the Greeks; the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there ... It is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of Christianity and its consolations, of our own age (Woolf, CR, 38).¹

¹ I will reference the following Woolf works with abbreviations throughout the remainder of the text: The Common Reader (normally in reference to her essay “On Not Knowing Greek” printed therein)—CR; Jacob’s Room—JR; Mrs. Dalloway—MD; The Waves—TW; and “Moments of Being”—MOB.
As an intellectual mentor, adored friend, or a classical inspiration, Thoby “was a solid male presence ... His character was ‘as splendid as his appearance, and as wonderfully complete’” (Edel, 96).

In 1906, just before Thoby was to take the bar, he took a trip to Greece with Virginia, Vanessa, their brother Adrian, and Violet, a family friend. The trip started marvelously. The group rode on horseback through the dusty countryside, discussing ancient civilization, sharing wine, and speaking Greek with their hired horsemen, and Virginia was deeply inspired by the landscape and the local people. But Thoby, Vanessa, and Violet soon fell ill. Once they had returned home, the family watched helplessly as Thoby grew weaker and weaker. As with the previous deaths of Virginia’s father, mother, and half-sister, Bell writes, medical help proved ineffective, and “there seems to have been a helpless, muddled drifting towards death” (Bell, I, 110).

Woolf was inconsolable when Thoby died, seemingly refusing to engage in any healthy way of mourning (Clewell, 206). To make matters worse, Virginia was afraid to shock the desperately ill Violet with news of his death, so for a month she undertook the anguishing daily task of writing Violet letters that gave fictional news of Thoby’s recovery. This bizarre form of (non)mourning, paired with the unresolved grief of the deaths of her other family members, left her unable to process her complicated feelings of loss and caused an emotional breakdown. Quentin Bell writes:

“Thoby’s death was a disaster from which Virginia could not easily recover. Two years later she still felt her loss acutely; it seemed odd to be living in a world that did not contain him, and even after twenty years it still seemed to her that her own continuing life was no more than an excursion without him, and that death would be no more than a return to his company” (Bell, I, 112).
In addition to the immediate pain of loss, Virginia found herself struggling to understand life and reality without Thoby. “Virginia’s vision of life was clearly affected. She wrote: ‘I would see (after Thoby’s death) two great grindstones ... and myself between them’” (Bazin, Postmortem, 144). His death also took on a larger-than-life quality through its association with Greek tragedy (Harris, 43), due to both its circumstances and Thoby’s role as her Greek mentor.

Woolf was still struggling with depression and unresolved grief over Thoby’s death eleven years later when she received the news about Rupert Brooke’s untimely death in the Greek Islands. The two young men whose lives were cut short by senseless tragedy and the pain she experienced as a result of their loss would come to drastically shape her views on youth, vitality, and death.

The Young Man and the Soldier

Woolf’s writing can be categorized in many ways. However, I read it first and foremost as an original and unexpected way of writing about war. The First World War, one of the most important events of her life during her most formative writing years, is visibly tied into many of her characters, entwining itself with the questions and issues each grapples with: what is war, and how is it experienced by those involved? On a higher level, how can we understand the experience of life for others, and how can we understand their deaths? Is there a way to understand our own death and the reasons why we struggle to live when death is imminent?

Other critics have, of course, cited war’s effects on Woolf’s writing. However, when exploring the questions of war in Woolf’s work, it seems to make the most sense to start with the characters who are most directly involved with war itself: the soldiers. This is where my work
diverges from that of other critics and writers, none of whom have explored the soldiers as a group and how they are characterized across Woolf’s body of writing.

In this thesis, I explore the figure of the soldier as he appears across Woolf’s work. Three of her novels contain a central soldier figure; specifically, these are Jacob (Jacob’s Room, 1922), Septimus (Mrs. Dalloway, 1925), and Percival (The Waves, 1931). I study how each of these young men is written by Woolf and the ways in which they shape her writing. The three figures differ in many ways: Jacob is a young scholar looking for his path in life; Septimus is a married man shattered by post-traumatic stress disorder; Percival is a heroic, golden-haired athlete.

However, they share certain qualities. All three are written vaguely, from different characters’ points of view or through a fractured narrative lens; Woolf does not allow us to fully know them. In addition, all three are described extensively in classical language. Finally, each seems to be heavily inspired by the real-life figures of Thoby Stephen and Rupert Brooks, the two men whose deaths had a profound impact upon Woolf. Their deaths came to stand for the deaths of young men in the war, which greatly shaped her understanding of the world and thus her writing as a whole. I explore these ideas and the impacts of Jacob, Septimus, and Percival on each novel in Chapters II, III, and IV, respectively, and conclude with Chapter V.

In On Not Knowing Greek, Woolf writes, “In the vast catastrophe of the European war our emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction” (Woolf, CR, 34). The creation of Jacob, Septimus, and Percival allow Woolf to distill the idea of the soldier into different metaphorical representations, making the three soldier characters at once accessible and inaccessible. They become universal beings whose traits and feelings are true, powerful, and reminiscent of our own. This universality, the sense that these characters are representative of ourselves but also,
somehow, all young men, provides us with a framework to consider the most inconceivable and ultimately inaccessible human experiences of war and death. For Virginia Woolf, who was haunted by war from her thirties through the end of her life, the figure of the soldier allows for an exploration of the inconceivable idea that an entire generation of young men could be young, beautiful, alive—and then, just as suddenly, gone.
Chapter II

Jacob

*Jacob’s Room*, Virginia Woolf’s third novel, was published by Virginia and Leonard’s company Hogarth Press in 1922. They had opened the press in 1917, and its effect on her work was palpable (Heske, 16). *Jacob’s Room* was Virginia’s first truly modern novel, with a fragmented style and unresolved ending. She seemed finally free of restrictions, striking out boldly in a new direction. Some understood the art behind the style: W.L. Courtney compared “its tense syncopated movements, its staccato impulsiveness” to jazz music, and E.M. Forster remarked on its lyricism with surprise, calling the work “essentially poetic.” But the approach struck others the wrong way; the prevailing trend of the moment being socialist and objective, many found *Jacob’s Room* “obscure and elitist.” The remarks that stung the most were made by Edwardian novelist and critic Arthur Bennett, who recognized Woolf’s talent but proclaimed her too obsessed with writing an “original” novel to create characters who were actually memorable (van Rooyen, 24-25).

It is easy to understand the critics’ frustration with Jacob. We follow Jacob throughout his life and almost to the moment of his death, yet he is characterized by vagueness. We see him mainly through the eyes of others, never really accessing his inner life but catching a large enough glimpse of it to see ourselves reflected in him. Through her casting of Jacob as son, brother, lover, student, seeker, Woolf manages to make him somewhat familiar and yet unknown, the very embodiment of youth. Through classical references, she glorifies him, which elevates his fate and his emotions to the level of a universal tragedy. This portrayal of Jacob
embodies many of the traits that Woolf loved and mourned in Thoby and Rupert, those bitter personal losses that had become larger than life in Woolf’s memory. It is also Woolf’s first literary attempt to try, somehow, to understand collective loss, to portray the soldier, his experience, and his death.

The Followers: Piecing Jacob Together

In the original Hebrew, the name Jacob has many meanings, but its primary one is “to follow.” While we are able to catch glimpses into the mind of Jacob throughout Jacob’s Room, these moments are rare. Instead, we see only how others react to him, how he reacts to others, and the results of decisions he seems to make based on what society asks of him. Our own understanding of him is also shaped almost entirely through the perceptions of others. Eventually we construct an image of him as scholar, seeker, lover and dreamer—through the eyes of other people.

We glimpse Jacob first through the eyes of a painter who is struggling to paint him. The boy will not sit still; he runs about, playing with an animal’s skull. Dissatisfied with his ability to see him, the painter simply smudges black paint onto the canvas and gives up. We see him in the next chapter through the eyes of a stranger in a train car. This woman notes his “indifference,” as well as the fact that he “was in some way or the—to her at least—nice, handsome, interesting, distinguished, well built, like her own boy ... Anyhow, this was Jacob Flanders, aged 19. It is no use trying to sum people up” (JR, 30). Her warm perception of Jacob as a good-looking, upstanding youth is clearly based on her perception of her own son, and so is, in the kindest sense, unreliable. Woolf suggests that trying to “sum people up” at all, let alone trying to do so at
first glance, is futile: this representation of Jacob is simply a small piece of the image we work to construct throughout the novel.

Once he arrives at Cambridge, we are given little insight into Jacob’s feelings: he appears mostly as the object of others’ thoughts or discussion. He is the irresponsible student who inconveniences the host of a mentor’s dinner party by being late; he is the dreamer in a moored boat being watched by a classmate (JR, 33, 37). He is a scholar and thinker, hosting animated debates with classmates—“Cambridge burning, it’s not languages only”—and storms from the room for an unknown reason, his footsteps ringing out, seeming to say, “The young man—the young man—the young man—back to his rooms” (JR, 48). Though Woolf gives us clues as to what Jacob is thinking about, she generalizes his thoughts and feelings. He thinks of his life in contrast to the less desirable lives of his mentors; just as we think we are finally getting a glimpse of his inner world, Woolf neatly sums up his feelings by noting that the world of the elderly always comes as a shock to the young and passes into a description of the river without giving us anything specific to grasp (JR, 37). He remains outside our reach, a patchwork of irresponsibility, vigor, idealism, and indifference. Trying to make sense of him is like trying to make sense of the inconsistencies and extremes of youth while we live them.

Through women’s eyes, we see Jacob as an object of love; yet Woolf keeps us distant from the details. Clara and Florinda fall in love with him, but they are unable to discern his feelings just as we are. In the beautiful scene where he walks in the garden with Clara, we feel her love for him exuding off the page, while he makes only vague statements like, “I have enjoyed myself” (JR, 67). Putting together a clear picture of his sexual relationship with Florinda is even more difficult. The relationship clearly overwhelms him with guilt, and the fact that he is unable to logically categorize it results in a feeling of loss of control. Jacob becomes convinced
that fitting sex into his life and system of beliefs is an utterly “insoluble” problem (JR, 90). Yet, inexplicably, he continues the affair. Even when Florinda betrays him, Woolf tells us that he is experiencing extreme pain but does not allow us to understand it:

> It was as if a stone were ground to dust; as if white sparks flew from a livid whetstone...fell, fell, fell. This was in his face. Whether we know what was in his mind is a different question...Ah! What’s the use in saying it?...He has turned to go. As for following him back to his rooms, no—that we won’t do (JR, 104-5).

