WILDE AND WOOLF: MODERN SEXUAL VACILLATORS, CONTEMPORARY QUEER ANTICIPATORS

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS …….. ii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION …….. 1

2. WILDE AND WOOLF—LIVING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE HYPHEN 8

3. FLORA SYMBOLISM AND SEXUAL AESTHETICS IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* AND *MRS. DALLOWAY* ……. 26

4. THE SEXUAL AESTHETICS OF LIGHT AND SPACE IN *SALOMÉ* AND *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE* …… 38

CONCLUSION ……. 59

WORKS CITED …… 66

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In her pioneering feminist treatise, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf devotes the latter portion of her Oxford lecture series to the "unity of the mind" in which there is a masculine and feminine side to the human psyche that must be united during moments of creativity. She states that:

> [t]he normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two [minds] live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her…It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely woman-manly…. (98)

While borrowing from her predecessor, the Romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Woolf posits that the act of creating art is a product of androgyny. Instead of a single gendered-mind dominating the artist, a balance of the two must occur- a male artist embraces his "woman part of the brain" while a female artist "must have intercourse" with her inner man. This unity stimulates the mind's creative power, allowing it to freely explore, vacillate boundaries, and discover other possibilities of creativity and beauty that would thus become stagnant if the artist utilized only a "purely masculine" or feminine mind. For Woolf, the androgynous mind defies polarity, boundaries, and categories; it is, as she describes, "resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is

naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (98-99). This became a distinguishing and fundamental feature of Woolf's feminist politics, furthering her case for the female writer's necessity of a "room of her own." Moreover, this suggestion of sexual ambiguity and experimentation where "test[ing] what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely woman-manly," is a deeply-rooted theme cultivated in her Modernist works and even a philosophy which she enacted throughout her life. Woolf was a member of the infamous Bloomsbury group known for their sexual trysts both inside and outside their intellectual clique. Additionally, she carried on several affairs with other women, which although did not necessarily involve physical intercourse (or to borrow Woolf's words from her diary entries, "copulation"), still produced an emotional and erotic intensity for her. Likewise, her writings, both the widely-produced Modernist novels and essays as well as the more privately kept diaries and letters, chronicle her subversive reflections and opinions against the late Victorian society into which she was ushered. She defied her society's norms and values, especially in regards to conceptions of gender and sexuality.

She was, however, not the first Modernist writer to challenge such conceptions, but rather she certainly continued the trend. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, which was just around the time Virginia Stephen was entering her formative years, her Irish predecessor Oscar Wilde became the most popular playwright in England, and soon became the poster-child for sexual transgression and deviant behavior. His defamation suit against the Marquis de Queensberry in 1895 led to the exploitation of his privatized sexual relationships with other (much younger) men. This evolved into an international scandal, resulting in Wilde's imprisonment as well as several prominent literary figures (including some of Woolf's contemporaries such as William Butler Yeats and George

Bernard Shaw) to sign petitions advocating for Wilde's release. Wilde, however, was challenging late Victorian society long before this event because, like Woolf, he maneuvered through Victorian society with his vacillations of its institutional categories. Through his life and his works, he embodied the androgynous vision that Woolf refers to nearly thirty years after his downfall. Therefore, through this study, my overall objective is to establish and examine the parallels, particularly relating to their sexual vacillations, existing between the lives and works of Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf. In addition, since my study specifically focuses on the area of sexuality, I intend to suggest that both Wilde and Woolf lay the foundations that eventually culminate into the development of contemporary queer theory.

Because of the latter part of my goal, I will predominantly be examining the works of Wilde and Woolf using a queer theoretical lens; however, because of queer theory's interdisciplinary nature, it will periodically overlap with other areas including feminism, psychoanalytic and cultural criticism. For this study, the works of Annmarie Jagose's *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996) and Nikki Sullivan's *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003) will predominantly be utilized as they have been proven to be valuable comprehensive studies of queer theory's evolution as well as one's which are easily accessible. While I may borrow throughout my discussion of selected literary texts some concepts constructed by the prominent theorists, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, who are coincidentally often cited throughout Jagose's and Sullivan's studies, my goal is not to immerse myself into the core of widely contested, overly abstracted, intensely complicated theoretical debates regarding current trends in queer theory. Instead, this introduction will provide a fundamental overview of what

many factions of queer theorists can agree upon regarding this school of literary criticism as well as provide some advantage to the argument of queer theory's academic legitimacy.

Queer theory evolved as a product of the newly developed field of gay and lesbian studies during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which coincided with a resurgence in gender politics, the increasing concern over the AIDS epidemic, and coincidentally a reemerging interest in literary figures who engaged in homosexual or homoerotic relationships such as Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf. Many theorists during this time relied heavily upon the works of Michel Foucault, who is often attributed as the (unofficial) creator of queer theory. His *History of Sexuality*, particularly the "We Other Victorians" section of the first volume, has become instrumental in the development of this theoretical field with not only pinpointing the evolution of homosexuality to a specific time period but also his poststructuralist philosophy of sexuality being a product of history and culture rather than nature. Foucault's contributions have led to the contestation of using "gay and lesbian" for this field of study on grounds of debated exclusivity in which the terminology is simply limited to that particular population. Those proponents for the usage of "queer" feel that "gay and lesbian" neglects considering other populations marginalized by sexual difference such as transsexuals, bisexuals, fetishists, and even queered heterosexuals. Therefore, those who have used "queer" felt it would be a more inclusive term, an "umbrella," as Jagose states, for all sexual minorities (1). Thus, this re-appropriation of a derogatory, marginalizing slang to a positive, more inclusive and embracing term also became a political statement.

However, the use of "queer" is not without contentions. Many poststructuralists as Alan McKee argued this "promotes an inclusivity, which is misleading" because it generalizes the experiences and desires of all sexual minorities and not accounting for their individual differences (qtd. in Sullivan 47). Today, the preference of "queer" over "gay and lesbian" has been a matter of preference, although there are still ongoing debates. Janet R. Jakobsen suggests to "complete the Foucauldian move from human being to human doing," meaning that instead of using "queer" to refer to identity, use it to refer to a series of actions" (qtd. in Sullivan 50). For the purposes of this study, I will mainly use "queer" in this context – to blur sexual categorical boundaries, to vacillate, and to uproot social barriers, particularly in the tradition of Wilde and Woolf.

While this does not define or explain what queer theory is, it establishes the overall tone for this recent school of literary criticism. Many queer theorists can agree that the field is simply undefinable because it is in constant formation and constantly changing. Nikki Sullivan defines queer theory as "a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that has the potential to challenge normative knowledges and identities" (43-44). It is vague and undefinable because it stands in direct opposition to those (sexual) categories that heteronormative culture defines. Lois Tyson says that "for queer theory, categories of sexuality cannot be defined by such simple oppositions as homosexual/heterosexual…individual sexuality [is] a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities" and can change over time because of sexuality's "dynamic range of desire" (337). Therefore, queer theory is not about deciphering who is "gay" or "straight," but moreso about dismembering these

simplistic, reductive categories. For them, the essence of sexuality is that, as a cultural dimension, it is constantly changing.

In addition to the debate over the use of "queer," there has also been debate over the consideration of its academic legitimacy. When defining exactly what queer theory is, many scholars have concluded that there is no conclusive, concrete definition. Because of its ambiguous and paradoxical nature, several scholars have scrutinized its merit in the academic realm. Despite these criticisms, queer theory has proven to be a valuable realm of academics, especially in a post-modern era that heavily relies, embraces, and advocates for subjectivity. In her study of queer theory and popular culture, Nikki Sullivan mentions that the poignancy in queer theory lies in its ability to foster multiple and new interpretations of reading texts. She states that "queerness does not reside in the text, but rather is produced in and through the ever-changing relations between texts, readers, and the world" (191). In Dick Schulz's discussion of queer theory and "questioning," he states that "[q]ueer reading and writing challenges…attempts at closer, hierarchisations and reconciliations of sign systems and rather embraces the playful, contradictory, and interrogatory quality any text carries, opening up endless possibilities of meaningfulness" (57). Queer theory provides an infinite array of interpreting and studying literary works; it warrants the revisiting and reexamining of texts that have often been neglected or underestimated in their queer content, such as those written by heterosexual authors. While it may be paradoxical in nature due to its numerous contradictions, endless debates, and its allusiveness to being specifically defined, queer theory's flexibility and evasiveness emulates not only Woolf's

androgynous vision, but also Wilde's and Woolf's constantly shifting sexualities as well as their contributions to the literary canon.

The first part of this study is devoted to how Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf exhibited their vacillations in queering late Victorian and Edwardian society. In his article, "Wilde Disappointment," David Jays mentions that the reason for literary scholars' disappointment with Wilde is due to the "irreconcilable things of him," his ability to embody opposing entities or, as Jays quotes the critic Jerusha McCormack, "living on both sides of the hyphen." While Wilde's paradoxical nature may be a disappointment for some like Jays, it enriches the value of his life and his writing in relation to his ability to subvert and criticize Victorian society. While expressing one set of opinions that gains Wilde acceptance into the fold of the Victorian aristocracy, he simultaneously and discretely exposes its hypocrisy and corruption through the same wit and spectacle that grabbed his audience's attention. Likewise, Virginia Woolf lived on both sides of the hyphen, perhaps in not the most overt way Wilde did, but she certainly embodied opposing entities and defied social categories. Therefore, the first part will exhibit how these two Modernist writers straddled late Victorian society.

The last two chapters of this study will delve into their works, specifically Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and *Salomé* (1892) and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The reason for selecting these particular works were two-fold – not only did they establish both writers as quintessential Modernist virtuosos, but they also share similar features in terms of their writings' aesthetics, specifically those associated with nature. Thus, within these remaining sections, I will conduct a comparative examination of the use of floral imagery in *The*

Picture of Dorian Gray and *Mrs. Dalloway*, which will be followed with exploration of the authors' use of light and space in *Salomé* and *To the Lighthouse* respectively. While these elements are principal aesthetic features of these writers' works, they are also fundamental features in providing queer readings of these texts. Moreover, my selection of two works from Wilde and Woolf illustrates a similar progression in their stylistic development, which serves as basis for this study's conclusion. Both writers evolve from a more concrete, tangible aesthetic to one that is more abstract, an evolution witnessed in the literary world as well as in the visual arts at the end of the nineteenth century with the transition from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism. The former initiated a shift from traditional schools of art (such as naturalism and mannerism); however, it was the latter movement that solidified the shift with its radical embracing of abstract form and subjectivity. Thus this very subjectivity not only becomes the thread that connects Wilde and Woolf the writers, but also the thread that connects Wilde and Woolf the queer anticipators.

Chapter 2

WILDE AND WOOLF—LIVES ON BOTH SIDES OF THE HYPHEN

In his "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote that "[t]he critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things" (3). For Wilde, a critic is a person who does not solely make judgments or appraisals, but someone who transforms their ideas into new modes of art. Critics master disguise and manipulation of their audience; they are a human chameleon. And there is no one who is more fitting than Oscar Wilde, the writer who simultaneously became a celebrity and a critic of late Victorian upper-class society. Drawing attention to himself through his flamboyant dress and theatrical gesturing became part of his fame and popularity, but it also eventually made him a target among moral purists and political conservatives.

