The Representation of Nature in Virginia Woolf's Novels

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Abstract

In Virginia Woolf's novels, Nature is always present. It takes the form of the flowers in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the sea in *To the Lighthouse*, and the trees in *Orlando*. In all of these novels, Nature dominates the scenery, and the visions of Woolf's protagonists. While its specific functions vary depending on the case, Nature generally represents an inspiration for self-discovery. It helps Clarissa and Septimus to discover the true essence of life; it teaches Lily how to be a woman and an artist in Edwardian England; it leads Orlando to embrace a new and androgynous gender identity. To see how Virginia Woolf gives such a great power to Nature, the four chapters of this thesis are going to analyze in detail the functions of flowers, the sea, and the trees in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando*. In particular, the thesis will consider Virginia Woolf's representations of Nature in relation to those of the Romantics, and to the woman's feminist ideas. Quite frequently, Woolf's personal desire to promote change for both her sex and marginalized people becomes alive on the page.

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1. Introduction

A strong component of Nature is always present in the novels of Virginia Woolf: there are flowers in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the sea in *To the Lighthouse*, and trees in *Orlando*. Nature plays a key role in the development of the plot and characters in Woolf's novels. As her stories unfold, they rely on the presence of specific natural components to inspire Woolf's notable "moments of being" in her protagonists. In *Mrs. Dalloway,* Clarissa, Septimus, and Peter feel their connection to life when they come into contact with flowers; in *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe understands herself as both a woman and an artist when she looks at the sea; in *Orlando*, Orlando gets past confusion of changing identity by finding rootedness in trees.

Woolf's use of Nature evolves over the course of her career. Earlier in her career, as in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf makes the natural component part of the social world. Clarissa Dalloway's flowers are part of Nature, but also what a florist will provide for a party. In *To the Lighthouse* the sea is a natural element that helps Lily Briscoe define her distance from social commitments, such as marriage. Most radically, in *Orlando,* the influence of trees brings to Orlando a sense of self in Nature that is organic and cosmic, and almost entirely free of social considerations.

Woolf's use of Nature is strongly influenced by Romantic poetry, particularly by the idea that Nature is that which can inspire moments of self-reflection and experience of the Sublime. Her influences are naturally more English than German and Italian, though Woolf is influenced by ideas that might also be found in Leopardi and Goethe.

Before considering the new shapes that Romantic ideas take in Woolf's novels, it is important to consider some of the characteristics of the Romantic movement. Differentiating itself from the German and Italian currents of the movement, English Romanticism

developed in two phases: the first was led by Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth, while the second found its principal exponents in Byron, Keats, and Shelley. Writers from both phases of the movement developed their work around the theme of Nature. Louis Dupré argues that "disappointed by political events in Europe, [the Romantics] cultivated nostalgic dreams of a return to nature and the quiet, traditional life that Goethe had depicted in *Hermann und Dorothea*, or to a memory of the past, as Walter Scott had done in his Waverly novels" (3). In this sense, the Romantics strongly promoted, through their works, a return to the past; a return that often involved going back to Nature. In a similar manner, Dupré advocates that "in various ways, all early Romantic poets experienced a desire, a *Sehnsucht*, for an unreachable idea" (3). He then goes on to say that "the term *infinite*, so often used as a predicate of the unattainable object of those aspirations, betrays both its surpassing and its indefinite nature" (Dupré 3). The Romantics did not simply strive to return to Nature, but they aimed to return to a Nature that contained the infinite. The existence of this infinite often led to pantheistic interpretations of the natural world, the immanent principles of which often inspired poets. However, even without considering this aspect, the Romantics generally seemed to consider Nature as a crucial source of inspiration. In William Blake's poetry, Nature constitutes the principal point of reflection for his speakers; speakers that often embody the role of the poet prophet. Accordingly, it can generally be said that the Romantics worshipped a near and yet distant Nature. This Nature, especially through its sublime landscapes, inspired these poets, and became a central element of their literary productions.