In keeping the details of his feelings vague, denying him the agency to make any concrete choices, and forcing us to follow him at a distance, Woolf allows us to imagine Jacob as any number of people we may have known. He becomes a reflection on the utter inexplicability of youth and emotion. Woolf presents the many facets of Jacob and allows the reader to step in and build their own meaning out of the experience.

The Wine-Dark Sea

The classics are another critical aspect of understanding Jacob’s character and its evolution throughout the novel. As noted above, he studied the classics in school, just as Thoby and Rupert had done, and it is evident that Greek holds the same hallowed place in his world as it did for them and for Virginia. He and Durrant comically mispronounce their vocabulary in school, but revere it all the same, shouting it out drunkenly “on Haverstock Hill in the dawn,” considering themselves “the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant” (JR, 83). What the Greeks meant, of course, is inexplicable; it’s the truth of emotion, the tragedy and comedy of life itself, “something different, by something perhaps more impressive—by heroism itself, by fidelity itself” (CR, 37). Jacob’s fixation on Greek, his rejection of the dull lives of his
professors and obsession with finding the truth about the world and his own emotions, creates a bright, vibrant picture that recalls our own youth and idealism.

The importance of Greek grows as the novel nears its climax. In the final pages, we follow Jacob to Greece on a Thoby-like pilgrimage, which offers the “only chance [he] can see of protecting oneself from civilization” (JR, 165). He seems to be following the path of many youths before him looking for their own way to truth and knowledge. We climb with him to the top of the Parthenon, marveling at the beauty of the ruins. We experience our own desire to seek and understand through him, though all we are given are vague descriptions of the notes he scribbles, “upon which the work of a lifetime may be based; or again, it falls out of a book twenty years later, and one can’t remember a word of it” (JR, 170). After creating a character whom we deeply relate to, Woolf simply categorizes his feelings as a “violent disillusionment...generally to be expected in young men in the prime of life, sound of wind and limb, who will soon become fathers of families and directors of banks” (JR, 171). She offers a detailed study of an individual in intense emotional pain, affected constantly by the time, place and people surrounding him, then she reduces him to a cliché, one in a million.

Why does she keep him so far from us? Our quest to know him is continually frustrated by reminders that what is large to him is so small in the scope of the world, by the disparities in how different characters perceive him, and by the gap between what Woolf says and what she means. The technique is intended to draw us into his world while also keeping him a general idea that we may mold to fit our own thoughts and feelings. If Jacob’s feelings were more specific, we might find ourselves alienated from him in some way; as he is, he reminds us of ourselves. In “Characterizing Absence: Virginia Woolf’s New Elegy in Jacob’s Room,” Alex Oxner argues that Jacob’s connection to the Greek does not make him a god; rather, it seems to erase his
personality entirely, to make him an empty vessel. This is why we begin with the black dab of paint, the empty vacant skull, Oxner writes: he is no one, so he becomes everyone.

The Greek aspect of his death also reminds us of Rupert and Thoby; and looking back, we find that the circumstances of Jacob’s life tie him inextricably to the two men. Both found solace and passion in the classical languages, and many of Woolf’s youthful memories would have centered around her Greek lessons, perched on the stairs with Thoby, first opening her eyes to the world. Jacob’s lazy days in the river canoe, dreaming about his books, hearken back to the times she spent at Grantchester, sunlight streaming through the trees onto the water, the lusty excitement of youth and sex and philosophy filling the heavy summer air. Like Thoby and Rupert, the seminal moment of his life—the height of knowledge and seeking, and the moment before death—occurs on a pilgrimage to Greece. The last sight of him, near the Piraeus Sea, “off the coast of the port town that has seen the democracy of ancient Greece cede to Spartan and Roman rule,” makes his death an “epical tale,” elevates it to a reflection on warmongering through the centuries and the idea of death and the hero (Heske, 18). Like Thoby and Rupert—like Icarus, flying too close to the sun—as soon as he reaches those heights over Greece, he is gone.

Fractured Reality: Losing Jacob

As the dark confusion of the war swirls in and “drops like a knife over Greece” (JR, 199), Jacob becomes miniscule. He rises out of the dust, striding toward—what? We have lost him in the crowd of men that enlist in the army. The “young man in the chair,” who is “of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us ... The moment after we know nothing about him” (JR, 78). He is a reflection of our own youth, our own love and lovers, of our
own sons and classmates and fellow seekers. Yet when war comes, he blows like dust through our fingers. Those of us left behind are unable to conceive of any part of him now; he has become utterly unfamiliar to us, canceled by the firing of the guns, unable to be portrayed even by the author who created him.

The circumstances surrounding Jacob’s enlistment are vague. We last see him in England, Woolf’s narrative fracturing into pieces around him: “Jacob rose from his chair in Hyde Park, tore his ticket to pieces, and walked away” (JR, 196). We wonder where he is going; we are interrupted by quotes from letters from his mother. “The long windows of Kensington Palace flushed fiery rose as Jacob walked away ...” (JR, 197); and now, a flock of wild duck fly by against the stark trees. An unknown voice booms in: “‘The Kaiser,’ the far-away voice remarked in Whitehall, ‘received me in audience’” (JR, 197). We feel fractured and confused, just as we imagine Jacob’s life is shifting and breaking within the army. The seeking which we have become so deeply invested in has abruptly ended; Jacob is now one of any number of far-away voices, indistinguishable from other men acting as pieces in a game of mounting tension. The novel grows heavy with interruptions and confusion as characters in different cities catch glimpses of men they think are Jacob (JR, 197-8).

Then, “the ships in Piraeus fired their guns. The sound spread itself flat, and then went tunneling its way with fitful explosions among the channels of the islands” (JR, 199). War has begun, but we cannot tell where the sound of the guns is real and where it is imagined. Betty Flanders rises from her bed, confused and alarmed, as “darkness drops like a knife” (JR, 199) over sun-drenched Greece, the only place which once promised Jacob illumination. She wonders about her sons; she thinks of other things. In the next scene, Jacob is dead. As with Thoby or Rupert, the incongruity of him smiling, invigorated, alive, sailing the wine-dark sea of Greece, is
stark in relation to his death. It doesn’t make sense. As we enter Jacob’s room in the final scene of the novel, we see that things are organized neatly for his return, and yet, as Betty Flanders cries, there is “such confusion everywhere” (JR, 201). Mrs. Flanders and Jacob’s friend Bonamy stand helpless and confused, looking at a pair of his empty shoes. The incongruence of the tidy, silent room Jacob inhabited in life, the quietly ticking clock on the wall, the epic golden pilgrimage and sweeping views of the Parthenon, are utterly incongruent with his death, which was likely in the muddy horror of a trench or the bloody carnage of battle.

The schism disturbs us and fractures our understanding of reality. Who was he, and how did he live? Was he exactly like you and me, or was he a Phoebus Apollo, a heroic seeker of knowledge? The chaos of war does not make sense with the life he has built and the order he strove for. Yet war has simply extinguished it, and we have no way of knowing what his final moments were like. As Bazin and Lauter note, “Our knowledge of him remains incomplete and unsatisfactory. The reader experiences the imperfect knowledge and inadequate recall we have when we try to recapture the life of someone who dies” (Bazin and Lauter, 15). He is characterized entirely by absence now; looking back, we realize we have “a timeline of his life rather than a firsthand account of his existence” (Oxner, 220).

A Young Man We Knew

What is Woolf doing here? Many critics at the time had little faith. They linked Jacob, and his abandoned room and empty pair of shoes, to Woolf’s inability to grieve for her brother, to her refusal to find an acceptable way to deal with his loss. They saw it as something that marred her work; Jacob was a failure, a young author’s unsatisfying attempt to bring a character to life. One of the most biting criticisms of Jacob’s Room, penned by critic Rebecca West, reads:
“Jacob lives, but that is hearsay. Jacob dies; there could be nothing more negative than the death of one who never (that we could learn for certain) lived. But his room we know” (van Rooyen, 25). West must have found him utterly unmemorable, frustratingly vague, a ghost flitting through the world. But to argue that Jacob lacks the qualities of character is to miss the point; Jacob is built entirely of the negative space around character. His vagueness makes him universally appealing, an artistic yet somehow realistic figure. The Greek symbolism and language running throughout the novel lends Jacob the glow of a hero and a heroic aspect that makes his death even more tragic.

Consider once again Jacob’s name—but his surname, Flanders, which would have been recognizable at once to Woolf’s readers in 1922. It is fitting that Jacob, the poet and dreamer, the follower who let society send him off to a distant and meaningless war, would carry the last name of one of the deadliest battlefields—and most famous poems—of the war. In Flanders Fields was penned by Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae as a response to the death of a friend in battle. It was also a memorial for the young men who had died in Belgium in an area called Flanders Fields—one of the bloodiest and deadliest locations a young English man could be sent, the first location in which poison gas was used to torture and kill men, and the place that sprouted carpets of beautiful red poppies after the war, confounding those who struggled to understand the death that had occurred there. Its second stanza reads:

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields (McCrae).

The poem itself gives a voice to the dead, allows them to state the inconceivable idea that they were so recently alive and are now buried beneath the earth—much like what Woolf seems to be
doing with Jacob. Oxner sums up the connection between Jacob’s name, his (non)personality, the poem, and even Thoby quite nicely:

“In Flanders Fields” was dedicated specifically to Alex Helmer, but is an elegy for all fallen soldiers. Similarly, *Jacob’s Room* was written partly as an elegy for Woolf's brother, Thoby, who died of typhoid fever, but as Thoby's literary counterpart, Jacob Flanders and his empty interiority remain a vessel to be filled with more than one spirit. The lament for a sole individual is thus transformed, through the noncharacterization of Woolf's protagonist, into a modern elegy which speaks for a generation of young men (Oxner, 212).

His name itself becomes a reference to the bitter, tragic poetry that sprung forth after the war, the other side of the coin from Rupert Brooke’s patriotic war poetry—and an elegy for all those who were taken from the world too soon.