Although not as overt and profane as her Irish predecessor, Virginia Woolf, too, became a chameleon in her own right. Her ephemerality in her politics and sexuality alone enabled her to assume numerous guises. It is very surprising that with the large bodies of scholarship completed on both these writers, there are few comparative studies focusing on their lives or their works (the most recent being Dick Schulz's *Setting the Record Queer: Rethinking Oscar Wilde's* The Picture of Dorian Gray *and Virginia Woolf's* Mrs. Dalloway). Despite their blatant differences, there underlie several similarities as well. They lived during a period of transition in English history and culture, fostered a profound passion in the Classics and visual art, desired to be the center of attention, advocated for women's rights, and as previously mentioned, constantly

deviated from the cultural boundaries of mainstream society. When considering the ways in which these writers, as Jerusha McCormack phrases it, "live on both sides of the hyphen," Wilde and Woolf vacillate in terms of their personal identities, their political beliefs, and most apparently their sexual transgressions.

The first parallel of consideration between Wilde and Woolf is in their conceptions of identity, the former experiencing the tension of being Anglo-Irish while the other's identity is caught between two different time periods. For Wilde, he constantly vacillated between his Irish roots, fostered by the close relationship with his mother, and the aristocracy of English society, a realm that deeply fascinated him. For example, upon matriculation to Oxford, Wilde arrived "naïve, embarrassed, had a convulsive laugh, a lisp, and an Irish accent," which affected his acceptance among his English peers. Because of these social rejections, Wilde reinvented himself into a scholarly English intellectual and his Irish accent became one of "many things [he] forgot at Oxford" and adopted "that stately and distinct English which astonished its hearers" in addition to exchanging his Dublin garb for more sophisticated tweed jackets, neckties, and hats (Ellman 38). This transition increased his popularity among his English counterparts, but it also served as a prelude to what Wilde eventually would do as a social figure and writer. Through his wit and debonair personality, Wilde attracted the attention of the English aristocratic society while simultaneously criticizing its hypocrisy and trifling values in his works.

While he devoted most of his post-graduate life to assimilating himself into the English aristocracy, Wilde still managed to return to his Irish roots. It was during his American tour where Wilde not only lectured on his aestheticism, but he also

rediscovered his Irish heritage. During his travels in the early 1880s, Wilde "found unexpectedly that he had potential allies among Irish Americans, who paid no attention to his aesthetics but liked his nationality" (Ellman 196). This re-connection influenced Wilde to proclaim Ireland's centrality to European culture and even criticized the English for stifling Irish culture. Moreover, it furthers Wilde's "living on both sides of the hyphen" through solidifying his Anglo-Irish identity. In her comprehensive literary study, Julian Moynahan defines this as a "doubled or split consciousness of a unique situation…on the one hand, a link with, yet removal from, English origins and English society; and on the other, a closeness to, and yet a removal or isolation from, the native Irish community" (13). It was through this displacement from English society that enabled Wilde to reconnect with his Irish heritage. These lectures reawakened feelings of Irish nationalism within him when he returned to England and became one of the motivating factors for him to subvert the dominating British culture.

While her predecessor vacillated between his Irish and English identities, Virginia Woolf's straddled two different periods: the late Victorian and the Modern. Her childhood was predominantly Victorian where her family divided their lives between Hyde Park Gate in London for most of the year and St. Ives in Cornwall during the summer. The former was a very restrictive environment for Virginia, dominated by her father's need for structure and self-affirmation as well as the house's Victorian-style décor. There were dark drawing room doors "picked out in raspberry red," dinner by candlelight as there was no electric lighting, and even a basement where the servants had their quarters (Lee 40). For her, life at Hyde Park Gate was "darkness, solid objects, interiors, and constriction….it came to stand for all of Victorian domestic life" (Lee 35).

Moreover, the deaths of Julia Stephen, Stella Duckworth Hills, and Leslie Stephen further darkened the atmosphere and gave the bedroom— a place of life, birth and fertility— the connotation of death. While Hyde Park Gate was clouded in darkness for Virginia, St. Ives was the complete opposite. As was customary for Victorian families to relocate their lives during the summer months, St. Ives became one of the most impressionable memories for Virginia "where she sites, for the whole of her life, the idea of happiness" and associated it with images of "fullness, rhythm and light" (Lee 22). It provided relief and an escape from the darkness of her home life in London, not to mention constant subjects for her writing.

Woolf's childhood memories at Hyde Park Gate and St. Ives become the subjects on which she centers most of her Modernist fiction as well as attests to the constant vacillations in her identities as a woman either of the Victorian or Modernist era. In her extensive biography, Hermione Lee comments that when Woolf was an adult, "the memory of the family house fill[ed] her with horror, but also with desire. She returns to it repeatedly in her thoughts and in her writing" (49). Additionally, she attempts to recapture that "idea of happiness" she associated with St. Ives, particularly when she choose it as the setting for her famous *To the Lighthouse*. In either case, the Victorian family becomes the focal point of her explorations as well as become the critiques of the society in which she lived. It is the "late-Victorian context [that] would be the stuff of satire and subversion in all Virginia Woolf's writings. Nevertheless, the memory of that childhood was so close and clear to her that it felt, all her life, more like a continuing existence than a memory" (97). This "continuing existence" attests to Woolf's fluidity and ephemerality as a writer. She straddles two different worlds: the Victorian world of

her early childhood and reconstructed subject of her writing and the Modern world in which she lived as a writer.

In addition to the personal identities in relation to history and culture, Wilde and Woolf's political positions also exhibit a vacillating tendency, particularly in respect to their feminist politics. Some of Wilde's achievements have portrayed him as a feminist figure while at the same time he has displayed very traditional, almost misogynistic to some, attitudes. His mother, Jane "Speranza" Francesca Wilde, was highly influential on his political beliefs, particularly relating to Irish nationalism and women's rights. She was a famous Irish radical who published poetry and other political writings in the famous Irish nationalist newspaper, *The Nation*, criticizing the British government's response to the 1845 potato famine and advocating her fellow Irishmen to revolt. Both she and her son detested "mob rule and excess, and [admired] personal heroism and [felt] fellowship with the oppressed" (Ellman 120). Moreover, as editor of *The Nation*, she paved the way for Wilde's interest in journalism, culminating in his contributions to *The Lady's World: A Magazine of Fashion and Society*. In April 1887, Wilde took over as editor for the magazine with goals for ambitious revisions. Among them, Wilde added a section for a serial story, included articles focusing on women's education and "on all the things women do with their time," and even a section on literary criticism. These revisions, including the changing of the title from *The Lady's World* to *The Woman's World*, added "an intellectual quality" that reflected issues such as "feminism and woman's suffrage, with women taking both sides of these questions." These became so groundbreaking that even Queen Victoria is reported to have expressed pleasure upon

reading it (Ellmann 292-93). Thus, by receiving acclaim from a highly-influential British authority figure, it attests to Wilde's role as a feminist activist.

At the same time, however, Wilde has reflected very conventional attitudes towards women, specifically in their roles as wives. Neil McKenna mentions an account that when asked the quintessential characteristic a wife should possess, Wilde's response was surprisingly very traditional: "devotion to her husband." McKenna continues to point out that in Wilde's works "the qualities of duty, devotion, self-sacrifice, and forgiveness of sins are pointed up as the hallmarks of an ideal wife. These views were inherited from Speranza who, despite her radicalism…believed that wives were there for the benefit of their husband" (61). This certainly evolves in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with the sole female character of Sybil Vane, an adolescent actress who falls madly in love with her "Prince Charming" only later commits suicide when she loses Dorian's affections after a poor performance in *Romeo and Juliet*. She is portrayed as a stock character devoid of any genuine emotions and is completely dependent on the man she admires. When he betrays her, she realizes the meaninglessness of her life without him and thus makes the ultimate self-sacrifice. It begs to question, though, whether Wilde was genuine in his response to this question about the role of wives; however, it does illustrate his living on "both sides of the hyphen" as a feminist pioneer but also still harboring traditional views of women's roles.

Like Wilde, Woolf also demonstrated vacillating opinions in her feminist politics, especially in relation to her involvement as well as women's writing. Throughout her life, she devoted herself to help pave the way for women, particularly women writer's, to achieve the same status and representation in society as men. Her feminist manifesto, *A*

Room of One's Own, attests to her commitment where she argues not only a woman's necessity for a proper education but also that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). Her entire career is centered on female lives and characters not only through her writing but also her involvement in politically subversive events. In 1910, a pinnacle year for Virginia Woolf for numerous reasons, she participated in the Votes for Women campaign and attended the Suffrage Rally at Kingsway Hall in 1918. Both events, however, revealed an ambivalent, aloof attitude. While working on the campaign, there were a few weeks where she exhibited "reluctant attendance at a couple of mass meetings" and she became "equivocal and half-hearted" over the work of addressing envelopes in the suffrage office (Lee 275). Eight years later, after attending the rally with Leonard Woolf, she recorded in her diary that "I get a satisfactory thrill from the sense of multitude; then become disillusioned, finally bored and unable to listen to a word" (qtd. in Lee 278). While she admits to being "thrilled" almost having a sense of optimism prior to the rally, she expresses ennui afterward as though it left her heightened expectations unfulfilled. Lee also mentions that despite her interest in feminist politics, Woolf remains "ambivalent all her life about women philanthropists and social activists. She partly admires them" but, at the same time, is also skeptical of them (121). Perhaps this skepticism evolved from these particular experiences; however, it demonstrates the binaries that Woolf embodies in relation to her involvement in feminist politics.

Additionally, this paradoxical nature evolves in her relation to women's writing, especially when writing autobiography. While Woolf has been a profound advocate for female fictional writers, she has also been a proponent for female biographers. Since she

always sought to break down the boundaries of traditional writing, her embracing of such undervalued forms of women's writing as letters, journals, and memoirs cemented this subversion. She would write to her friends "urging them to write their life-stories" (Lee 13). When it came to her own life, however, Woolf again was ambivalent and evasive. Woolf recorded in her 1937 diaries feeling "horrified" upon learning that Ethel Smyth "might be thinking of publishing her letters or writing about her" (Lee 11). Her anxiety over self-expression, however, existed even before this "threat." In an earlier diary entry, Woolf wrote about feeling "most unpleasantly discomfited" about "lay[ing] bare [her] soul" (qtd. in Lee 17). While she encouraged her own friends to write and publish their "life-stories," she ironically censored her own due to fear of exposing her true self. Even more ironic is that while she is willing to censor her own writings, she is against the public censorship of other writers, as evidenced in her testifying in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* obscenity trial. Therefore, not just in her involvement in feminist activism, but also in the publication of women's life-writings, Virginia Woolf embodies opposing political binaries, which only further attest to her vacillation.

While their cultural identities and political beliefs attest to Wilde's and Woolf's elusiveness, the most prominent instances of their leading "double lives" and thus vacillating social norms is through their sexualities. Both writers engaged in same-sex affairs, a completely unconventional lifestyle that evolved during the fin de siècle, while maintaining conventional heterosexual relationships. For Wilde, marriage became a mode for him to bolster his status in English society, not only as a member of the upper class but also as a posing heterosexual. Marriage "would save him from the moralists, and a rich one from the moneylender….[a wife] might confront society without having to

affront it" (Ellmann 233). With this mentality, Wilde courted several women in the late 1870s and early 1880s: Florence Balcombe, who eventually married Wilde's fellow Irishman, Bram Stoker; Lillie Langtry, a woman Wilde considered proposing to but then decided against it since she already was; Violet Hunt, the daughter of the artist Alfred William Hunt; and Charlotte Montefiore, the sister of a friend from Magdalen. Of the four, Violet proved to have been the most significant because Wilde was in love with her "for the moment and perhaps more than a moment" while the others were merely his acquaintances (qtd. in McKenna 23). Violet's wealth (or lack thereof), however, prevented Wilde from actually pursuing the marriage.

Instead, in 1883, Wilde chose to marry Constance Lloyd who fulfilled both of his conditions: financial stability and a conventional relationship. Constance was from a well-to-do family and lived with her aunt in a mansion at 100 Lancaster Gate, assuredly making her a viable option for Wilde's attention. From the beginning of their relationship, they experienced disappointment where they "had not agreed on a single thing" (Ellmann 236). It was when Wilde lectured on aestheticism that she became attracted and thus entered into a courtship. Wilde grew very fond of Constance as he "married the Madonna Mia of his poetic imagination. With her slender, boyish figure and tremulous, flower-like beauty, Constance was the embodiment of sexual innocence: unsullied, untouched, untainted by any overt manifestation of sexuality" (McKenna 65). It was this sexual purity and youthfulness that Wilde not only valued about her but also ironically in the young men with whom he would soon become sexually involved. It is as though Constance resembled some aestheticized and androgynous young woman, especially with her "boyish figure" and "untainted" (and undeveloped) sexuality. When

Constance gave birth to their two children, however, Wilde became less affectionate and more apathetic. He realized that because her virginity was non-existent, so was the youthfulness and beauty he associated with it. Wilde's marriage became monotonous, a routine that completely destroyed his wife's "idealised freshness….She became sentient and sensual, a lover, a mother with breasts that enlarged and a belly that swelled" (McKenna 65). McKenna suggests that Wilde's disgust and ennui towards Constance is what influenced him to seek an alternative desire: the desire for other men. While this interpretation hardly seems to be the sole reason for Wilde's desire for other men, McKenna's theory attests to the Irishman's attempt at forging a conventional relationship as well as his sexual fluidity.

For Wilde, there were two essential men who cultivated these homosexual desires that would eventually become the playwright's sources of pleasure as well as his downfall: Robert Ross and the more notable and reckless Lord Alfred Douglass, better known as "Bosie." While at Oxford in 1886, Wilde met Robert Ross, a member of the crew team and a practicing homosexual. According to Richard Ellmann, he "presumably introduced [Wilde] to the oral and intercrural intercourse" that he practiced in his later life (275). He was attracted to Wilde's "wit, his ease, his loyalty, his buoyancy. They liked each other, and for a time their friendship was passionate" (276). This became pivotal in Wilde's life because he realized that his homosexual desires catapulted Wilde from the "pasteboard conformity [of his married life] to the expression of latent desires" (Ellmann 278). It not only pushed him to the foreground to become the representative for repressed sexual desires, it also became an additional mode to his wit and paradoxical creeds for him to subvert Victorian society. Moreover, it was after the initiation of his

friendship with Ross that Wilde engaged in even more homosexual relations, including John Gray who served as the inspiration for Wilde's protagonist of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and his most important partner, Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas.

Whereas Ross initiated Wilde into same-sex relations, Douglas became the more pivotal not only in Wilde's lifestyle but also in his writing. In relation to the influence on Wilde's lifestyle, Douglas encouraged a more risky and devious path that made Wilde's previous relationships appear tamer. His reputation of being "totally spoiled, reckless, insolent, and…fiercely vindictive" was widely known throughout London society, evidenced in his frequenting the urban underground of opium dens and seeking rent-boys as well as the scandalous blackmailing that resorted him to seek Wilde's assistance (Ellman 324). Bosie's youthful beauty and intellectual potential eclipsed this Byronic lifestyle, thus causing Wilde to develop an intensely romantic, and strangely masochistic, attachment to him. Under this enchanting influence, Wilde developed some of his most famous and successful plays, whose popularity grew stronger simultaneously as his relationship with Bosie. For Wilde, homosexuality "fired his mind. It was the major stage in his discovery of self" as well as his creative spirit (Ellmann 281). His relationship with Bosie became the outlet for his creative spirit; it ignited the exhilaration and adventure he craved and was deprived of through his traditional marriage to Constance.

Like Wilde, Woolf's romantic interests shifted between heterosexual relationships and those more adventurous and subversive relationships with other women. Of all her acquaintances with men, the most significant was her marriage to Leonard not only because of his assistance with the editing and publication of her novels as well as

establishing the Hogarth Press, but also due to his attentiveness and devotion as a husband through her battles with mental illness. Throughout their extensive courtship, Leonard meticulously chronicled the symptoms and treatments she experienced. Biographer Hermione Lee characterizes their relationship as "space of mutual necessity…a marriage which is worked at; a working marriage; and a marriage which works" in that, despite the obstacles of her mental illness, there existed an emotional intensity between them (315). Their relationship "made a frame and a space for the work, which was life to her….It became constructed as a régime" that countered the deaths she experienced in her earlier life (314). In this case, Woolf's attitude towards her marriage could be the complete antithesis of Wilde's who became bored and disaffected after Constance gave birth to their children; however, her marriage contained queer dimensions just like Wilde's. Along with Woolf's brother, Thoby, and close friend, Lytton Strachey, Leonard was a product of the British public school and college system where same-sex intimacy and erotic practices proliferated. While he was more on the prudish end of the continuum, he did engage intimately with other men, particularly Stratchey, who was more overt in his sexual encounters. Strachey's "bawdiness and Leonard's priggishness allowed for some eroticism between them" where they "would exchange notes on Thoby's physical 'magnificence'" as well as expressed desires for intercourse with other men (Lee 297). Through these experiences, Lee proposes that Leonard's college experiences "[suggest] some androgyneity." Therefore, Virginia's relationship with Leonard, although appears to be heterosexual, was really queered because of his apparent homoerotic encounters. Moreover, despite the existence of some intimacy between them, this does not necessarily mean it was erotic. Thus while her

marriage to Leonard had the appearance of a traditional heterosexual marriage, it was more subversive and queered than one might expect.

Just like it did for Wilde, same-sex relationships provided the intellectual stimulation Woolf desired. Instead of the physical intercourse that Wilde would later engage in with Robert Ross, Virginia Woolf depended on a tamer, more psychological eroticism. For her, it was more emotionally-driven:

> [t]alk and petting, thought and writing, were powerful sources of excitement. Her eroticism expressed itself not as 'copulation,' but as demands for comfort and admiration, as 'effervescence' in talk or whimsical animal-paly, and as intensely physical apprehensions…She had a sensual imagination…her translation of perceptions and emotions into concentrated moments of physical responses has its own eroticism. (Lee 240)

The only possibility for this erotic stimulation in Woolf was through relationships with other women, specifically Violet Dickinson, Katherine Mansfield, and her most prominent, Vita Sackville-West. Virginia's first relationship was with Violet Dickinson, which was "playfully erotic from the beginning of their correspondence" and filled with such intimacies as teasing jokes and the revelation of secrets to each other. To Violet her "evolving ideas about how to live, how to talk and how to write" were "all about refusing conventions and getting round formalities" (Lee 164). In return, Violet provided opportunities for Virginia to behave the way she truly desired: free and subversive.

While Violet Dickinson ignited Virginia's latent desires, Katherine Mansfield stimulated them even further intellectually. They developed a camaraderie that was

"intimate but guarded, mutually inspiring but competitive….[Virginia] fluctuated between feeling that they had found a particular intimacy of equals, and feeling that Katherine was not really interested in her at all" (Lee 381). Moreover, Mansfield's death left a lasting impression on Woolf. Just as she was finishing *Mrs. Dalloway*, thoughts of Mansfield resurface in Woolf's diaries. Woolf reflected on how "[K.M.] saw me as a ship far out at sea. But K.M. always *said* affectionate admiring things to me, poor woman, whom in my own way I suppose I loved" (Woolf 2: 318). From such diary entries, critics have characterized Woolf's attitude towards Mansfield as ambivalent, especially based on the evident rivalry between the two (ironically Woolf mentions these feelings in earlier in this same entry). It is poignant however, more than a year after Katherine Mansfield's death and at a crucial point in her artistic process when Woolf feels her presence and recollects a more "affectionate" dimension of their relationship. While Woolf was left ultimately disappointed at the end of their friendship, partly due to Mansfield's harsh review of Woolf's *Night and Day*, Mansfield's work and relationship intellectually challenged Woolf and gave her the stimulation she always desired.

In a similar way, Virginia's relationships with other men were queered, especially within her own intellectual sphere. Through her association with the radical Bloomsbury group, she was often exposed to political and social subversion. One of these modes of subversion was frank and overt expressions of homosexuality: "[t]hey were shedding the inhibitions of the past and turning their gossip…into what seemed to them daringly erotic scandal" (Lee 238). Many have criticized her attitudes toward gay men, citing her as "unsympathetic" and "contemptuous"; however, Virginia's deeply rooted friendships with Lytton Strachey and E.M. Forster have proved otherwise. Strachey became "the

person she most valued for their talk" and "would pride herself on their intimacy" (Lee 252). So much so, that not only did their involvement in "[c]ompetitive scandal [serve as a] form of love-making" but also their close relationship. Their desperate desires of escapism (he from his latent homosexuality and she from the controls of her father) culminated in a faux marriage proposal (Lee 254).

Meanwhile her friendship with Forster was more of a professional confidant that contained an intimate and mutual level of trust. In a diary entry from 1925, she wrote that he was "one of the six people in the world she most minded" (Lee 268) and, when came time to publish *Mrs. Dalloway*, it appeared that his response meant the most to her than any of her other associates (Bristow 131). In a May diary entry, Woolf reflected: "The only judgment on Mrs D. I await with trepidation…is Morgan's" (Woolf 3: 22). Her anxiety would soon be appeased a few days later with praise from Forster stating, "Morgan admires. This is a weight off my mind…" (Woolf 3: 24). Despite the a difference in degree of emotional and intimate investment when compared with Strachey, there existed an intense respect between these two writers, illustrating not only the evident influence of gay men on her life but also the queering of Virginia's relationships with men. She appeared to have traditional relationships with men, but in reality they were more subversive because the men she befriended undermined and queered the traditional Victorian conceptions of sexuality and gender expectations. They forced one to question whom does she really desire: men, women, effeminate men, or masculine women? Moreover, like Wilde, Virginia Woolf experienced a confinement, and even boredom, with the male-dominated Bloomsbury group. While she and other "women can be at ease with them [gay men]…'something is always suppressed, held down'" (Lee

239). While she did forge relationships with Stratchey and Forster, and even married Leonard, they failed to produce the emotional intensity that would come when around women.

Even though Violet Dickinson's and Katherine Mansfield's influences on Virginia Woolf were significant, it was her relationship with Vita Sackville-West that has become the most essential to her life and work, and the most widely researched. Both of these women shared many similarities from being professional writers to leading double lives; however, in how they lived their double lives varied drastically. While Virginia was more attentive to keeping her same-sex desires concealed and private, Sackville-West's attraction toward women was more known, particularly among her close friends. During the 1920s, her social circles knew that she "cross-dressed, she had lesbian and homosexual friends, she had figured in lesbian scandal, and she had a reputation for passionate and predatory affairs" (Lee 483). It would be wrong to consider Vita reckless; however, when compared to Woolf, her lifestyle was more prone to slippages that both "displayed and disguised her lesbianism" (482).