Then again, elegy may be the wrong word. Tammy Clewell argues that while Woolf is challenging something big here, it is not necessarily just the ideals behind the war; it is the practice of mourning itself. By fracturing the narrative, leaving us dissatisfied and confused, she is refusing to mourn in any kind of acceptable way. Her “textual practice of endless mourning compels us to refuse consolation, sustain grief, and accept responsibility for the difficult task of remembering the catastrophic losses” of the war (Clewell, web). Clewell argues that in *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf catalogs the many accepted ways of mourning—church services, tombstones, monuments, and more—then disproves them all. Jacob’s father’s tombstone is filled with errors; Jacob finds church unsatisfying and silly; the city’s monuments are unsatisfying and forgettable. She recognizes that the ones who erect monuments and hold funerals and make speeches are the same ones driving the war itself. By urging the reader to disregard them as means of consolation, she argues that we should be *inconsolable* over the war, that it was inexcusably tragic, that
humanity should accept responsibility for its madness instead of putting it into logical terms or continuing to follow an established tradition of any sort.

When we consider all these interesting things Woolf is bringing to the discussion of war—calling attention to the tragedy of death, forcing us to realize the humanity of those who were killed, denying us comfort by refuting the practices of elegy itself—it is worth considering how all this is informed by her unique female viewpoint. She is very careful not to let the feminine voice be suppressed in *Jacob’s Room*. The narrator is most definitely female; we can tell through her asides, her tone, her distaste with Jacob’s inherently patriarchal beliefs (as in the church, when he finds all women to be like dogs and wishes they were barred from the service). She uses it to create distance from him, and she uses it to compare the violence of war with domesticity and peace. We see the female voice in the way Jacob’s mother associates the sound of guns with the beating of carpets, with her vacillation between rote patriotic thoughts, terror for the young men in the town, and maternal concern over her chickens in the roost. Through her narrative voice—which is by turns motherly and revolutionary, always distinctly female—and Mrs. Flanders’ thoughts, Woolf paints “an implicit picture of a divided self, required to respond, incapable of response, in which the failure to find an appropriate mode of understanding is embodied in indirection” (Ouditt, 86).

She is also able to also elucidate her frustration with being an uninformed bystander in a way that a male writer may not have understood, let alone been able to write. Ouditt explains that Woolf found value in the female interpretation, as women are more subject to the fragmentation of perspective and emotion and are able to see civilization in a different way, more able to evolve: “She sees masculine tradition as comparatively monolithic, female perception as capable of more variety as it is less rigidly fixed into, and has less to gain from, patriarchal tradition”
Creating a vague Jacob and undermining patriarchal traditions of mourning allows Woolf to appeal to readers from a female perspective, hoping they will step out of their place of rigidity and tradition, construct their own image of exactly what was lost with Jacob, and challenge the machinations that brought war on in the first place. He understands the world as a young man—impatient, impulsive, and often careless—and fittingly, dies for a cause he has not thought much about. It is the women he leaves behind who wonder, and question, and struggle with a guilt they cannot quite put their finger on.

As readers, we see Jacob’s vagueness. We see his distance from the female narrator and the peaceful feminine ideal. We see that Jacob’s personality is informed by Rupert and Thoby, war poetry, and the classical hero. All this somehow combines to make him a young person like the ones we know and love, a young person just like us. Except he is not us. He is dead, and we are left behind, wondering what that means. Through her careful construction of Jacob’s character, her use of classical language to elevate his personality, and her female narrative voice, Woolf paints the figure of a soldier who is like the men we know, eliminates him, and challenges her readers to make sense of the consequences.
Chapter III

Septimus

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they're 'longing to go out again',—
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud
Of glorious war that shatter'd their pride ...
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

Siegfried Sassoon, Survivors, 1917

_Mrs. Dalloway_, published in May 1925, represents Virginia Woolf’s next iteration of the soldier character. The novel is based on one day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, a housewife in 1923 London. Despite being firmly entrenched in her role as a socialite and trapped in a marriage that seems utterly devoid of feeling, Clarissa nevertheless surprises us in her ability to read people and pick up on emotional undercurrents that those around her seem to miss. Woolf jumps in and out of Clarissa’s consciousness, as well as that of Peter, her former lover, and Septimus Smith, a veteran living nearby. This juxtaposition of thoughts, experiences, and viewpoints represents a refining of Woolf’s modernist style, and Septimus is an important step in the evolution and exploration of the soldier figure in her work.

Though Septimus has survived the war, he is shattered by trauma. We catch glimpses of the man he used to be through heartbreakingly sincere moments, his feelings of love and goodwill for humanity—but at most times, his memory seems wiped clean by war, his path drawn inexorably back toward the fate he somehow managed to elude earlier. His visions and
our journey inside his consciousness are characterized by two things familiar to us from *Jacob’s Room*: fragmentation (and here its inverse—pattern) and classical metaphor.

The Visions of Septimus

Woolf’s introduction of Septimus is very direct. This is uncharacteristic and especially noticeable in a novel written entirely about the details of one day, where several pages might be devoted to the formation of a single thought or opinion. She gets his essence across early in the novel, within two sentences:

Septimus Warren Smith, aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat, with hazel eyes that had that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too. The world has raised its whip; where will it descend? (*MD*, 20)

Septimus is like a frightened rabbit, intelligent and yet somehow pathetic. When he stops in this passage to look at a car that has backfired, he notes the tree pattern on the car’s windowshade, a “gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world quivered and threatened to burst into flames” (*MD*, 21). For him, the pattern multiplies in noise and significance until it comes to represent the unraveling of reality itself. The violence of his response to this everyday moment orients us to the depth of his mental issues. If the narrative in *Jacob’s Room* is fragmented, we may think of the narrative of Septimus’ thoughts as even more so, a smashed pane of glass—piecemeal, scattered, its shards seeming to reflect off one another until the reflection becomes a menacing pattern. In this way his thoughts seem broken and yet organized according to some otherworldly logic—a contradiction that continually threatens to put him over the edge.
As the novel progresses, Septimus swings between exuberance and terror. One moment he sees tiny red and yellow flowers, “like floating lamps he said,” and the next “an old woman’s head in the middle of a fern” (MD, 100). Fields of the dead appear out of nowhere; he hears voices behind the walls and the sound of strangers “making up lies as they passed in the street” (MD, 100). The deafening patterns make another appearance: the voices of birds “chime and chatter in a queer harmony, grow louder [...] the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, something tremendous about to happen” (MD, 104). He is overcome one moment by the “exquisite joy” of a leaf trembling, feeling surrounded by beauty everywhere—and then suddenly, his former comrade Evans, who was killed at war, calls out from behind a tree (MD, 105).

This is the first point at which Septimus’ visions exhibit another quality that characterized Jacob’s Room: classical metaphor. Evans sings a song about the dead in Thessaly, and thereafter the association of Greece with the dead persists throughout Septimus’ visions. The flowers that Rezia picks and puts in his room, half dead, “had been picked by [Evans] in the fields of Greece” (MD, 141). Septimus envisions himself plunging off cliffs and into flames as though he is in Dante’s Inferno. He jumps in fear at the sight of a half man, half dog; the sound of a street musician becomes a goatherd’s flute; rock transforms into classical columns, hemming him in. His body melts, flowers growing through it as the goatherd’s flute becomes an elegy—a dreamy classical scene twisting into a nightmare (MD, 102). When Rezia simply asks him the time, he plunges into a vision of a black figure moving across a battlefield, legions of men at his back (MD, 106). His visions seem to spring from the sight of natural phenomena, transforming them into alternately beautiful and terrible things. The lovely river winding through the park is suddenly a Styx marking the fluctuating border between Evans’ world and his own.
Septimus’ fixation on Greek and Italian mythology first grew out of an attempt to escape the confines of his own mind. When Evans was killed, he was surprised at the fact that he felt nothing; as the last shells fell around him, he “looked on with indifference” (MD, 130). After the war ends, terrified by his lack of capacity to feel, he pursues classics like *Inferno* and marries Rezia, an Italian, in an attempt to connect with some deep and true feeling of comfort, some sort of moral touchstone, again. However, the only result is that his hallucinations later take on a vivid classical quality. The Greek comes to represent the darker truths of humanity; human nature itself becomes a “repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils,” exemplified eventually by his doctor (MD, 139). Septimus begins to believe that he is the only one who sees the world for what it is, the only one with a sense of its meaning since the Greeks and Romans (MD, 102) and the only one able to save it.

The Pattern Behind

What has happened to Septimus? Some critics propose that he suffers from bipolar disorder. This would make sense; the creation of Septimus would have offered Woolf a way, in writing, to distill and deal with her own bipolar disorder. The symptoms match up in terms of Septimus’ swings between elation and terror, as well as his tendency toward paranoia and the deafening patterns that seem to consume his consciousness. Nancy Topping Bazin writes that Clarissa and Septimus were originally intended to be one character, but Woolf eventually split them, Septimus taking on the depressed aspect and Clarissa the manic one. Indeed, Septimus’ breakdown reflected Woolf’s own 1913 experiences: she also lacked a way to speak out about her trauma, and she attempted suicide after a visit to a doctor like the one Septimus had (Bazin, 141). Steven Monte corroborates and expands upon this theory, stating that after Woolf’s close
friend Kitty Maxsen died in a freak accident that was likely a suicide, she was spurred on to create Septimus. This turn of events actually increased her focus on the book and helped develop it into the novel it became (Monte, 605).

In another work by Bazin and Lauter, the authors propose that Septimus represents a different type of problem Virginia struggled with: he is a victim of the patriarchy. As noted in the Introduction, Virginia’s outlook on the world was severely impacted by negative experiences with trusted male figures in her life, and she defined war at its essence as male aggression gone out of control. Bazin and Lauter cast Septimus as a man struggling with homosexual feelings for his friend Evans; later, repressed by a rigid patriarchy and unable to express his grief for Evans’ loss in any sort of meaningful way, he is forced to hide his feelings, and this leads to madness. It is certainly true that Woolf herself dealt with homosexual feelings while married—namely for her lover Vita Sackville-West—and these made her unresponsive with her spouse and troubled by her own incapacity to feel, just as Septimus was (Bazin, 141). In the novel, Clarissa struggles with her buried feelings for childhood friend Sally Seton, who offered her the only freeing and enlightening experience with love that she has ever known. The theme is an important one for Woolf, and would have been tied inextricably to a story about passion, repression, and the effects of trauma and war.

But however relevant explanations of the patriarchy and repressed sexuality may be, they are not enough. They miss the point that Septimus is a casualty of war, and that war is entirely responsible for his destruction. His experience is consistent with what we now understand to be post-traumatic stress disorder, or “shell shock.”