From 1924 to 1927, their relationship intensified simultaneously along with Woolf's creative spirit, which attests to Vita's influence on not only her life but also her works. As their relationship progressed, Woolf's writing style became more Modernist, "more openly sensual, more overtly sexual in topic" (Sproles 8). She was breaking from the confining Victorian style that dominated her earlier novels. This is especially evident in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* where the "language she used for the writing of the book was like her language for Vita….Lily's longing for Mrs. Ramsay in the novel was coloured by her missing Vita" (Lee 493). Even in *Mrs. Dalloway*, there are moments that

reveal Vita's lasting impressions on Virginia. Both literary scholars Toni McNaron and Karyn Z. Sproles mention how Sally's kiss with Clarissa serves as a code for the relationship between Vita and Virginia. While Clarissa acknowledges the vivid emotions of the kiss but her behavior contradicts these feelings, the kiss re-emerges, as Sproles writes, "as a trace, a thread of disruption that weaves throughout the novel" (7). This not only illustrates the complexity of Clarissa's emotions, but also the vacillation of desires for both Clarissa and Virginia. Even though they are married to Richard and Leonard respectively, their more intense and intimate desires shift to female figures and thus blur, or queer, their sexual inclinations. While they care for both men, their relationships with women gratify their sexual desires more completely. Therefore, while Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West provides her the quenching of her sexual desires, it also stimulates her creative thought where she produces her most popular and successful literary achievements.

Therefore, through their personal identities, political positions, and own sexual liaisons, both Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf exhibited vacillating tendencies throughout their lives. These vacillations not only illustrate the multiple ways they have subverted late nineteenth and early twentieth-century societies, but also establishes them as queer figures because of the ambiguity and blurring of social norms these vacillations produced. Moreover, they developed novels whose queer nature undermined British society, particularly in their specific sexual aesthetics. The following chapters will examine both Wilde's and Woolf's sexual aesthetics in some of their most prominent works and how these sexual aesthetics not only subverted social conceptions of gender and sexuality but also contribute to the queer nature of these texts.

Chapter 3

FLORAL SYMBOLISM AND SEXUAL AESTHETICS IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* AND *MRS. DALLOWAY*

Virginia Woolf began her most famous novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), with one of the most famous lines in all of literature: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (3). Not only does this introduce her audience to the independence of the eponymous protagonist, but it also establishes one of the most important images in the novel: the flower. Floral symbolism is a powerful image throughout Woolf's writing; "she uses them in many ways, but they are almost always associated with people…[who] often treat flowers in whimsical, unconventional ways that surprise other people" (Gillespie 246-47). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, flower symbolism is especially significant to Woolf's aesthetics, especially to her aestheticized portrayal of same-sex desire. Similarly, Oscar Wilde makes frequent use of floral symbolism in his *fin de siècle* novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Throughout both novels, each writer utilizes a variety of flowers that have different significances for men and women, as well as same-sex and heterosexual love. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, the flowers symbolize not only the youth and beauty that the protagonists associate with them, but also the queered desires that become threads throughout each novel in which conventional, heterosexual relationships are associated with traditional flowers and same-sex passions are associated with more exotic flowers.

For both Wilde and Woolf, flowers become a poignant symbol of youth and beauty due to their fleeting nature that catalyzes particular metaphysical experiences. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, flowers become an emblem of eternal youth for the

protagonist because of their cyclical nature. The reader first sees this connection at the very beginning of the novel when Lord Henry seduces Dorian Gray with his aesthetic philosophies. While the model is posing for his portrait, Lord Henry informs him of the "Hellenic ideal" and that "the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with the longing for the things it has forbidden itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful" (Wilde 19-20). Since Dorian is an easily impressionable young man, Lord Henry realizes that he can effortlessly seduce the muse with appealing creeds on desire and beauty. Moreover, because of Dorian's naïve nature, such thoughts take immediate effect. Soon after Lord Henry spouts these intellectual ideas, the protagonist states that he "must go out and sit in the garden. The air is stifling in here" and is later discovered "burying his face in the great cool lilac-blossoms" (Wilde 21). This reaction becomes very poignant that after Lord Henry mentions about yielding to temptation and desires, Dorian's mind becomes aroused with pleasure. He becomes suffocated and so he finds reprieve through his immersion in the lilacs' fragrance that assuages his excitement.

Later in the garden, the flowers connection to youth and beauty becomes more prominent as Lord Henry compares Dorian's fleeting youth with the more eternal youth of the flowers. As they continue conversing in the garden, Lord Henry mentions to the young muse that:

> When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it…Time is jealous of you, and wars against your lilies and your roses. You will become sallow, and hallow-cheeked, and dull-eyed. You will suffer horribly….Ah!

> realize your youth while you have it. Don't squander the gold of your days…. (Wilde 22-23)

While Lord Henry advises Dorian with this carpe diem of realizing the importance of (his) youth, he is also connecting the aesthetic quality of flowers with the physical beauty of the painter's muse. He discloses to Dorian about the "warring" relationship between time and beauty – time will eventually cause Dorian's physicality to wither and those aesthetic features, his "lilies and [his] roses," will not eternally last. Lord Henry makes a similar statement shortly afterward when he states that the "common hill-flowers wither, but they blossom again. The laburnum will be as yellow next June as it is now….But we never get back our youth" (Wilde 23). Here, the aesthete differentiates between the lives of flowers and humans. While humans grow and eventually die, flowers are more cyclical and are able to blossom again. Wilde enhances this through his distinct use of the perennial laburnum, which is vibrant in color yet poisonous and deadly in nature. Therefore, their perpetual beauty transcends the effects of time. This observation solidifies Dorian's desire to eternally preserve his own aesthetics and makes him wish to sell his soul in order to remain young and beautiful forever.

Woolf utilizes floral images throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* to symbolize the various forms of beauty and emotional (or erotic) experience. For Clarissa, flowers are connected to her sense that beauty and pleasure are fleeting, especially since those phenomena are beautiful and pleasurable precisely because they are fleeting. To her, the ordinary, everyday events are the most beautiful due to this ephemerality. After arriving home from the flower shop, Clarissa immerses herself in the preparations for her party that evening. As she reviews the missed telephone messages, she reflects on "her

life…[and] how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness, she thought…one must pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments" (29). Clarissa considers the everyday occurrences in life to be the most beautiful, even if they are the most simple and common moments. In this description, Woolf uses the "buds" and "flowers of darkness" images to emphasize the aesthetic effect Clarissa feels when preparing for a party, which serves as an "exquisite moment." The idea of flowers of darkness is itself paradoxical. Light is normally the source that cultivates plants and flowers; however, in this instance, Clarissa's "moment of being" arises from the darkness of her consciousness regarding her own mortality. Through these images, Woolf associates the flowers and buds with Clarissa's "exquisite moment" because of their ephemerality as well as to emphasize the idea of natural growth.

Similar to their representation of beauty's fleetingness, the flowers symbolize the ideal of youth due to their temporary nature. Clarissa finds beauty in life because of its fleetingness. She constantly focuses on the present and the pleasures that the "moment of being and living" provide her. For example, while walking into the openness of Bourton life, she recognizes "[i]n people eyes…and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead…what she loved; life; London; this moment of June" (4). She loves all aspects of life ranging from people to common inanimate objects as "aeroplanes." By her centering on the present, she refuses to grow old and forestalls thoughts of the experience of death, which is why she values youth. Also, the purpose for her walk and plunge into Bourton life is to purchase flowers for her party that evening; she later immerses herself in their beauty as a therapeutic process.

Additionally, Clarissa associates Sally with the idealism of youth that the flowers represent. Sally demonstrates a nurturing and tenderness, particularly through "her way with flowers…Sally went out, pick[s] hollyhocks, dahlias- all sorts of flowers that had never been seen together- cut[s] their heads off, and [makes] them swim on the top of water in bowls. The effect [is] extraordinary…" (33). This has a profound effect on Clarissa in which she finds Sally's unique maintenance of her own exotic garden appealing. Furthermore, by her "cutting" the flowers' heads, she physically shortens their life-span; however, the flowers continue to thrive as they "swim on the top of water." The "effect" is not only Clarissa's vivid remembrance of the flowers as signs of Sally's aestheticism but also indicates Clarissa's passion for youth. Despite being well in her fifties, the "effect" of Sally and her flowers is still intensely powerful for Clarissa. The wildflowers become an emblem of the lesbian relationship Clarissa has with Sally, and the intense passion of youthfulness the relationship provides.

Another example of floral images representing beauty and emotional experience is when Clarissa goes to Miss Pym's shop to buy flowers, when they serve as emotional therapy by alleviating pain. When Clarissa goes to buy flowers for her party, she becomes engulfed in the floral arrangements. She recounts that when "she began to go with Miss Pym from jar to jar…as if this beauty…were a wave…[she allows it to] flow over her and surmount the hatred" she feels toward Doris Kilman (13). Up to this moment, she has been regretting the relationship her daughter, Elizabeth, has with Miss Kilman because of the latter's unscrupulous nature. This memory fosters hostility in Clarissa that gradually heightens throughout the novel; however, the aesthetic pleasure of the flowers creates a "wave" of rapture for her. She allows this ecstasy to overcome her

to the point that it assuages the hostility and hatred she has for Miss Killman. Thus, they serve as a therapeutic process for Clarissa; the aestheticism of the flowers relaxes and soothes her.

While the eponymous characters of both Wilde's and Woolf's novels associate flowers with youth and beauty, they are most importantly linked with sexual desire. Throughout these novels, Wilde and Woolf attribute traditional flowers with conventional heterosexual desires while the more exotic wildflowers represent the homosexual passions, thus creating a queer dimension to the novels' sexual aesthetics. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde associates scenes with women and traditional relationships with more commonly-known flowers, such as the rose. For example, the solitary female character that has a role in Dorian's life, Sibyl Vane, is described in a distinctively floral way. When she is walking with her brother, James, through the streets of London, the narrator describes the two as "a common gardener walking with a rose" (Wilde 57). By attributing her younger brother with a more dominant role, Wilde illustrates not only Sibyl's fragility but also her comparable nature to a traditional symbol of love and romance. In fact, it is her idealistic notion of love and romance that renders her so vulnerable that causes her brother to be so protective of her.

This characterization appears even in relation to her love with Dorian Gray. When he is explaining to Lord Henry his attraction to Sibyl, the protagonist recalls how "she was hardly seventeen years of age, with a little flower-like face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, [and] lips that were like the petals of a rose" (Wilde 45). Dorian's description of Sibyl is particularly striking here— not only does he use the floral symbolism when describing

his love interest, but he particularly links it with her sexuality. By comparing the most intimate part of Sibyl's face, her lips, with the more traditional flower, Wilde establishes a link between the conventional image and heterosexuality.

Contrasting this use of floral imagery, Wilde associates the more exotic and atypical wildflowers with the more transgressive sexuality that thus adds a queer dimension to the sexual aesthetics of the novel. From the very beginning, the readers observe this fusion of two desires from the initial pastoral description: "The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac…" (Wilde 5). This description becomes striking for two significant reasons: first, Wilde establishes the two worlds of the artist's studio that houses the roses' "rich odour" while the springtime flower, the lilac, represents the external, pastoral setting of Basil Hallward's garden. With the two spatial worlds colliding, it queers the atmosphere of Basil's studio where both scents remain present in the environment and thus attribute an androgynous feeling to the atmosphere. Thus, just as Woolf's androgynous vision of masculine and feminine sides of the mind, the fusion of traditional and exotic floral scents constructs a harmonizing setting that fosters the artist's full creative potential.

The garden becomes an important setting during the novel's exposition since this establishes the homoerotic relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian. While in the garden, Dorian indulges in the lilacs' sweet fragrance as Lord Henry manipulates and seduces him with his aesthetic philosophies. As Dorian becomes intrigued with Lord Henry's hedonism, a "spray of lilac [falls] from his hand upon the gravel" (Wilde 23). Through this action, Wilde informs the reader that Dorian has submitted to Lord Henry's

seduction as he loses sensation of an object in which he previously attempted to enrapture himself. He becomes lulled into a state of pleasure and desire not only with the aroma of the lilacs in the garden but also the aesthetic tenets that his new found friend divulges. Even more striking is the appearance of the "furry bee…[that] began to scramble all over the oval stellated globe of the tiny blossoms…" and Dorian watches as it is "creeping into the stained trumpet of Tyrian convolvulus. The flower seemed to quiver, and then swayed gently to and fro" (Wilde 23). The bee mirrors the exact effect Lord Henry's words have on Dorian's mind – they pollinate his thoughts of pleasure and sexual desire. The bee's literal act of fertilizing the exotic convolvulus is sexual in nature and Wilde enhances it through his sexually-charged diction where the "flower seemed to quiver," emulating an orgasmic state of ecstasy. Richard A. Kayes mentions that Dorian's seduction "takes place amidst the minutely observed movement of a pollinating bee in Basil's teeming garden suggest Wilde's interest in finding a foundation in nature for the courtship rituals of same-sex eros" ("Sexuality" 57). Thus, not only does Wilde link Dorian Gray with the exotic lilacs and the convolvulus, but he utilizes them as a code for homoerotic desire that can be traced to Lord Henry as well as Basil. Moreover, through the various associations of floral symbolism with erotic desires, it develops a queer sensibility to the overall novel.

In a similar way to Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, the flowers in *Mrs. Dalloway* symbolize the various forms of Clarissa's erotic passions — the more traditional flowers are associated with Peter Walsh and her husband, Richard, while the more exotic resemble the Sapphic love she has for Sally Seton. For example, flowers are associated with Peter Walsh in that they symbolize his suppressed passions for Clarissa. Much to his regret

and frustration, he continuously remembers the passion and admiration he has for Clarissa as well as the times they spent together during their youth. When he reaches Regent's Park, he thinks "-odd…how the thought of childhood keeps coming back to [him]- the result of seeing Clarissa perhaps" (55). She becomes the catalyst for Peter's past, those memories of ecstasy and admiration complicated by those of bitterness from when she rejected him.

These memories of an unrequited love haunt Peter throughout the novel where even the simplest image, such as flowers, ignites them. While walking through Trafalgar Square, Peter encounters a young woman who is "not married; she's young; quite young, thought Peter, the red carnation he had seen her wear…burning again in her eyes and making her lips red" (53). For Peter, the redness reflected in the carnation immediately attracts his attention, which leads him to associate the flower with the woman's "eyes" and "lips." His interest in a single, traditional flower suggests that, despite his embitterment, he is enamored by Clarissa and views her as a conventional woman. This single interest causes Peter to compare the "young woman" to Clarissa, pondering whether she is as worthy and admirable as the love from his youth. Therefore, flowers symbolize for Peter the ideal of youth; however, they also resemble the passion for the unrequited love he has for Clarissa.

Just as Peter Walsh's passion is associated with the traditional carnation, Richard Dalloway's union with Clarissa is similarly represented by the traditional rose, implicating not only their relationship's conventionality, but also its monotony for Clarissa. Upon returning from his luncheon with Lady Bruton, Richard decides to buy a bouquet of roses and tell Clarissa that he loves her. After returning home, however,

Richard "hold[s] out flowers- roses, red and white roses. (But he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words)" (118). Through this scene, Woolf achieves two purposes: first the contrasting of images between the traditional roses and the unromantic and sex-deprived couple; and secondly the affirmation of lesbian passion by juxtaposing the Dalloways' relationship with that of Sally and Clarissa. Instead of saying "I love you," Richard merely presents her with a bouquet of red and white roses that lack the passionate intensity, freshness, and exotic qualities that Clarissa finds most representative of her emotions. Jeanne Shearer claims that these "roses that Richard gives her represent [a] unity with him, and she continues to notice them throughout the novel, often at points in which she is concerned about the success of the party" (26). Ironically, while these flowers are a universal and conventional symbol of love, they are a complete contrast to the exotic flowers (the crocus, delphiniums, dahlias) that Clarissa associates with herself and her lesbian relationship. When she thinks about Richard's flowers, it is in the context of her party's success rather than genuine erotic pleasure.

Moreover, the absence of romance and sexual arousal in the relationship emphasizes and affirms that the only pure and true love Clarissa experiences is with Sally. Clarissa even recognizes that Richard wants to say something more "and she wonder[s] what? Why? There were the roses" (119). She is more concerned about the roses than her own husband because of the emotional and sentimental value. She appreciates the roses because of the straightforward message they convey of Richard's devotion; however, because of their conventionality, they become lack luster and clichéd. Clarissa is more excited by the nontraditional and aesthetic wildflowers since they allow her the freedom to construct meanings herself, however complicated they are. These

atypical flowers allow Clarissa to have a more intense experience of beauty and pleasure much like her relationship with Sally allows.

While Woolf (as well as Clarissa Dalloway) associates conventional floral symbols with traditional heterosexual love, she relates more distinctive and exotic wild flowers with Sapphic love to implicate its unconventionality. These flowers are linked to the latent, erotic passions she has for her longtime friend, Sally Seton. When she was younger, Clarissa harbored an unconventional attraction to Sally, which has a profound effect on her. While in her bedroom, Clarissa ruminates on her sexless marriage, but then finds herself remembering the incident in which "Sally stop[s]; pick[s] a flower; then kiss[es] [Clarissa's] lips. The whole world might have turned upside down!" (35). For Clarissa, this becomes the defining and happiest moment of her life. Her entire system of conventions and values become uprooted and unsettled by the very ecstasy that Sally's kiss sparks, which remains with her permanently. Moreover, when her memory shifts from the sexless marriage with Richard to the Sapphic kiss, Clarissa describes the feeling as "an illumination: a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over- the moment" (34). Woolf uses the floral symbolism of the crocus to develop an erotic visual of an ovarian symbol. This reference's ambiguity allows the reader to infer that the crocus symbolizes Clarissa in which it metaphorically translates to a fire burning inside of her. The match that sparks this fire is Sally's kiss, and the fire is the lesbian passion that exists between the two women. Thus, just like Wilde, Woolf utilizes floral imagery to express the various forms of erotic experience.

As a result, both Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* convey the various meanings of floral symbolism. On one level, they connect the threads of beauty, youth, and homoerotic desire that help construct each novel's sexual aesthetics. More importantly, however, the flowers become a method for the two writers to develop an androgynous dimension to their works; the floral symbols can mean either of two erotic possibilities where the more conventional flowers can be linked to heterosexual relationships and the more exotic floral images can represent the more homoerotic desires. Therefore, through these particular symbols, Wilde and Woolf anticipate the fluidity in the sexual natures of the protagonists of these novels, and perhaps, those of modern sexualities as well.

Chapter 4

THE SEXUAL AESTHETICS OF LIGHT AND SPACE IN *SALOMÉ* AND *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

Oscar Wilde's Symbolist play, *Salomé* (1892), opens with the following description:

> *A great terrace behind which is the banqueting hall of the palace of Herod. Some soldiers are leaning over the balcony. To the right is an immense flight of steps; to the left, at the back, an old cistern with a wall of green bronze around it. A full moon*. (293)

From this brief narrative of the setting, Wilde establishes two very critical motifs that contribute to the play's overall sexual aesthetics – light and space. The light comes from the full moon that is so matter-of-factly stated at the end of the description of the ruler's palace. It is as though the playwright included it as an afterthought; however, knowing Wilde's flamboyance and hunger for theatricality, it has the complete opposite effect. It adds suspense to the scene's exposition in several ways: one being the symbolism of a full moon generates an ominous and foreboding mood among the audience; the full moon becomes the central symbol that is connected to the play's protagonist throughout its duration; lastly it becomes the constant source of light in the play.

While the moon becomes the dominant impression of the opening description, Wilde also establishes the motif of space through the grandiosity of Herod's palace. With its banquet hall, "immense flight of steps," and outdoor terrace and balcony, the playwright establishes an open atmosphere that is free, flowing, and ventilated. Wilde contrasts this, however, with two additional props- the minor characters of the soldiers

who are “leaning over the balcony” of the terrace as well as the “old cistern” that eventually becomes the holding place for the prophet, Iokanaan, throughout the play. Both of these features intrude on the open atmosphere and become symbols of oppression – the guards resembling authority as well as representing a means of forceful invasion and the cistern serving as an eventual means of controlling any opposition to the ruling power. By immediately drawing the audience’s attention to these two motifs, Wilde is expressing their centrality not only to the overall play’s meaning but also its sexual aesthetics.

Nearly thirty-five years later, Virginia Woolf incorporated these identical motifs into her next highly-experimental masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In this novel, Woolf utilizes a variety of visual tropes that become the foundation of the novel’s sexual aesthetics: windows, water, and the lighthouse. The novel’s central image of the lighthouse becomes the main source of light; however, it also becomes linked to the central female characters of the text, the Victorian matriarch and unyielding matchmaker, Mrs. Ramsey, as well as the conflicted artist, Lily Briscoe. For both women, the lighthouse becomes a code for their sexualities in which it conveys an androgynous dimension to these women in which they contain both masculine and feminine traits. Additionally, Woolf’s use of windows and water in relation to the novel’s spatial environment contribute to the overall sexual aesthetics, particularly in the creating a distancing effect. Therefore, the sexual aesthetics of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* are developed using the similar techniques of light and space, which create a queer dimension to both texts.

Wilde and Woolf utilize the motif of light and darkness throughout their works; however, it is the source of the light and its relation to female sexuality that become essential to the texts' sexual aesthetics. In *Salomé*, the full moon provides the light, which not only induces hysteria but also becomes linked to the princess, particularly her sexuality. In the opening scene of the play, the young Syrian and Herodias's page are seen together. The page comments on the moon's nature saying it "has a strange look. She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. She might be seeking the dead" (Wilde 293). This strangeness and association with death enhances the ominous effect that the celestial orb establishes from the playwright's introductory stage directions. Not only is it a full moon, but its association with death and the supernatural also creates a sense of impending doom and incites abnormal psychological behavior. After hearing the Jews argue about the existence of angels, Herodias makes the observation that men have become completely insane. She states how "[t]hese men are mad. They have looked too long at the moon. Command them to be silent" (Wilde 315). Through Herodias' declaration, Wilde establishes a connection between lunacy and the moon. Because of the moon's unnatural appearance in both shape and color, it produces unnatural and irrational reactions among the play's ensemble. The Jews banter about whether or not angels exist, the young Syrian decides to commit suicide out of his lust for Salomé as well as the guilt he experiences for submitting to her seductions, and Herod agrees to order the death of the prophet, Iokanaan, in exchange for a few moments of voyeuristic pleasure. Moreover, by Herodias' order for silence, especially when Iokanaan calls from the cistern, she avoids the reminder of her own sexual transgressions.

As the moonlight becomes the catalyst of the characters' unnatural and hysterical behavior, it also aligns most prominently with the protagonist's unconventional sexuality as it magnifies her promiscuity and seduction. From the very beginning of the play, Wilde links his title character with the play's central image:

> The Young Syrian: How lovely the Princess Salomé is tonight.
>
> The Page of Herodias: Look at the moon. The moon has a strange look. She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. She might be seeking for the dead.
>
> The Young Syrian: She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil and has silver feet. She is like a princess with little white doves for feet She might almost be dancing. (Wilde 293)

Here, Wilde associates the moon with the princess in several instances. First, through the moon's strangely-tinted shade and Salomé wearing a "yellow veil," Wilde accentuates their unconventionality. He links them with an off-white color to suggest their unorthodox natures. Also, Wilde foreshadows the impending doom where the moon is compared to "a woman rising from a tomb" while the princess becomes the cause of death for several of the characters, including herself. Finally, there is the ambiguous antecedent for the pronoun "she" where Herodias' page uses it to refer to the feminine moon while the Syrian refers to the object of his sexual desires, the princess Salomé. Kerry Powell notes that "in this play *no one* listens and speech never breaks out of its self-enclosing circle" (65). While Salomé's beauty enraptures the young Syrian causing his libido to dominate his psychological state, he neglects to realize the difference in the

page's reference when using "she." Thus, he misinterprets her and continues discussing Salomé's alluring physical beauty, which exhibits not only the connection between the moon and the princess but also how they are easily interchangeable.