Trauma can be described as consciousness exploded (Demeester, 652)—emotions and bodily sensations gone out of control. After a life-altering event such as war, the trauma victim
works to piece together a narrative—a way to fit the story into their own life and give it meaning—but in some cases is unable to do so. Freud notes that the sound of shells had such a traumatic experience that the soldier could not ever leave it behind after the war had ended.

When one is overly stimulated in this way, a protective barrier in the mind is broken, the “mechanism for apprehension” fails, and trauma results (Freud, Reddick, and Edmunson, 26, in Heske, 197); being “battered repeatedly with the possibility of death” (Das, 83, in Heske, 197) not only wears on the ears, but leaves permanent scars in the mind. The fragmented nature in which Woolf writes Septimus’ thoughts illustrates that his sense of time is mixed up and he is constantly reliving the past within the present. He is unable to reintegrate the event of war into his life, and so it must define his identity entirely (Demeester, 652).

The idea of patterning and fragmentation is intricately tied to one’s orientation to the object they look at, and thus their reality and the world. Heske characterizes the experience of war first and foremost as total disorientation, noting the following discussion of trench warfare from the memoir of Frederick Elias Noakes, a soldier from Kent:

Sixteen hours of blackness were broken by gun flashes, the gleam of star shells and punctuated by the scream of a shell or the sudden heart-stopping rattle of a machine-gun. The long hours crept by with leaden feet and sometimes it seemed as if time itself was dead. In the darkness we were prey to all sorts of unreasoning fancies. A tree stump, a hummock of earth, a coil of wire took on new and menacing forms and in the light of a star shell, could seem to be moving towards us (Noakes in Heske, 190).

Noakes’ confusion causes him to attribute lifelike characteristics and movement to inanimate objects. Gun flashes in an otherwise dark sky “fragment any visual continuity, therefore making it difficult for the human eye to accurately map the locations of stationary objects,” Heske writes, which translates into a theoretical problem of discerning reality from falsehood. The strobe-like
effect causes time and space to seem “discontinuous,” a scene that is rapid and yet slow motion (Heske, 190). This is much like Septimus’ visions, which deal in total contradictions and thus confound the sense of logic he tries so painstakingly to hang on to.

Soldiers writing from the front found it necessary to use a new type of language—that recalling a kaleidoscope, time slowed and broken, requiring metaphor to fill in the dark spaces of confusion and fear. Heske writes:

In trying to recount the disorienting physical experience of enduring sixteen hours in the muddy trench, to describe what ‘unreasoning fancies’ were while in the dark, Noakes infuses language with metaphor and creates fictional possibilities out of otherwise sharp senses. When put into words for a diary entry, time itself, “sixteen hours” was “broken” and “punctuated” as if it were a tangible object, able to be shattered, like a mirror. Furthermore, time, an unalterable dimension, was described as if it was able to be disturbed by both visual and oral medium. The “flashes” and “gleam” of guns and shells as well as the “scream” or “rattle” of shells and guns rupture the sequence of the ordinary passage of time (Heske, 190).

The soldier described here does not necessarily feel that he is being destroyed, but that he is being “derealized or demoralized, any sensory point of reference suddenly vanishing” (Heske, 192). This creates a vacuum, a sense of invisibility and confusion that can permeate all he held true before.

This is the world Septimus inhabits long after he leaves the front—not a world of bipolar disorder or repressed sexuality or moral opposition to the patriarchy (though at least the latter could certainly be argued to be part of the overall problem). He has seen an alternate reality, one where humans destroy one another and he has to face head on the problem of his own nonexistence. It is little wonder that he now finds himself out of joint with society’s version of reality. This is the reason for his jumpiness, separation from reality, and loss of emotion, and the feeling that he is being hunted and is already dead. It is the reason he speaks the language of “the
“poet and the madman” (Demeester, 654). Objects around him have taken on a new meaning that cannot be translated into the normal world, and thus he can only use metaphor to try to describe them. The sound of shells has fractured his consciousness, hence his fractured language and the incongruent images he sees; the classical metaphors are a desperate attempt to try to describe the terror he feels. Like Noakes, he is prey to the unreasonable fancies that come with darkness—the darkness of guilt, detachment from reality, and the terrible knowledge of silence and what human beings are capable of. Perhaps it is not the sound of shells, then, that so rocked returning soldiers—but the darkness they found in facing down their own lack of existence. Heske quotes soldier Wilfred Owen in a letter home to his mother from the Front: “I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air, I have perceived it, and in the darkness, felt” (Owen in Heske, 96).2

A Hostile Reception

Many soldiers who returned from the Great War, broken in body and mind, were met with a public that simply could not comprehend their experience. The symptoms of this trauma “ranged from uncontrollable diarrhoea to unrelenting anxiety. Soldiers who had bayoneted men in the face developed hysterical tics of their own facial muscles. Stomach cramps seized men who knifed their foes in the abdomen. Snipers lost their sight” (Bourke, web). The effects of shell shock were not normally immediate; rather, they would pop up seemingly randomly after one’s return home, just as Septimus’ did.

2 Taken from a letter to his mother from the Front, as referenced in Heske (96). Woolf would have been familiar with Owen, one of the most renowned war poets and a friend of Siegfried Sassoon. His poetry stood in stark contrast to Rupert Brooke’s in its darkness and its focus on the futility of war. Owen was killed in action on November 4, 1918, one week before the Armistice was signed.
Bourke quotes president of the British Psycho-Analytic Association, Ernest Jones, writing that war encouraged men to behave in ways “abhorrent to the civilised mind ... previously forbidden and hidden impulses, cruel, sadistic, murderous and so on, are stirred to greater activity, and the old intrapsychical conflicts which, according to Freud, are the essential cause of all neurotic disorders ... are now reinforced” (Bourke, web). When men return to the society they have lived within for years, repressing these conflicts, it causes immense pain and difficulty. Some men who experienced shell shock had not even been at the front, suggesting that the trauma could even be due to the collapse of their familiar moral and social code.

However, when the men returned home, they were met only with “silence: people were described as hanging their heads in 'inexplicable shame’” (Bourke, web). The public had little sympathy for the returning heroes, embarrassed and uncomfortable at the sight of the men falling apart. Perhaps this is the difficulty men like Septimus experienced: after facing down the silence of death and any god they had previously believed in at the front, they return only to the more deafening silence of those they had sacrificed for.

Indeed, they seem unaware of the sacrifice in Mrs. Dalloway: even Rezia, who loves Septimus, feels an overwhelming sense of shame and embarrassment at his condition. She wonders why he is incapable of controlling his rage. She grows angry at his inability to let go of Evans’ death; after all, she reasons, “Such things happen to every one. Every one has friends who were killed in the war. Every one gives up something when they marry [...] Septimus let himself think about horrible things, as she could too, if she tried” (MD, 98). Though Rezia’s intentions are good, she likens the experience of the trenches to her own move from Italy and her struggles with marriage, an experience that is not even remotely on the same plane of suffering. She feels that the worst part of his illness is that he cries, because it makes her uncomfortable.
when grown men who are supposedly brave cry (MD, 213). She lacks the tools to understand what he is going through. Rather than a help, she simply becomes a reminder of his inability to feel and the fracturing of his sense of self—another pang of guilt for him to endure.

Septimus’ doctor is no better; in fact, he makes the situation drastically worse. Doctor Holmes takes Septimus’ “refusal” to get better as a personal affront and chides him for not doing his duty to England or to his wife whenever he has an episode (MD, 138). Septimus’ second doctor, Bradshaw, checks off boxes about his symptoms on a tiny card and attributes his behavior to a “lack of proportion” in diet and schedule (MD, 151). He orders him to lie in bed for thirty days and drink plenty of milk, a treatment that seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with the problem. It is also dangerously isolating, which is exactly the opposite of what Septimus needs.

The doctors come to represent the terrible beast of humanity for Septimus; all he wants to do is share his knowledge, and they seem hell bent on silencing him. It is this fact, made worse by the rest of the seemingly unfeeling population, that ultimately breaks him. As time goes on, Septimus becomes fixated on those people who seem so insensitive, whose inability or refusal to understand him and each other signifies to him their desire to tear one another apart. There seems to be an invisible pane between him and the rest of the world—until he throws open the window.

The Land of the Dead

Although it comes far before the climax of Clarissa’s party, Septimus’ death is undoubtedly the most powerful moment in Mrs. Dalloway. As Doctor Holmes comes barreling up the stairs to force him into a convalescent home, the very picture of the red-faced beast of humanity, Septimus flings himself from the window. His last moments are despairing yet oddly
detached; he does not want to die, he thinks, for “Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did they want?” (MD, 226). Woolf offers him no other option; it seems clear that death is the only way out. His last words to humanity are “I’ll give it you!” (MD, 226)—and finally he gives his fellow men what he believes they want.

The reactions of those around him only serve to reinforce what he had believed. Doctor Bradshaw’s first reaction is not that of horror or sadness; rather, he instantly screams “The coward!” (MD, 281). Even after Septimus’ death, society’s initial reaction is to blame him personally for the mental illness he deals with as a result of the trauma he experienced in the war. What he sees as a sacrifice for others is met only with scorn by men whose reality is entirely constructed around a false sense of proportion and who never had to fight themselves.

The women’s reactions are much more human. Rezia’s reaction is confused and horrified, reminiscent of the jumble of metaphors Septimus himself sees. She sees in her mind’s eye a waving flag, a clock, the sea, and tries to put these into context. However, she seems instinctively to understand what he has done and that he is in some way deserving of honor. The elderly housekeeper standing by is the only one who seems to have any sense of humanity and common sense in the situation (as only Woolf’s older female characters do). She realizes that Rezia should be allowed to go to Septimus, that love should trump all, even in death, and that married people “ought to be together,” but stands by resignedly as the men instruct her to keep Rezia away (MD, 283). In trying to “protect” Rezia from the horror of seeing his crushed body, they also seem to be hiding the truth about the effects of war from those who understand its futility most of all—the women.

Clarissa, who has never met Septimus, also seems to grasp the larger meaning behind his death. As she steps away from her party, the men rigidly and awkwardly attempting to react to
the news in a way that seems socially appropriate, she imagines the experience of that death in vivid detail—the spikes through his body (reminiscent of his own visions of flowers growing through his body), the sudden darkness (*MD*, 280). She understands it instinctively as an attempt to communicate, to reach a center of being that we can never really reach while alive; suicide seems a leap into the terrible and pleasurable sensation of being truly free and responsible for one’s own fate. She does not put him at a distance, but sees his death as a protest and a sacrifice for her own ability to live a life of beauty and happiness, a reminder of the pain and horror human beings inflict upon one another. She is glad he has done it.