This becomes even more evident through Salomé's own observations of the moon. She comments on how it is "cold and chaste... that she is a virgin. She has a virgin beauty….Yes, she is a virgin. She has never been defiled" (Wilde 298). Through her description of the moon as a "virgin," Salomé's repeated observation solidifies the connection between the moon and sexuality. Ironically, she neglects the "strangeness" of the moon's shade that the other characters notice. This disregard contrasts her earlier innocence and purity from the other characters, which eventually changes progressively in the play.

While Wilde establishes the princess's ethereal, virginal, and innocent quality from the beginning of the play, the moonlight eventually heightens her sexuality of which she assumes the role of a seductress. The moon becomes the catalyst for deviant behavior among many of the characters, and with the profound association it has with the protagonist, she, too, is vulnerable to its effects. For example, when she encounters the prophet, Iokanaan, Salomé comments admiringly on his physical attributes: first his body, then his hair, and then finally, his mouth. It is the latter body part that she becomes "in love with" as she describes it as "a scarlet band upon an ivory tower," "a pomegranate cut with an ivory knife," and "a branch of coral that fishermen have found in the twilight of the sea," ending with "[a]llow me to kiss your mouth" (Wilde 298-99). Iokanaan's handsome features enthrall her to the point where she becomes sexually aroused and inclined to kiss him. In order for her to receive this gratification of pleasure, she

repeatedly flatters him with elaborate analogies to lull him into a state of submission and then ending her observation with a declarative statement of power. Salomé's sexual promiscuity becomes magnified through the combination of white and red imagery – the innocence, purity, and virginal qualities that are initially established with the moon and princess contrasted with the more lusting, aggressive, sexual desire that, at this point, dominates her.

Even when her father requests that she dance for him, Salomé expresses this aggressive sexual behavior. When the king demands her to perform the dance of the seven veils, she initially refuses until he offers her the opportunity to make any request she wishes. After agreeing to perform, Salomé's performance produces an ecstatic and erotic response in Herod in which he replies, "Ah! so you will dance with naked feet! Splendid!" (Wilde 322) and "magnificent!...Come near so that I may give you what you have earned" (Wilde 323). Through her dancing, Salomé seduces the king into a state of pleasure in which he offers to fulfill any desire she wishes, even the most horrifying wish that threatens his power as a ruler. Through these instances, Wilde's Salomé functions as an archetype of the *femme fatale*, a vision of the New Woman that evolved during the *fin de siècle*. "Many of the period's most arresting ideas and images about sexuality are evident in the late-Victorian fascination with an atavistically aggressive female" in which Wilde's *Salomé* is the most successful depiction of *femme fatales* (Kayes 56). This aggressive female uses her beauty to seduce and dominate her male counterparts, which attributes an androgynous dimension to her. Thus, through Wilde's employing of the feminine moon as a source of light, he establishes a queer dimension to the play's central character. While the moonlight is linked with her pure, virginal quality, the phases and

lunacy that it incites among the characters, arouses Salomé's sexual desires in which she evolves from this traditional feminine beauty to an androgynous *femme fatale* that challenges the patriarchal power of the play.

While the source of light in Wilde's play is more natural and characterized as more feminine, the Godrevy Lighthouse in Woolf's novel is particularly androgynous, especially in its connection with Mrs. Ramsay. For example, the opening scene of "The Window" establishes how the lighthouse produces a sense of desire in the characters. Woolf depicts Mrs. Ramsay reassuring her son, James, that "'Yes, of course, it will be fine tomorrow…But you will have to be up with the lark'" (Woolf 7). Her reassurance instills a comfort in her son that he would be able to embark on a voyage to the lighthouse. Moreover, he becomes enraptured with such an "extraordinary joy" that it becomes a moment of ecstasy for the six year old boy, nearly equivalent to that of sexual desire. This moment, however, becomes interrupted when Mr. Ramsay contradicts his wife's reassuring statement, "'But…it won't be fine,'" and incites not only disappointment in young James, but also a particular rage in which "[h]ad there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and kill him, there and then, James would have seized it" (Woolf 8). This opening scene becomes very poignant because it establishes the opposition between the two engendered opinions regarding the excursion to the lighthouse. While Mrs. Ramsay attempts to console James and alleviate the despair of having his desire crushed by providing a sense of hope, Mr. Ramsay asserts his patriarchal authority (and stringent Victorian nature) through his rejection.

The lighthouse also becomes the subject of tension between Mr. Ramsay and his son in which the latter harbors violent, pseudo-oedipal angst. This tension resurfaces throughout the novel in which James becomes increasingly embittered. Just as Mr. Ramsay approaches, his son resurrects all of the hatred he has towards his father and "hope[s] to make him move on…he hope[s] to recall his mother's attention, which, he knew angrily, wavered instantly his father stopped" (Woolf 40). This anger stems from his father's rejection of fulfilling his desire to travel to the lighthouse as well as the rivalry over vying for Mrs. Ramsay's attention. Moreover, the reader notices how James eagerly gravitates towards his mother as she is the one who supports his desire to travel to the lighthouse. Thus, Woolf immediately establishes the connection between Mrs. Ramsay and the Godrevy Lighthouse where she gratifies her son's desires instead of repressing them.

Mrs. Ramsay even aligns herself with the lighthouse as it provides her a Woolfian "moment of being" that establishes a certain affinity with life. While she knits and reflects on the day's occurrences, particularly James's disappointment, Mrs. Ramsay looks:

> to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke…she became the thing she looked at…. (Woolf 66).

At this particular moment, Mrs. Ramsay's disposition is one of rapture hence "this mood" she experiences is "some exclamation of triumph over life when things come together."

She associates this feeling of excitement and pleasure with the "stroke" of the lighthouse's beam, which she claims ownership as "her stroke." Her becoming "the thing she looked at" sharply contrasts her current relationship with her husband, which fails to produce the same erotic effect as her solitude with the lighthouse, an androgynous symbol. The light engulfs her and magnifies her emotional ecstasy similar to the moon's effect on Salomé's sexual desires for the prophet, Iokanaan. Because it induces such pleasure in Mrs. Ramsay, she actively searches for this experience as it brings her a thrilling exhilaration that is comparable to heightened erotic intensity Salomé experiences when she attempts to seduce Iokanaan and the fulfillment of her kissing his mouth at the end of the play. Later on, Mrs. Ramsay ponders "how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one…[there] rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover" (Woolf 66-67). This entire experience unites her with the lighthouse where she feels a sense of a communion as a bride meets her lover. While this establishes the sexual implications of this feeling of unity, what is also striking is that Woolf's disclosure of the lover's gender is ambiguous; the lover could be male or female.

Moreover, there is a more perceptibly androgynous dimension to Mrs. Ramsay that resembles a similar nature of the lighthouse. During the scene where she is reading the Grimm's fairytale, "The Fisherman's Wife," Woolf's description of her female character is very arresting. While with James, she is "sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself…burning and illuminating…into this delicious fecundity, this fountain spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare" (Woolf 40). Woolf paints for her readers a scene that contains both

masculine and feminine images. Mrs. Ramsay assumes both genders where she expels both "energy, a column of spray" yet portrays an "animated" expression as she is reading with James. While the "fountain and spray of life" is symbolically phallic, there is also the feminine art of the storytelling. Interestingly, the tale she chooses to read James is about feminine desire. In her "Virginia Woolf and the Flounder," Luisa Rubini mentions how "the topic of desire, delineated by the fairy story, concerns far more women's desires and their legitimacy through the book's double protagonist in the transition from the Victorian to the Georgian era" (289). Thus, there are both masculine and feminine attributes to Mrs. Ramsay, which becomes analogous to that of the lighthouse's architecture. While it is phallic in structure, the lighthouse also contains the concave image of light, similarly emulating the moon's orb as seen in Wilde's *Salomé*. Through the association with this androgynous structure and the light it produces, as well as the erotic implications that the lighthouse has for her, Woolf creates a queer dimension to Mrs. Ramsay as well as the use of light throughout her novel.

Coinciding with the use of light imagery throughout their respective works, Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf both utilize the motif of space to further develop their sexual aesthetics that contribute to queer readings of these works. In *Salomé*, this becomes evident in two images – the enclosed space of the cistern as well as the use of such color imagery as black and red. As the play begins, the audience notices the contrasting images of the cistern surrounded by green bronze and the fairly open space of the palace balcony. The bronze receptacle functions primarily as a storage of liquids (mostly water); however, in the case of the play, it also serves as the prison cell of Iokanaan and becomes a point of fixation among the audience as well as characters. This becomes

evident when the princess leans over to stare into it and comments, “So dark down there! It must be dreadful to be in so black a hole! It is like a tomb…” (Wilde 300). The darkness of the cistern contributes a confining and oppressive mood to the play, only to be enhanced further with the comparison to “a tomb.” Much like the unnatural appearance of the moon, it functions as a symbol of impending doom, specifically the prophet’s own death.

Additionally, it becomes a means of suppression of threats to the ruling authority (since it functions as a prison for Iokanaan) as well as sexuality. After the princess expresses her sexual desires to the prophet, he rejects her advances by stating, “I will not look at you. I will not look at you. You are accursed, Salomé, you are accursed” in which he returns down into the cistern (Wilde 307). Iokanaan claims that Salomé is “accursed” and impure based on her uninhibited sexual behavior, as well as her mother’s transgressions, and in order for him to avoid submitting to her advances, he returns to the enclosed space. He uses it as an escape from the temptations of sexual deviance that the princess (and her mother) comes to embody throughout the play; it becomes a method to preserve his morality. Ironically, Wilde constructs a queer sensibility in which Iokanaan is situated in a receptacle that not only would be considered concave, but also contains fluid much like a woman’s womb. This retreat implicates some inversion in the prophet, but more importantly, the cistern functions as a containment or closet of secrecy. Additionally, the cistern contrasts the vastness of palace balcony where the deviant behavior occurs, the realm of corrupt behavior of which Herod oversees. Through these contrasting images, Wilde uses the motif of space as a sexual aesthetic to further develop a queer reading of his play, *Salomé*.

In order to contrast the moonlight that serves as the other dominating image, Wilde also utilizes color imagery, specifically black and red, which also impacts the spatial elements of the play. Both of these colors add to the oppressive atmosphere by providing liminal effects. The darkness of the night sky, the chasm of the cistern, and the prophet's hair counterbalance the white imagery found in the moon, the princess, and the silver charger. In some cases, the darkness provides a murkiness or undefinable feature as seen in Salomé's observation when looking down into the cistern or in her commenting on Iokanaan's eyes. She mentions that his eyes "are terrible. They might be black holes burned by torches in a Tyrian tapestry. They might be black caves where dragons dwell, black Egyptian caves where dragons make their lairs. They might be black lakes stirred by fantastic moons…." (Wilde 303). Salomé's analogies suggest that she can easily become lost in his eyes since they are so dark; however, it is even more suggestive of a cruelty as they "are terrible" and as though they were "burned by torches." Because they are so inconspicuous, they are emotionless and lifeless which frustrates the princess as she desires the prophet to submit to her seduction.

While the dark imagery can convey a limitless and undefinable effect, it can also establish boundaries and distinction. Most prominently, the darkness of the night provides a clear outline of the moon's fullness; however, Wilde also uses it in reference to the physical attributes of the prophet. When she is commenting on Iokanaan's aesthetic features, Salomé mentions that his hair is like "the nights when the moon does not show herself, when the stars are afraid, are not so black…Nothing in the world is so black as your hair…Allow me to touch your hair" (Wilde 305). When she is describing the prophet's beauty, she begins commenting on the whiteness of his skin, which she

quickly criticizes after he rejects her. The protagonist then flatters him again by describing the aesthetic quality of his hair, which she qualifies that "[n]othing in the world" is as black as his hair. This becomes a distinguishing characteristic of his physicality, especially when next to the fairness of his white skin. It almost reveals a subconscious fetish that she has toward the prophet, an obsession or means of idolizing and worshipping his handsome features.

Woolf uses similar techniques in *To the Lighthouse* that contribute to her novel's sexual aesthetics in which various structural images such as the house's framed windows and the lighthouse as well as the use of blue to provide a distancing yet unifying spatial effect. Just like Oscar Wilde's use of the cistern and palace balcony in *Salomé*, Woolf utilizes the contrasting images of the windows of the Ramsay's house and the lighthouse to contribute to the novel's sexual aesthetics in which the windows represent oppressive feelings of confinement and entrapment while the lighthouse provides more freedom and tranquility through its distancing effect. Woolf establishes the feeling of oppression and captivity from the very beginning when Charles Tansley remarks that "'There'll be no landing at the lighthouse tomorrow'" while he is "clapping his hands together as he stood at the window with [Mr. Ramsay]" (Woolf 11). This observation becomes a disappointment to James who is passionate about traveling to the lighthouse; it provides him a sense of pleasure and denial of this feeling instills embitterment towards his father, who is also staring out the window. James becomes confined to the Ramsay's house, which mirrors the emotional confinement that he must wait another day to voyage to his favorite destination. This also produces discontentment in Mrs. Ramsay as she "wish[es] they would both leave her and James alone and go on talking" and becomes embittered

with Mr. Tansley for upsetting her son (Woolf 11). Her maternal instinct to shield her son from disappointment considers both Mr. Tansley and her husband a threat to the harmony and pleasure that her son, as well as herself, relishes.

When considering the windows' relation to Mrs. Ramsay, it becomes more paradoxical where she becomes confined to traditional female roles but then continues to glimpse out the window as an attempt to breach these boundaries. Throughout the first section of the novel, she repeatedly thinks of how the "windows should be open, and doors shut – simple as it was, could none of them remember it?" (Woolf 31). By preferring the windows to be open, Mrs. Ramsay expresses her desire to be in an spatial setting where she is connected with the external, pastoral world, a rarity as she is seen throughout most of the first section tied to the house such as when sitting with James on the porch as Lily Briscoe paints or hosting the dinner party for the family and guests. Her limitation to the house reinforces the patriarchal and heterosexist role of female domesticity, which the windows' frame symbolizes. The house literally bounds her where she is forced to appeal to Mr. Ramsay's moodiness and reassure his superiority as a patriarchal figure, which becomes a form of gender inversion. By constantly looking for approval, Mr. Ramsay becomes dependent on his wife for self-affirmation; this undermines the Victorian conception of masculine of which men were expected to be independent and self-sufficient, not emotional and reliable on a woman's support.

She desires, however, to transcend this limiting role as she becomes compelled to gaze outward, particularly when experiencing aesthetic moments of being. While the lighthouse's rays become the principal exemplar of how Mrs. Ramsay transcends the boundaries of her traditional role, there are other moments when she experiences these

existential moments. When she observes her children shortly after the dinner party, she feels "inclined just for a moment to stand still…and pick out one particular thing…that mattered; to detach it; separate it off; clean it of all the emotions and odds and ends of things, and so hold it before her…" (Woolf 114-15). It is during this particular moment where she chooses to focus on the elm trees outside the staircase window, which provides her "a sense of movement." Moreover, after leaving James's room, she looks out this same window to see "the yellow harvest moon…[and] for no reason at all, Mrs. Ramsay became a little girl of twenty, full of gaiety" (Woolf 118). Through these moments of being, Mrs. Ramsay fully transcends time and space where she not only connects with the swaying of the elm trees in the wind, but also regresses back to a youthful experience of sheer rapture and "gaiety." This window gazing produces in her a sense of excitement, which contrasts the monotony and discontent of her current existence. She "transcends her worries about children and the passing of time with a rhythmical assertion of well-being. Although she immediately ridicules it herself, it is this instinctive rapport with life and light and time which gives Mrs. Ramsay her serenity and charisma" (Dowling 160). This not only queers the symbolic meaning of the windows but also queers Mrs. Ramsay's character. While she adheres to the patriarchal and heterosexist values, as demonstrated by her constant matchmaking of viable suitors for her children as well as her devotion toward her husband, she simultaneously attempts to transcend the liminal domestic roles that are expected of her.

Whereas Mrs. Ramsay is confined to the domestic setting of the house, Lily Briscoe is more associated with pastoral environment which aids her aesthetic anxieties by providing her with the necessary physical and emotional space. For Lily, she desires

unity and balance, which pits her against Mrs. Ramsay's campaign of marriage and sexual reproduction. In order to evade such marital investments, Lily yearns for space and freedom. In "The Lighthouse," after Mr. Ramsay leaves with Cam and James on their quest to the lighthouse, Lily thinks that "so much depends…upon distance" (Woolf 194). By having the surviving Ramsay's sojourn to the lighthouse, Woolf creates an atmosphere of solitude for Lily where she can finally work on her painting. Prior to the Ramsay's leaving on their quest, she feels the pressures from the imposition of Mr. Ramsay's presence and the anger toward Mrs. Ramsay (and her death). The atmosphere becomes oppressive for Lily, but when watching the Ramsay's vanish into the background of the blue horizon, Lily experiences a sensation of freedom and satisfaction. Lily maintains her integrity both as an artist and as a lesbian through the space and distance that the lighthouse provides. This exemplifies Woolf's "androgynous vision," which is necessary for the artist to achieve complete creative perfection. Lily's feminine emotions, which are overwhelming her, are balanced by the masculine distance and reason, which allows her to regain control of her artistic vision and complete the painting.

As an individual, Lily demonstrates this need for freedom and isolation through her defiance of Mrs. Ramsay's masculine agenda for her to marry and reproduce. While observing Bankes's rapturously looking at Mrs. Ramsay, Lily reflects on Mrs. Ramsay "[a]rriving late at night…[where] she would adroitly shape; even maliciously twist…[and] insist that she must, Minta must, they all must marry" (52-53). Despite having such a deep appreciation and reverence for Mrs. Ramsay, Lily also has a profound dissatisfaction toward her mother due to the manipulation and pressuring of her daughters to marry. Lily suggests that Mrs. Ramsay turns this agenda into an art-form where she

resorts to Machiavellian methods in which she "adroitly shape[s]," "maliciously twist[s]," and "half turn[s] back" to gesture intimately yet aggressively the necessity for her daughters to marry. Lily is more concerned with the interiority of life rather than its exteriority, which is analogous to the conception of marriage. Mrs. Ramsay values marriage for the very fact that it results in procreation, not the intimacy that is associated with the sexual act. Thus, it is with this understanding that Lily defies Mrs. Ramsay's values and refuses to marry; it becomes a façade for her and lacks meaning.

Moreover, Lily appreciates the solitude that maintaining her integrity provides as it enables her to solely infuse her creative talents into her artwork. She mentions that "…gathering a desperate courage she would urge her own exemption from the universal law…she liked to be alone…to be herself; she was not made for [marriage]; and so have to…confront Mrs. Ramsay's simple certainty that her dear Lily, her little Brisk, was a fool" (Woolf 53). She avoids conforming to social standards of marriage and procreation, which serves as the tension between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. "Lily's efforts are belittled by Mrs. Ramsay, not from any aesthetic point of view but from the fact that Lily will not be a pawn in [the matriarch's] matchmaking plans" (Dowling 150-51). Her refusing to be a pawn in Mrs. Ramsay's matchmaking preserves not only Lily's individuality but also her artistic spirit. This becomes analogous to conception of female sexuality in the novel – where Mrs. Ramsay chooses to conform to social pressures and values of heterosexual relationships, Lily Briscoe defies social conventions and maintains her own lesbian identity.

In order to create the balance that Lily desires and requires to achieve the completion of her painting, Woolf utilizes color imagery. As a professional artist, Lily's

appreciation is for the process of artistic creation in which it becomes emotive as well as provides a sense of balance and unity. In the final section of the novel, "The Lighthouse," the family ventures on a memorial "pilgrimage" to the lighthouse while Lily is left to confront her painting that has remained incomplete for the past ten years. As she paints, Lily discovers "[a]gainst her will she had come to the surface, and found herself half out of the picture…" and later ponders "[f]or how could one express in words these emotions of the body? express that emptiness there?...It was one's body feeling, not one's mind. The physical sensations that…had become extremely unpleasant" (Woolf 181). By her being "half out of the picture" and her inability to "express in words these emotions of the body," she is not only distracted and disoriented, she is caught between two worlds – the realistic/physical present and the imaginary/abstract transcendent. The cause for this disorientation is two-fold: first, the unexpected death of Mrs. Ramsay; then, the foreignness of the bodily sensations caused by the catharsis of grief and anger toward Mrs. Ramsay's death. Since Lily defines her sexuality in a more platonic sense, she would be inexperienced in terms of these bodily sensations of reverberated grief and anger. Thus, explaining the unsettled and anxious feelings she experiences and her distraction from her painting. It is not after she confronts these conflicted feelings, as signified in her crying Mrs. Ramsay's name, does she return to her painting. In this re-visitation, Lily "attack[s] that problem of the hedge" and later "[h]er mood [comes] back to her…[in order to] to hold the scene…in a vise and let nothing come in to spoil it" (Woolf 184, 204). She resurfaces a determination and focus in order to complete her painting. Thus the process becomes emotive for Lily where she becomes overwhelmed by anxiety, but eventually regains her focus in order to finish the painting.

At the end of the novel, there is a simultaneous harmony achieved- just as Lily finishes her painting, Woolf finishes her novel- which is apparent in both the utilization of the color, "blue," and also an affirmation of her own aesthetic vision. The function of the blue, particularly in the ocean, provides a moment of perspective through the distance it establishes, but it also provides a moment of unity. As she witnesses the Ramsay's embarking on their pilgrimage to the lighthouse, Lily overlooks the bay. While there, she notices how "the sea stretched like silk across the bay. Distance had an extraordinary power; they had been swallowed up in it, she felt, they were gone for ever, they had become the nature of things. It was so calm; it was so quiet" (Woolf 191). While Lily is overlooking the water, she notices the Ramsay's boat "had been swallowed up" into the background of blue. They disappear into the horizon, the point where both the blue sky and blue ocean meet. The color blue becomes very poignant and reappears multiple times throughout the novel. Literary critic Jack Stewart mentions how "distance and blue are spatial or plastic equivalents for memory, emotion, and vision" (93). This results in a sense of tranquility and unity for Lily, as she realizes how "calm" and "quiet" everything was (outside of the sleep-induced Carmichael). It provides a moment of creative inspiration for Lily where she finally finishes her painting. This technique resembles Wilde's use of color in *Salomé* except that instead of the polarizing darkness of black to contrast the white of such images as the moon and the characters' pale complexions, Woolf utilizes the color of blue to increase the landscape's spatial capacity. Additionally, through this technique, it suggests a sexual intercourse between the sky and ocean, both of which have dualistic natures, an aggressive and tempestuous side as well as a tranquil

and soothing one. Thus, this balance suggests that the natural world has an androgynous dimension.