Indeed, it is only the women who can open their minds enough to see him as more than a mentally disabled man. They are the only ones who can—sometimes—get past their own points of view, think about Septimus as a whole and even noble being, and consider the question of what it means to die. It is a point that echoes throughout much of Woolf’s work: the men begin the war, fight in it, and die in it; then the women begin the work of sorting through the collective trauma and grief that it causes.

**Second Face of the Soldier: Pain and Silence**

Who and what, ultimately, do we lose when Septimus dies? He thinks that humanity wants to punish him for the sin of not feeling, and that he is giving the world what it wants. We can also infer that the sins of all the things he has done at war and the people he has seen killed lie beneath his consciousness unprocessed, and he feels he is somewhat atoning for those. He is an uncomfortable reminder of what has happened, and he interprets others’ discomfort with him as hatred and anger; his suicide is a bewildered sacrifice for the happiness of others.
However, when he dies he extinguishes the universal truth of the human experience he has found, symbolized by classical and nightmarish fractured imagery—the truth of the senseless violence and horror that human beings inflict on one another. Society loses all he could have contributed, the things he has seen, and all he has learned about love and life and why war should be prevented again.

The creation of Septimus would have been an imaginative leap for Woolf. While it was possible to inform Jacob’s more familiar character by channeling her brother Thoby and Rupert Brooke, his experience ended as he went to war; after that we lost him in total unfamiliarity, just as Woolf lost touch with the consciousnesses of Thoby and Rupert when they grew ill and died. However, Woolf did have other tools at her disposal that allowed her to piece together the experiences of a victim of trauma incredibly effectively. Despite having never been to war, she manages to build the story of Septimus out of her signature style of fragmented consciousness, shifts of perspective, paranoid episodes, and classical mythology. Through this combination, she can get across the darkness and the pain, despite writing very little detail on Septimus’ war experiences themselves.

The use of Greek metaphor and language offers a return to the truest emotion, an escape from the stifling, nuanced British society that threatens Septimus’ memory of war and the power of his raw experience. It is not only more powerful, but also more effective. Woolf may have realized that there was no way she could draw readers in with play-by-play accounts of Septimus’ memories of war, as she herself had never experienced it. But she is able to use classical metaphor to create a visual hellscape. Drawing on the dark imagery we have all read about and seen in our nightmares, she paints deadly battles and violent emotion and uncontrollable feeling and bodily destruction, elevating the pain of war to an epic and artistic
level and simultaneously giving us the tools to understand how it feels. In much the same way that she gives us access to Jacob through her use of universal classical metaphor, here she gives us access to the very experience of war itself. We cannot experience the trenches—but neither can Septimus, as his mind seems to have lost the ability to remember exactly what happened to him. We experience the true feeling of fractured consciousness. Woolf’s use of Greek allows readers to skip over the specifics and yet still see death and pain itself, to peer into a person’s private hell through the window of a universal metaphor.

Septimus does not die because of schizophrenia; he does not throw himself from a window because of his repressed homosexuality. He illustrates the damage of the First World War and the silence that surrounded it. His illness is an injury, not a condition. He tries desperately to restructure his story into something that makes sense within the society that marginalizes him, but is unable to do so due to the repetitious and disorienting experience of trauma. He has lost relationships with others as well as all sense of a higher cause, and the public has no interest in hearing that all the loss and tragedy of the war was for naught (Demeester, 650). He has no choice but to give up.

He is, in a sense, the next logical extension of Jacob. As Woolf writes in her diary, the novel is a “study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & insane side by side—something like that. Septimus Smith? Is that a good name?—&to be closer to the fact than Jacob (Diary, 2:207-8). He is an evolution of the earlier character, a later version—the version of Jacob we would have seen, perhaps, if we had been able to travel with him into battle and beyond. He is a representation not only of veterans suffering from trauma, but of the hell of war itself.

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3 Referenced in Monte, 605.
Woolf’s attempt to explain his experience is, in a larger way, an attempt to transcend the space between humans. Woolf lays the gulf between us wide open repeatedly throughout the novel: old women smile at Septimus and Rezia, thinking they are happy newlyweds; Peter chuckles at their “lovers’ spat” as he passes in the park, unaware that they are both struggling with uncontrollable misery; a housemaid reads Septimus’ notes on life and humanity and doubles over in derisive laughter. Unlike Jacob, who is simply extinguished as soon as he comes into contact with war, Septimus has ventured into the abyss and lived to speak about it; he offers the rest of us a chance to see what hell is really like. But we miss it. As Woolf writes, the crushing population of London has swallowed many men, even those with fantastic names like Septimus; no one suspects that here passes “the happiest man in the world, and the most miserable” (MD, 126). There seems to be an invisible pane between Septimus and the rest of the world, something unseen and undetected. He is a reminder that we are utterly unaware of one another’s hell.

Stephen Monte writes that Mrs. Dalloway is Woolf’s first mature book, a great improvement on Jacob’s Room. In Woolf’s catalogue of war characters, Septimus goes beyond Jacob, just as she wished, to represent the second face of the soldier: pain and suffering, the hell of other people. He is the lamb who sacrifices all and then is only further reviled because of society’s guilt and cowardice. He is “the sailor, the god, the poet—all swallowed up” (MD, 146-7). This soldier is Woolf’s reminder to a society struggling to get back to “normal” that for the soldier, there can never be a “normal” again—that all men who go to war are lost in one way or another, and that is our collective loss to bear.
Chapter IV

Percival

So his friends crowded round Pallas with many 
groans and tears, and carried him back, lying on his shield.

O the great grief and glory in returning to your father:  
that day first gave you to warfare, the same day took you from it,  
while nevertheless you left behind vast heaps of Rutulian dead!

Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book X

*The Waves*, published in 1931, was one Woolf’s last books, and her most experimental.  
In terms of style, it can be seen as the peak of her modernist, fragmented style of storytelling.  
The novel follows six children—Bernard, Susan, Jinny, Neville, Rhoda, and Louis—throughout  
their adolescence and adulthood.

Taken together, these characters seem to make up different facets of the personality of  
Woolf or people she knows; on a larger level, as Klitgard puts it, they compose together a gestalt  
about a central and universal consciousness (Klitgard, web). Louis is an outsider, Bernard a  
storyteller, Jinny is pretty and social. Susan turns to the natural world and motherhood as she  
grows older to find her self worth. Rhoda is fragile and easily disturbed, sensitive to time, nature,  
and the criticisms of others. Neville is attracted to other men, struggling ferociously to hide his  
feelings and fit into the world around him but also capable of seeing the beauty and art in life in  
ways that the others seem unable to. There are prevalent theories about who in Woolf’s life  
inspired these characters: Louis may be T.S. Eliot, Susan may be Virginia’s sister, Vanessa Bell.
Rhoda, with her fixation on Greek metaphor and the alternating heavens and hells that swirl around her, seems to stand in for Virginia herself, or at least the darker and more unstable part of her personality.

Woolf’s narrative shifts continually between these characters, allowing us to become a part of each one momentarily before moving on and seeing the same events through someone else’s eyes. Nancy Topping Bazin writes that Woolf and Leonard may have actually rejected medication to help her finish The Waves, as she thought a mental breakdown might aid in the creative process (140). The fragmentation here, but unlike in the cases of Jacob’s Room or Mrs. Dalloway, does not necessarily serve to make us realize our alienation from one another or to illustrate the ravings of a broken mind. Here, the narrative is actually shaped and enriched by the corroborating or conflicting points of view, creating a bigger picture of the whole, showing reality as it is—porous and shifting.

There is also a seventh character in The Waves who will seem familiar to those looking for the soldier figure in Woolf’s work. However, Percival is even less known to the reader than Jacob or Septimus. He exists solely through the perceptions of those around him. Unlike in the case of either of the former soldier characters, we are never treated to a glimpse of his thoughts; we do not even have the resource of his words to make sense of him as a character. He is the center around which much of action and meaning in The Waves orbits, and yet he is little known to us—to the point that he does not utter a single syllable throughout the course of the novel.

The Golden Boy

Percival is first introduced by Neville as a child “lying heavy” in the long grass, “chewing a stalk between his teeth” while Bernard tells a story to the group (TW, 24). As the
story becomes extravagant, Percival’s boredom becomes apparent: “he is always the first to
detect insincerity; and is brutal in the extreme” (TW, 24). His rejection embarrasses Bernard to
the verge of tears, and Louis, while jealous of Percival’s ability to openly decry “dabblers in
imagery” like Bernard, feels the system of order in his life has been shattered by his taunts. He
longs again for the protection of the ring of children, which seemed to offer “some other order,
and better” than the natural world before it was broken by Percival. He vows to try to fix the
situation “in words, to forge in a ring of steel, though Percival destroys it, as he blunders off,
crushing the grasses, with the small fry trotting subservient after him. Yet it is Percival I need;
for it is Percival who inspires poetry” (TW, 25).

In just this first scene, Percival makes the children’s system of rules seem silly and
useless, then goes crashing out of the scene and into the natural world that suits him better. He is
a force of destruction, the epitome of childish selfishness, bullying, and thoughtlessness. And yet
he’s also an image of beauty and innocence. The scene is somewhat reminiscent of the
descriptions of Woolf’s own days spent lounging in the grass at Rupert Brooke’s estate, talking
about life, piecing the world together, feeling the sunshine and watching the light change.

For Louis, Percival’s contempt of the idea of conforming to a mode of behavior just
because it is socially correct provides a glimpse into a wilder world, a world in which rules are
not followed. It is uncontrollable as the change of seasons and the march of time, a destructive
force that plows on with complete disregard for the social structures and people within it. It is
panic-inducing, and potentially destructive, and yet it is beautiful, for the natural, the wild, and
the uncontrollable have a sort of purity that inspires poetry.
It is worth returning to Woolf’s quote in *On Not Knowing Greek*:

In six pages of Proust we can find more complicated and varied emotions than in the whole of the Electra. But in the Electra or in the Antigone we are impressed by something different, by something perhaps more impressive — by heroism itself, by fidelity itself. In spite of the labour and the difficulty it is this that draws us back and back to the Greeks; the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there. Violent emotions are needed to rouse him into action, but when thus stirred by death, by betrayal, by some other primitive calamity, Antigone and Ajax and Electra behave in the way in which we should behave thus struck down; the way in which everybody has always behaved; and thus we understand them more easily and more directly than we understand the characters in the Canterbury Tales (CR, web).