While the blueness of the ocean provides a symbolic unity for Lily, the affirmation of her aesthetic vision achieves Lily's desired unity. At the very end of the novel, Lily finishes her painting: "[t]here it was- her picture…With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (211). In this very last passage, Woolf ends her novel with a very optimistic tone. With the last "line…in the centre," it produces in Lily an "intense" satisfaction, almost a feeling of "ecstasy" toward her finished product. This feeling of ecstasy suggests an intense erotic experience between the artist and her work. This is induced from the blueness of the water and sky where "as a substantive, the word *blue* conveys a substance (atmosphere or pigment) as well as inviting an imaginative response" (Stewart 81). Moreover, by Lily "having [her] vision," it suggests that she achieved the very unity, or intimacy, she desired to achieve. Through this achievement of unity, Woolf illustrates an optimism as well for erotic possibilities; however, it is those erotic possibilities that are not based on visual aesthetics but more of emotional, or platonic, connection.

As a result, both Wilde's *Salomé* and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* employ the similar techniques of light and space to develop the sexual aesthetics latent in their works. Through the incorporation of the contrasting motifs of light and dark as well as proximity and distance, these Modernists develop a balance or an "androgynous vision" that lend themselves to a queer reading of these works. Moreover, it establishes a

stylistic progression in their developments as gay and lesbian writers and artistic visionaries from moving more toward an aesthetic subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

In her famous essay on modern fiction, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), Virginia Woolf made two assertions in front of the Heretics Club of Cambridge, one was how every individual is a judge of human character while the other "more disputable perhaps, [was] to the effect that on or about December, 1910, human character changed" (26). Around this time, several events that helped shape the Modern era occurred: beginning with the year Woolf mentions in this essay, the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition arrived in London, curated by her close friend and fellow Bloomsbury member, Roger Frye; four years later, the infamous "Great War" erupted, creating disillusionment throughout Western Civilization and impacting Modernist writers both in Europe and in America; and several years later women earned the right to vote. All of these events paved the way for a new philosophical and artistic approach among intellectuals known as Modernism. Through her repertoire and very own life, Virginia Woolf embodied three principles of that characterized this movement– subjectivity, rebellion and nonconformity, and freedom of sexual expression– making her the solitary female writer among the caliber of such great Modernists as Joyce, Faulkner, and Rilke.

However, the beginnings of this change in human character can arguably be seen towards the end of the nineteenth century. In 1895, the Oscar Wilde "gross indecency" trials brought homosexuality to the foreground, giving it an image that countered the Victorian binary of masculinity and femininity. Alan Sinfield explains that "same-sex passion was being represented, in Wilde's time, as quintessentially masculine…[but] the trials reoriented it" (vii). Through his ascribing men with effeminacy, Wilde demonstrated that homosexuality and queer identities are not limited to the pre-Victorian

same-sex masculine love. What he inadvertently accomplished through his trials, Sinfield argues, was:

> construct[ed] a different framework of interpretation: Wilde appeared…as one who consorted with male prostitutes. Yet he was still the effeminate dandy. So the two figures coalesced. At this point, dandyism forfeited the protection from same-sex imputations that the image of general dissoluteness had afforded. The leisure-class man, not the insignificant [early modern] molly, was the sodomite….The Wildean model produced an image even more specific…the queer – dandified, aesthetic, effeminate….The queer was clearly in view, and clearly unacceptable. (122)

It was this "Wildean model" of queer identity that allowed for the visible coexistence of opposing gender binaries in a single person. This new image becomes more subjective in relation to the rigid gender categories of Victorian England by allowing the existence of new erotic possibilities to become acknowledged. Thus, Wilde not only challenged and shifted the Victorian conceptions of (homo)sexuality and gender, but he also began the shift in human character (particularly in relation to human sexuality) that Woolf asserts decades later in her "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" essay.

This study has attempted to accomplish two over-arching goals– to illustrate the comparisons between two Modernist heavyweights, Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf, in how they vacillate and subvert mainstream society both through their life experiences and their works' aesthetic elements as well as to establish a continuum of queer identity that predates and anticipates the contributions of Michel Foucault and contemporary queer

theory. While there is a plethora of scholarship in existence on Wilde and Woolf respectively, few scholars have placed these writers in conversation with each other (the few exceptions being Ruth Vanita's 1996 study, "The Wilde-ness of Woolf: Evading and Embracing Death in *Orlando* and *The Waves*" and the more recent, Dick Schulz's *Setting the Record Queer*). Thus, this study's ongoing intention of juxtaposing Wilde and Woolf is fulfilled through the parallels in their lives— their experiences of "living on both sides of the hyphen" culturally, historically, politically, and most importantly, sexually. Additionally, both writers embraced the spotlight where they both enjoyed being a spectacle. Of course, Wilde was more overt in his flamboyant public "performances" while Woolf tended to be more subdued. She still, however, desired to be the center of attention, particularly in regards to her writing where she envision her relationships with other writers in terms of rivalries, and thus both writers thrived on the dramas that life afforded them.

Moreover, these parallels continue into and are echoed through their core literary works, especially in the aesthetic elements and techniques they infused to establish a sexual dimension to their works. In their earlier texts, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, Wilde and Woolf utilize the symbolism of flowers to encode the various erotic responses among the main characters. This use of concrete objects to evoke and convey such emotions of ecstasy and pleasure is very impressionistic. For the Impressionists, who were rebellious and subversive just like Wilde and Woolf, their aim was "to present material not as it is to the objective observer but as it is *seen* or *felt* to be by the impressionist or character in a single moment" (Harmon 266). In addition to the Impressionist dimension, both associate the more traditional flowers with heterosexual

relationships while the more exotic flowers are utilized during moments reflecting same-sex desire. Thus through the multiple meanings and emotions the flowers embody and evoke in the characters, they become a queer symbol that enhances the novels' sexual aesthetics.

A shift occurs, however, in the sexual aesthetics evident in *Salomé* and *To the Lighthouse* from a more concrete symbolism to more abstract as evidenced in the use of colors as well as elements of light and space. This is not to say that their earlier works did not contain these elements; however, color, light, and space played more crucial roles and also embodied the principal concerns of the Post-Impressionists. These artists, as well as Wilde and Woolf, shared a reliance on vibrant colors that their Impressionist predecessors favored. In her study of Woolf's aesthetics, Jane Goldman mentions that:

> [a]lthough Woolf makes other painterly analogies for writing…it is colour she emphasizes. On one level she uses colouring as a metaphor for the writer's descriptive powers…On another level, this metaphor extends to Woolf's description of the physical act of writing itself: like painting, writing is a process of marking – to write is to paint with words, to create colour. (114-15)

This certainly is prevalent in *To the Lighthouse*; however, Wilde's use of color in his Symbolist play is not as varying as Woolf's until the end. When Herod attempts to persuade Salomé to change her mind over requesting the head of Iokaanan, he lists all of his possessions to entice her: "collar of pearls…that look like silver moonbeams"; "topazes that are as yellow as the eyes of tigers," "pink as the eyes of pigeons," and "green as the eyes of cats"; "opals that burn an icy flame"; and "sapphires big as eggs and blue as blue flowers" (Wilde 327). Thus, despite the varying degree of the spectrum used

throughout the play, Wilde creates this "explosion" of color that becomes constantly seen in not only Post-Impressionist art, but also in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

Additionally the aesthetic elements that Wilde and Woolf use in these two works are rooted in the Post-Impressionist concern regarding perspective and subjectivity. Roger Fry, commented that Post-Impressionists "do not seek to give…a pale reflex of actual appearances, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality….they wish to make images appeal[ing] to our disinterested and contemplative imagination" (qtd. in Kelley 62). This idea of creating "images" that "appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination" is the principle of subjectivity. The more important aspect of the artwork is providing a perspective for the audience, not imitating the content. For example in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe's painting of Mrs. Ramsay and James in which she utilizes a purple triangle to represent them is often characterized as Post-Impressionist in style because of the various interpretations in provides. Lily "sees [Mrs. Ramsay] as a dome shape, but shortly afterwards she explains to Bankes that in her painting the triangular shape is Mrs. Ramsay reading to James.…" (Dowling 53). Additionally, the purple triangle "expresses a complex reality: mother and child; the child merged with the mother; and the difference of being that unfolds in the triangulation of desire for every subject" (Froula 146). As seen in the purple triangle's multiple representations, the Post-Impressionists focused more on the form and the subjective responses it provided, thus adding a realistic quality to the art. Therefore, not only do the aesthetic elements Wilde and Woolf develop in their works become another point of comparison, but they also emulate the progression of Modernist art from the late nineteenth-century Impressionism to the early twentieth-century Post-Impressionism.

As artistic visionaries, Wilde and Woolf contributed fundamental texts that not only advanced Modernist aesthetic principles surrounding art and literature but also that provoked societal conceptions of same-sex desire. In contemporary queer theory, post-structuralist Michel Foucault has been fundamental to this field with his famous post-modern study, *The History of Sexuality*. As essential as Foucault has been, it is the works of Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf that are arguably the more pioneering. Not only did they personally experience the impact of sexual difference, but they also reflected these concerns in their writing. Richard Kaye argues that Wilde has continuously been "*the* literary figure around whom Gay Studies and Queer Theory in Britain and the United States have defined themselves as academic fields… Wilde's trial intersected with historically pivotal developments in modern sexuality… that continues to harbor a broad current resonance" ("Gay Studies" 191). His serving as the figure for queer theory enhances his legitimacy as a Modernist writer, which many critics have discredited him for being, as well as a social theorist. "Wilde's revolutionary contribution was not only to conceive gender, personal identity, and life itself as 'performed,' but to welcome this recognition with open arms and adopt, in both theory and practice, a calculated strategy of self-fashioning" (Powell 4). His "theory and practice" of self-fashioning enabled Wilde with a mode of not only coping with his double identity, but also another means of subverting mainstream Victorian society. Foucault may be fundamental in his politics, but Wilde was even the more essential because he life became the basis of queer theory.

Likewise, Virginia Woolf serves as an anticipator of queer theory and Michel Foucault's theories. In an issue solely devoted to Virginia Woolf and queer theory, Madelyn Detloff and Brenda Helt attributes Foucault's concept of "biopower" to her.

Woolf envisions a complexity of "interlocking networks (or webs) of intimate behavior, social conventions, pedagogical 'memory and tradition,' and ideological, moral, and political influences" (2). It is this overlap of private and public spheres that complicates the regulation of one's life that both Foucault and his predecessor recognized, and it is the role of queer theory to unlock all of the underlying possibilities in these "interlocking webs." Thus, Woolf not only anticipated queer theory but also Foucault's post-structuralism.

Therefore, this study has demonstrated that while having no direct communication during their lifetimes and the minute comparative studies completed to today, Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf are more comparable than one might think. They have experienced similar triumphs and obstacles in their lives in terms of cultural, political, and sexual identities; they have developed works of literary art that utilize similar Impressionist and Post-Impressionist techniques; and, more importantly, they laid the foundations for not only a fundamental sociologist but also a contemporary school of literary thought that is still in (re-)formation today. Both writers embody the "androgynous vision" that Woolf expounded in *A Room of One's Own* through their constant vacillations in their lives and their works, and illustrates the fluidity, complexity, and constant flux that is at the center of artistic creation as well as queer identity politics. Moreover, through the work that both Wilde and Woolf contributed to Modernist literature, they have provided "a new and definite reality," a reality that is experienced by those people who were often voiceless and marginalized for the unconventional relationships they experienced.

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