Percival is this “stable, the permanent, the original human being.” By casting aside society, he seems to rise above it. He alone seems to possess the key to the “ring of steel” that unites the children and governs their lives, and it is only with his permission that they can continue living their lives with any comfort or meaning. He rises to the level of a god even as a child.

As we watch Percival grow through the eyes of the other children, another picture begins to emerge: Percival as a lover. Neville brims over with a confused lust for him, struggling under the weight of his own athletic inferiority yet conflicted by his clear mental superiority: “He despises me for being too weak to play (yet he is always kind to my weakness) ... when I read Shakespeare or Catullus, lying in the long grass, he understands more than Louis ... Yet I could not live with him and suffer his stupidity” (*TW*, 30). As in *Jacob’s Room*, we feel the inexplicability and inconsistency of blossoming sexual love through Neville’s eyes. We also feel its chaotic natural power: “Not a thread, not a sheet of paper lies between him and the sun, between him and the rain, between him and the moon as he lies naked, tumbled, hot, on his bed” (*TW*, 30). Neville thinks Percival superior to others like Bernard, who has the capability to be
strong and yet frets in indecision over the smallest fly caught in a spider’s web (*TW*, 31), and superior to himself, who “cannot feel the flight of the ball through my body and think only of the ball. I shall be a clinger to the outsides of words all my life” (*TW*, 30). Percival, “legs apart, with his hands ready ... will think of one thing only, that they should win” (*TW*, 31). He is able to direct his entire body, mind and soul toward one goal.

Even in this first interaction, we see why Woolf named her character after a knight of the round table. The name Percival was likely derived originally either from the Welsh hero *Peredur*, whose name meant “hard spears,” or from the French *percer val*, “to pierce the valley” (Campbell, web). He is, even as a boy, an emblem of valiant masculinity, charging forward, disregarding the more “feminine” social constructions and escaping all control. He is unaffected by confrontation, drawn to action and frustrated with anything he feels is false or unnatural. We see all this in the first scene, though Woolf has not provided us with even a glimpse of Percival’s thoughts. His masculine capabilities enable him to valiantly accomplish the things he sets out to do at any cost. He becomes the very picture of virility, an emblem of masculinity and all the thoughtlessness, power, and beauty that comes along with it.

The Hero

When Percival leaves to take a colonial post in India, the pieces of others’ memories combine to make him larger than life. Bernard muses, “Now, when he is about to leave us, to go to India, all these trifles come together. He is a hero” (*TW*, 77). He has become a god of masculinity for Neville, the “statue of our pious founder with the doves about his head” (*TW*, 38). He knows that Percival will forget him, leaving “my letters lying about among guns and
dogs unanswered ... But it is for that I love him ...” (TW, 38). He seems reduced, thoughtless, nothing but a vessel of the empire here.

The other characters’ perceptions of him are completely different, however, reminding the reader of Jacob’s Room’s impossibility of putting together an accurate picture of another without knowing his thoughts or emotions. Louis still admires him, especially in his ability to “mak[e] us aware that these attempts to say ‘I am this,’ ‘I am that,’ which we make, coming together, like separated parts of one body and soul, are false” (TW, 86). Jinny detests his inability to conform socially; Rhoda sees him as a solitary thinker, sparking in her consciousness dreams of far-off lands beyond the reaches of men. Bernard envisions him as a brutal god of empire, “applying the standards of the West ... using the violent language that is natural to him” to organize and improve the chaos of India (TW, 85). Susan barely notices him at all, uncomfortable as she is in a city restaurant. His world of men is completely foreign to her.

However, in looking at Percival, all feel the presence again of the “steel-blue circle underneath” (TW, 86), linking them together. However differently they perceive him, he functions as a roaring reminder of chaos, the center around which the circle whirls, the most meaningful thing and the only thing in the novel worthy of worship. He is an embodiment of youth and beauty itself, and a reflection on their own feelings toward them. He is the rallying point, the reason they all come together for dinner. As he leaves the table before his deployment, although he goes only to a colonial post and not actually into battle, he comes to symbolize the ideal of the soldier of empire.

With that power comes great conflict and confusion. As Woolf wrote on the subject of a brave friend in her diary, “I never know whether to be angry that such heroism was needed, or glad that such heroism was shown” (The Pargiters, p. xxvi, in Hulcoop, 471). His qualifications,
aside from making him the center of the others’ universe, also mean he is destined for great responsibility, made to be a soldier. It leads the others to question that power’s relationship to the bearer and themselves. It leads the reader to question whether someone who so personifies youth can ever live to old age.

The Lost

On the road in India, Percival’s “horse stumbled; he was thrown. The flashing trees and white rails went up in a shower. There was a surge; a drumming in his ears. Then the blow; the world crashed; he breathed heavily. He died where he fell” (TW, 96). Through the imagination of Neville, we can attempt to step into Percival’s shoes to live the last moment of his life and experience his death, just as we tried to do through Clarissa in Mrs. Dalloway. But difficult as it was to know him in life, it becomes infinitely more so to understand his collision with death. The simple fact remains that there is no way for the living to imagine what it is to die.

Graham, in his 1983 article on The Waves, argues that first-person narration of the death of self is impossible in literature because it necessitates the death of language. The experience of death itself goes beyond language, and even if there was any sort of wording capable of capturing the experience, no one on earth has ever lived it. As Hulcoop writes on Bernard’s attempts to explain it: “Logically, Bernard can do nothing once such a death has occurred; it cannot, therefore, be included as a present event in any of the [book’s] episodes ... or, consequently, be recovered from the past by Bernard in his summing up; it cannot, in fact, be narrated” (Hulcoop, 475). While we do not skip right over it, as in Jacob’s Room—the unspeakable and unexplainable—we can only attempt to experience it through others’ eyes. However, we know even as we read that what we are seeing is a mirage, a cold and untrue copy of the original moment.
The other characters immediately translate his death into a larger and more universal idea of death. Louis muses that perhaps “he died in Egypt; he died in Greece; all deaths are one death” (TW, 109). The truly impersonal, indiscriminate death, which claims all individuals, comes across; the event seems to resonate with a larger cultural fatality (Oxner, 220). Neville’s view of the world shifts; it suddenly seems a “[grinning] subterfuge...sneering behind our backs. That boy almost lost his footing as he leapt on the bus. Percival fell; was killed; is buried; and I watch people passing; holding tight to the rails of omnibuses; determined to save their lives” (TW, 97). His world has suddenly become one in which the act of riding a horse is an opportunity for death—in which everything, suddenly, has become an opportunity for death. It seems to grin at Neville as it snuffs out the most important light in his life seemingly at random, kicking his golden god into the dust and reminding him that no one, not even himself, is exempt.

Bernard cannot untangle his pain from his joy as Percival dies and his son is born. He is struck by his inability to disentangle his feelings: “‘Such is the incomprehensible combination ... such is the complexity of things, that as I descend the staircase I do not know which is sorrow, which joy. My son is born; Percival is dead’” (TW, 85). He longs only to return to normal, confounded by the simultaneous occurrence of the beginning and end of the cycle. This idea of losing one’s ability to feel repeats itself again, a common theme from Woolf’s life; however, here it seems it is not a lack of feeling that is the problem, but an overdose of it. It echoes the shattering of the moral code of the generation after the war, a complete overwhelming of feeling and lack of knowledge about which way to go, an emotional shutdown in response to the trauma of war. In a way, it is a distillation of the acute suffering that Septimus experienced, or its mirror image.
Rhoda’s collision with the idea of death shatters her; she feels “the rush of the great grindstone within an inch of my head” (TW, 101). Her feelings echo those of Woolf and the “two great grindstones ... and myself between them” that she was so terrified and mesmerized by immediately after Thoby’s death (Bazin, Postmortem, 144). As with Neville, and with Woolf years before, Rhoda’s reality suddenly seems unpredictable. And as with Septimus, or as with Woolf in her manic states, it begins to take on vicious qualities: “Reckless and random the cars race and roar and hunt us to death like bloodhounds. I am alone in a hostile world. The human face is hideous” (TW, 101). She likens her life to a bunch of violets, gone black, and offers them up as a sacrifice to Percival. She is struck with terror and disgust at people who greet her in the street, unsure of how to fit in (Montashery, 805). She recoils, like Septimus, and ultimately steps off a cliff.

It is interesting that although Rhoda’s story most closely parallels Woolf’s, she is not the only character who represents her. By the time she wrote The Waves, Woolf seems to have moved beyond the casting of only women into those who understand the futility and agony of war. In her breaking up of one universal soul into many different characters, she allows the male characters to share the same level of consciousness about death. No longer are the men reminiscent only of some awful patriarchy, standing off against the women; here they are just as easy to identify with as the women. And sometimes easier; indeed, Susan—the very symbol of motherhood—seems the least concerned by Percival’s death, connected as she is with the more natural world and an innate understanding of the cyclical and impersonal nature of life.

Man or woman, Percival has become a part of every character in the novel, and they have built their feelings and ideas around him. His death shatters their experience of normal life, just as his embrace of nature and chaos shattered their social system as children. Unable to conceive
of a world in which their laws are broken and people die at random, most of the other characters feel guilt and burden and cannot imagine how to go on from here. Rhoda sees her world vanishing out “over a sky dark like polished whalebone,” clouds looming ahead (TW, 92).

Neville puts it in the most heartbreaking and articulate terms:

> Now the agony begins, now the horror has seized me with its fangs ... Now the cab comes, now Percival goes. What can we do to keep him? How bridge the distance between us? How fan the fire so that it blazes for ever? How to signal to all time to come that we, who stand in the street, in the lamplight, loved Percival? Now Percival is gone (TW, 92).

**Whence Percival?**

What does the loss of Percival really signify—and what did he represent in the first place? Like Jacob, he is built of fragments—but in a different way. We never get to see the different facets of him as brother, scholar, ordinary person; we see him as a beautiful child, an object of love, and a Pallas-like hero. Like Rupert Brooke, after his death, he seems more beautiful and perfect than ever, and yet also part of the problem, a cog in the larger machinery of empire. Like Septimus, we get a window into his death, but it is nothing like the death of Septimus, chosen and meaningful and heroic in its own way. His death is futile, unnecessary, totally unbefitting of a hero. It feels absurd.

It’s been written that Percival is meant as an open stand-in for Thoby. He’s a “man’s man,” athletic and successful, focused on the protection of others, just as Thoby was in his youth. Through Woolf’s very classical descriptions of Percival, we can see a link to the stories of Greek heroes that her brother told her on the stairs where they sat as children. In his essay “Characterizing Absence,” Alex Oxner writes that Jacob was a “vessel filled with Thoby’s spirit,” an idea constructed by Woolf with all the contextualizing information removed so that
she could imbue it with the traits of her brother and tell a story with it (215). I would argue that Percival is another type of vessel Woolf constructed as she came to terms with her brother’s death over the years. Using the Greek tales Thoby had taught her, and the beauty she had seen in Brooke, she constructs a golden hero imbued with the characteristics of both men. She does not allow us to really know him, because he is simply an idea; this erasure of personality makes him universal, and almost transforms him into a god, but falls just a bit short, deepening our sadness because we still feel a sense of loss that we are unable to know him (Oxner, 218). Imbued with all the characteristics of two men who Woolf knew only in youth, who never had the chance to grow old, he comes to symbolize youth itself. Perhaps, then, it is necessary that he must die before the end of the novel.

Hulcoop writes on Woolf’s study of the heroic theme, citing passages from earlier scholarship and Woolf’s diaries themselves. He argues that the theme of the hero dominates The Waves, and he gleans from her diary that Thoby was at its root:

“Dead ‘ere his prime,” Woolf’s brother was the barely hidden subject of her “elegy for past youth and past summers” in Jacob’s Room (p. 168) and a major source of inspiration for The Waves: “I must record ... the end of The Waves ... I have been sitting here these 15 minutes ... thinking of Thoby & if I could write Julian Thoby Stephen 1881-1906 on the first page” (Diary, 410, in Hulcoop, 470).

It was Thoby who encouraged Woolf’s study of the Elizabethans, in particular Shakespeare and Sir Walter Raleigh, who took the natural imagery of the sea and heroic, solitary journeys and used them to confront the mystery of time and our uncertainty about its passing (Hulcoop, 471). And it was Thoby whose death, bizarre and unexpected, futile and incomprehensible, informed Woolf’s complicated understanding of death and the threatening, descending grindstones of life. He is the hero who is lost from her life, just as Percival is wiped from the pages of The Waves in one fell swoop.
Woolf uses these traces of Thoby and Rupert, Greek metaphor, and a fragmented style to build our idea of Percival as the boy hero and then the perfect soldier. This puts a sort of halo around him, makes him seem disconnected from reality and vaguely positive, just like our memories of the dead. It sets him up perfectly to become what he is later in the novel, what Rupert and Thoby ultimately became—a memory that those who knew him struggled to recall, and thus a larger question about why they ever came into our life at all if we were only going to lose them. He becomes representative of the larger fatality of death; like Pallas in the Aeneid, a reminder that one’s beauty and skill in life do nothing to protect them from its clutches, especially in the larger casualty of war. Like Jacob, he also comes to stand for our collective struggle to make sense of who the dead were through our own biased eyes after they die.

In his eternal capturing of youth, he also symbolizes a resistance—one that may be futile, but nevertheless glorious. On the last page of the novel Bernard is contemplating his own death, defensive and afraid. He cries out, “It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O death!” *(TW, 297).*

Percival makes the jump from man to Pallas-like hero here. He is the conqueror of death, the one who bravely battled the inevitable. The futility of his death seems to disappear somehow as the other characters look back on him; we are left only with memories of glory. Of course, these memories are false as well; this seems to be the very thing Woolf warned about in *Jacob’s Room,* cautioned about when she urged readers not to mourn conventionally, not to accept the propaganda. Unlike Jacob, who was almost real, or Septimus, stuck forever in an Inferno-esque...
hell, he moves beyond into some sort of glorious afterlife. As in the obituary of Rupert, he comes to represent courage itself (Hulcoop, 484); the transition to hero is complete.
Chapter V

Conclusion

I felt that I had made a discovery. I felt that I had put away in my mind something that I should go back [to], to turn over and explore. It strikes me now that this was a profound difference. It was the difference in the first place between despair and satisfaction. This difference I think arose from the fact that I was quite unable to deal with the pain of discovering that people hurt each other, that a man I had seen had killed himself. The sense of horror held me powerless. But in the case of the flower I found a reason; and was thus able to deal with the sensation. I was not powerless. I was conscious—if only at a distance—that I should in time explain it.

Virginia Woolf, “Moments of Being”

Throughout the course of her novels, Woolf’s take on war—in terms of both what it is and what it means about humanity—doesn’t necessarily change. She condemns the suffering and the loss of youth, and she blames a patriarchy gone out of control. All the passing years between the war and the publication of her final novel, Between the Acts, don’t do anything to change that. However, her ability to describe them changes. Her style becomes more refined and skilled. Between Jacob’s Room and Mrs. Dalloway some sort of transition has taken place. Though Jacob’s Room is intended to be fragmented, some critics have noted that its narration and transitions verge on the clumsy; by the time she gets to The Waves, she is able to glide between six different points of view without repetition or jarring transitions whatsoever. Her style, as she ages, grows more graceful at the same time it grows more experimental.

And yet she uses many of the same tools throughout the arc of her career. The most noticeable one is the fragmented style with which she approaches her characters. It is clear, from
her other novels, that Woolf knows how to immerse us inside the consciousness of character. Those such as Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* or Bernard in *The Waves* draw us in so far that the line between their consciousness and our own blurs. However, in the case of some characters—most notably, the three soldiers discussed here, she chooses not to do so. We get to know all three by piecing together random thoughts, forgotten memories, and fragments of the consciousnesses of those around them. She lets us in to see how they are for short, illuminating bursts, then makes it clear once again that we know nothing about them.

This modernist style grew out of the ashes of the First World War, and it is little wonder that it did. Modernism is considered the literature of trauma, although psychologists wouldn’t understand the conditions behind it for another fifty years (Demeester, 648). It is fractured and metaphorical—a literary type so in touch with the human response, one might think, could only emerge from a culture dealing with an extremely painful event, one that had not yet learned how to heal. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, writes Karen Demeester, Septimus had no option to heal by bearing witness and relating what he had seen. Perhaps this is why he had no choice but to leap from the window; from what Woolf could see, there was no way to reconcile what he had lived before with the reality of returning to society. He is the one character who manages to cross back and forth between worlds, and when we lose him, we experience a double loss—both the trauma of his pain and our inability to learn from it. As Demeester writes:

> Trauma inevitably damages the victim’s faith in the assumptions he has held in the past about himself and the world and leaves him struggling to find new, more reliable ideologies to give order and meaning to his post-traumatic life. Like trauma survivors, the modernist writers suffered a similar loss of faith in the ideologies of the past and particularly in the literary forms that emerged from those ideologies (Demeester, 650).
The form and content of modernism, with its imagery, fragmentation, and questioning of the norms of art and society, may have been the perfect vehicle with which to write about trauma, and was a precursor to the psychological studies that eventually discovered what trauma actually was.

In its fragmentation, however, modernism never offers a path to healing. As Demeester writes, it illustrates the post-traumatic condition, but does not offer a cultural or personal explanation for that suffering; this would be a task for later generations of authors to undertake. As Eliot would write, modernists focused at first only on the death of the old world, and not the start of the new; only in the 1930s would authors like Sassoon and Forster try to make sense of the war beyond something broken, to orient themselves within it and write on preventing it from ever happening again; only in the latter half of the century would psychological treatments catch up (Demeester, 655). It is a literature of pain, of unfinished business, an incomplete picture of an idea that no one can truly know in and out.

Woolf seems to understand modernism’s limitations, to work around and through them, bending and molding them to a breathtaking level of art and beauty—just as she understood the limitations of her own consciousness. Through the construction of a soldier prototype based on those she knew, supplemented by a style that is many-faceted and yet still incomplete, she manages to paint an exquisite picture of the pain, scope, and consequence of war and death, while acknowledging implicitly that she has never herself experienced it. It mirrors her fascination with the real and the false, with seeking to pull off what she refers to in Moments of Being as the “cotton wool” covering reality and see the true reality that lay beyond (MOB, web).
Another tool Woolf employs throughout the arc of her career is that of classical imagery. In his humorous essay on learning Greek in the modern age, Gorry writes that “For Woolf, understanding Greek meant getting beyond the language” (156). Her use of Greek mirrors her use of the fragmented modernist style and supplements it. Woolf was concerned with the limitations of language and how these represented the limitations of consciousness and experience. Greek and classical language allowed for a more universal experience, something that tapped into our sense of the human experience and alluded to something we are familiar with at the bottom of our souls on a basic level. For Jacob, the quest in Greece conjures up thoughts of our own seeking of knowledge, the excitement of the world beyond; his death makes us think about the significance of the things we reach for in our own lives. In Mrs. Dalloway, the Greek serves as a way to describe, in symbolic terms, a hell that is beyond literal description. In Percival’s case, it elevates him to the status of a hero and a lover, tearing us apart when he dies because he represents some of the ideals we have held in highest regard in others. As Heske writes, Greek offered for her a true world: “The world around her is false, and the one that might be real—that has real living and dying and courage and filth—she knows nothing about. She’s been kept from action, sidelined her whole life, marginalized by her father and brothers and husband and now the war” (Heske, 110). Greek was the most effective tool she had.

Who Were They?

The three soldier figures represent the different faces of the ultimate losses of war. Jacob is a lover, scholar, friend and son—just like us, yet slightly different, his feelings just out of our
grasp. As Woolf notes, even knowing the things he says does not necessarily give us an insight into who he is:

But though all this may very well be true—so Jacob thought and spoke ... there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself. Moreover, part of this is not Jacob but ... the room; the market carts; the hour; the very moment of history ... Even the exact words get the wrong accent on them ... endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all ... what remains is mostly a matter of guesswork (JR, 79-80).

This space between, however, allows us to step in his shoes. It makes him specific enough to feel real, but universal enough so that we can magnify him to represent youth and the generation that was killed. Jacob is the boy we know, the boy who is just like us.

Septimus, in the next iteration of the soldier, takes us one step closer to the war experience itself. He is immersed in it, has become it; his pain and suffering blots out the sun and takes over the whole life he used to have. She allows us inside his head, but what we find is a broken consciousness, unreliable, plagued with visions and paranoia as well as great beauty and intuition. He is a walking dead man. When he finally takes his own life, it seems a sad yet inevitable end—finally, freedom from the shackles of suffering.

Percival represents another picture of the soldier, that of glory and heroism, the propaganda man’s dream. We actually get to watch his entire life arc throughout the novel—from normal boy to celebrated soldier to dead man. He has the quality of a larger-than-life memory even while still alive. This leads to a feeling of distrust of the narrative by the end; it feels as though all these retellings were actually distorted through the rosy glass of memory. Woolf takes us past the initial death here to show us what comes beyond. He is worshipped for his strength and beauty, yet hated for his role in the war and his part in causing his own death and the pain of the others. Like Rupert Brooke, the chaos of his death inspires worship,
memorial, derision, and confusion. He is the clash between the haze of memory, the comfort of our own consciousness, and the coldness of reality.

Woolf brings us close to, and distances us from, all three characters to make them real and representative at once. By giving us others’ perceptions of them during specific moments, she makes us care about them and relate to them. By distancing us from them, she creates more generalized characters that reflect the youth and the chaotic possibility of an entire generation. They become representations of our sons, brothers, lovers, scholars and seekers, of the things and people we know, pieces of ourselves. And yet they also harbor the insanity of immense pain and the universal virtues of heroism and valor—the most real and somehow most unreal things all at once. They are a constant reminder that truly knowing another is often beyond our grasp, and when they go to war, they become utterly unfamiliar to us.

In the closing pages of *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf writes:

> The actions of war, of city and of empire] are the strokes which oar the world forward, they say...It is thus that we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it; that it goes hurtling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons. This, they say, is what we live by—this unseizable force (*JR*, 176).

When all three men become part of this larger force of war, the narrative grows dim. We collide with the unseizable power of violence and anonymity, of political turmoil and military backlash. Jacob, Septimus, and Percival become part of something we have not experienced and cannot explain. We are unable to read further; everything stops. Even in Septimus’ case, whose life continues for some time after he goes into battle, the entire experience of war is wiped out, blackened, replaced with vague metaphor. Even his visions don’t tell us anything about what he actually saw; they only hint at a sort of hell that is ultimately beyond words.
It is interesting to contrast Woolf’s approach to that of other writers who had experienced war. Representing a darker side of the coin than Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen became one of the most famous war poets as the fighting drew to a close. Owen was killed in action on November 5, 1918, his parents receiving the news of his death on the day the Armistice was signed. He penned poetry that actually depicted the horrors of war—for example, one of his most famous verses on a comrade choking on poison gas in “Dulce et Decorum Est”:

> If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
> Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
> His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;  
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
> The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
> Pro patria mori.

Owen’s poetry rails against blind patriotism and senseless violence, as Woolf’s novels do, but he is able to lend an entirely different quality of horror and bitterness to the writing, to really depict the violent hell that led to the trauma of men like Septimus. In light of his death, it gives his voice a rage and bitterness that seems to come from beyond the grave, a sort of *J’Accuse* edge that takes direct aim at the patriarchy and the evils of “the old Lie.” Perhaps because she had not experienced it—or more likely, because she felt words were inadequate to describe it—Woolf did not write in the details in this way, though her access to Owen and other firsthand accounts would have certainly been there. She seems to be making a larger statement about war, equating it to death, leaving a blank vaccum for us to consider in place of details.

What does this evolution of the soldier, from familiar friend to trauma victim to hero, represent? I see the growth and evolution of this prototype as a continuous strand throughout
Woolf’s work. She begins, in Jacob’s Room, by trying simply to get across the enormity of war itself, of the facts—portraying a single consciousness and all that feeds into it, then asking us to magnify it times millions to get an accurate picture of the staggering death toll of war. She leaves death itself a void, something completely unwriteable, though it is the most universal experience of all. She suggests that our ability to know what death is—and perhaps, then, what life is—is completely nonexistent. We are not even equipped with the tools to talk about it, let alone understand what it is.

As her writing style evolves and peaks with Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf creates more pathways into consciousness itself. She dives headfirst into the psyche of a soldier who had lived through war and come out alive. She never addresses the experience of war itself, perhaps a testament to its utter unknowability for those who have not lived through it, but impresses upon us the utter erasure of the normal consciousness and soul that it brings. She also suggests that there is no possible way to move beyond war; it represents the total death of life before, the event horizon of the twentieth century.

By The Waves, Woolf branches even further into the questions of life and war. She is able to successfully employ six different points of view, using a central thread of narrative and themes to connect them and make the story flow fluidly. Here, she puts forth the soldier as a hero—like the mass social narration we experience here, Percival is a sort of societal representation of a fallen soldier. When he dies, it is somehow not surprising to us, because he’s been described throughout the novel as though he were only a pleasant memory anyway—beautiful, bathed in sunlight, tangled beneath the sheets, riding off proudly on his horse. His death means both futility and courage and heroism, paradoxically, as Brooke’s did for English society.

She would not have been able to create such vivid characters if not informed by Thoby as
well as Rupert. Hulcoop writes:

More significant than his role as mentor is Thoby Stephen's acting ... as prototype for one of the most powerful symbols in Woolf's work: the magnanimous hero on horseback who takes definitive form in Night and Day (1916-18), and then gallops through all the novels from Jacob's Room to Between the Acts, as well as through essays, stories, letters, and diaries (Hulcoop, 471).

It only makes sense that someone who had so completely formed Woolf’s vision of life, heroism, and reality itself would come to shape her views on war. It also makes sense that someone who lived on forever in her mind as a young man, the very embodiment of youth, would be used as a prototype for the soldier, for the generation of young men whose lives were taken in their prime.

All of these characters seem to make up the figure of the soldier—and yet, for all her construction around war, Woolf never fully immerses us within war. We skip right over it; in all three novels, a blank space yawns in the middle, uninformed by any type of narrative. How is it that all three stories are built around war, and yet none of them actually contain any writing about what happens at war? And on a larger scale, how is it that an author who writes continually around, underneath, over, and beyond death either skips over the moments of death or makes it very clear that other characters’ ways of imagining them are not accurate?

Woolf sought to uncover the mystery of death, which reared its head in her life through the deaths of those she loved and through the larger-scale fatalities of war. The subject preoccupied her—“the impersonal, indiscriminate nature of death, which eventually claims all individuals” (Oxner, 220)—and coming to terms with its reality, with the suddenness and implications of simply not existing anymore, fills her writing. Death is the experience we can never understand, and Woolf knew it; instead, she pieced together fragments of stories, various consciousnesses and forms of thinking, and metaphor to help us understand in many different
ways the idea of death and how a whole world could have elected to send so many of its men to
die unnecessarily.

One Man, a Million Men

Thirty percent of men aged 20-24 in 1911 were dead by 1918 (Heske, 110). How is it
possible to conceive of what that means? If we ever want to understand something so large and
horrific as the war, understanding a single soldier is the only way to begin. If Jacob is our brother
and friend, Septimus is the face of death and the shattering effects of trauma, and Percival is the
afterlife, the golden god, the idealized hero, we must combine all three ideas to understand all the
different things a soldier is and can be. It’s important to look at him as a compilation of all of
these people, as a place at which to begin our consideration of what war means. Woolf builds
these characters by fracturing the narrative, allowing us to see it from all sides, to take apart our
preconceived notions, to climb inside the cracks between ideas and challenge them from within.
She does it by using classical metaphor; essentially the opposite of breaking down the common
notions about war, this elevates and dramatizes them. The juxtaposition—golden glory and
anonymous, futile death—allows us to come more to grips with the complicated idea of just who
and what a single soldier represents.

After all, it’s never possible to completely and summarily understand something as
complicated as a person—or as war and death. But Woolf’s literature elevates our attempts at
understanding to the level of art. The arc of her literature explores the different ways of dealing
with war. It refuses to allow us to fall into easy patterns of attending memorial ceremonies; does
not allow us solace in church; disproves the miracles of technology and challenges our ideas of
heroism. She forces us to think, to try to understand, to figure it out.
Is she particularly capable of doing this as a woman writer? Perhaps. Her writing seems to imply that women have a better grasp of war’s tragedy—that being removed from the blinding rages of male ego, they are able to see more clearly. And perhaps her knowledge of Rupert and Thoby, her sensitivity to the patterns in her own life, her tendency to fracture and question and break, also contributed to her abilities. Perhaps her sensitivity to the beauty of heroism and her simultaneous knowledge that patriotism and hero worship is the enemy of peace also contributed—perhaps all these things came together to make her the sensitive, understanding, questioning, and angry challenger of war, the challenger of death and the demise of youth, that she was. This, for me, what characterizes her writing above all else.

Thankfully for all of us, there will always be artists and thinkers who try to seize the unseizable force, who try to make sense of life and death and share their knowledge in literature. Unfortunately, those who fly to close to the sun must often pay a price. The world’s second descent into madness, the approach of the Second World War, drove Virginia over the edge. On March 28, 1941, she took out a pen and began a note: “Dearest, I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can’t go through another of those terrible times.” She wrote of her love for Leonard, finishing it, “I don’t think two people could have been happier than we have been” (Openculture, web). She folded up the note, filled her overcoat pockets with stones, and drowned herself in the River Souse.

A loss as it was, she left us with an important legacy—an elegy for those she had loved and lost as well as a larger one for society’s loss. Impossible as it may be to describe and contextualize war and death, she is able to take us past our inability to conceive of it, past our own numbness, and describe the pain. She is able to get at a universal truth in a way that allows us to apply it to our own lives, much in the same way her Greek writers did:
In the vast catastrophe of the European war our emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction. ... But the Greeks could say, as if for the first time, “Yet being dead they have not died” … They could march straight up, with their eyes open; and thus fearlessly approached, emotions stand still and suffer themselves to be looked at ... It is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age (CR, 38).

This question that an entire generation struggled under—how do we continue to live and love others after such horror?—is one that haunted Woolf throughout her life. We find threads of the war running through all her novels, but it is the soldier characters who truly exemplify its tragedy. She introduces them as central characters to us, the readers, piece by piece, metaphor by metaphor, informing them from characters in her own life, until they represent the human component of war. They portray the devastation of the lost generation, the beauty and possibility dead with the death of youth, the inconceivability of death itself and the chaos for those who are left. Her carefully constructed and achingly honest presentation of the loss of three men—anonymous, undignified, random—represents war’s utter inexplicability. Yet it also gives us a duty: never to be numb, always to seek meaning. Never to forget.
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