In a similar manner, Romantic poets also engaged—although less frequently—with ideas of femininity. It is particularly in the ideas of the Romantics and Gothic Romantics that ideas of femininity started to be challenged, and began to take on new shapes. When explaining the differences and similarities between the Romantic and the Gothic literary movements, Patrick O'Malley ascribes to both interesting ideas about gender, sexuality, and femininity. He

argues that "the Romantic-era engagement with theories and structures of dominance becomes deeply gendered and eroticised (. . .), even as it presents itself in the guise of the Gothic" (O'Malley 333). In this sense, O'Malley argues that both the Romantic and the Gothic literary movements present complex ideas of womanhood. In the works belonging to these two genres, women tend to be imprisoned in reality or metaphorically, and often find themselves in positions of disadvantage (O'Malley 324). Jerrold Hogle highlights how "women are the figures most fearfully trapped between contradictory pressures and impulses" (Hogle qtd. in O'Malley 324). It appears that "the modes of Romanticism and the Gothic deploy gender and sexuality as, simultaneously, key terms of distinction from each other and, ultimately, sites of identity, finding the Romantic in the Gothic and Gothic in Romanticism" (O'Malley 336). According to O'Malley, this theory reflects Samuel Taylor Coleridge's own ideas about the representation of women, and about the similarities between the two genres (336). The question of gender can then be interpreted as an important Romantic theme. Particularly relevant Romantic and pre-Romantic works, such Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, dwell on what it means to be a woman, what women's rights should be, and meanwhile work to expose the ways in which women were second class citizens often treated with abject cruelty during their authors' lifetimes. Accordingly, it seems that specific currents of the Romantic movement had begun to focus on the condition of women.

Nature is linked to reflections about gender in Woolf's works and characters. In fact, her novels are characterized by the use of flowers, trees, and the sea to inspire her characters' moments of being. More specifically, Virginia Woolf's Nature reprises that of the Romantics in its importance as a central element, to which the characters look to for answers. The natural world in Woolf's novels also shares the Romantics' own reliance on the theme of the Sublime. The Nature that inspires Woolf's characters—and particularly dominates *To the*

Lighthouse—is often not easy to interpret; rather, its power relies on Nature's complexities. A mixture of danger and inspiration is often involved in Woolf's characters' contemplation of scenes of Nature, and in their reflections about themselves. Jonathon Penny argues that Naturalism—which characterizes Woolf's novels—expresses principles that are similar to those of the Romantic movement. He believes that "Naturalism is in some ways a radical, rationalist extension of Romanticism: natural space is sacred space, but not, as for the Romantics, because it brings the human subject into contact with the divine; rather, in nature the subject confronts itself, faces the limitations, as Jack London most often has it, of its own imagination, or of its intelligence, ability, preparation, or talent" (Penny 63). Consequently, "nature strips us of pretense" (Penny 63). Penny's analysis allows readers to clearly identify the similarities and differences between Woolf and the Romantics. Following the principles of Naturalism, Woolf focuses her works on Nature's bond with human beings. To achieve this result, Woolf first has to strip Nature of its additional meanings. In general, Woolf's Nature is not characterized by an intrinsic pantheistic value, nor it is the representation of a God-like entity; a fact that is undoubtably true for the Romantics. Moreover, the Nature of the Romantics has an important universal significance, which assumes the form of the poet prophet conveying a message about humanity. Accordingly, Romantic poets often give a prophetic value to their speakers' words, and embed their works with the teachings they learnt from Nature; teachings that they want to transmit to the rest of humanity. Differently, Woolf's representation of Nature strongly focuses on the concerns of the individual in the world. While Woolf's interpretation of the natural world can inspire interesting considerations about how much impact a character's personal discoveries have on society at large, her fiction mainly focuses on the relationship between the single character and Nature.

Like her Gothic and Romantic precursors, Woolf is interested in exploring ideas of femininity and women's condition. Reprising ideas on the necessity of an improvement of

women and minorities' conditions, which were explored earlier in the work of Romantic and Pre-Romantic writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Woolf expands these ideas beyond the Gothic and Romantic imaginary. Rather than simply speaking about the role of women—which Woolf often does in her essays, she employs her novels to show not only how they should be more involved in society, but also their need to obtain larger and freer roles inside it. When considering this initial difference, it is important to keep in mind the clearly different periods in which these authors wrote; periods that inevitably influenced them, and gave Woolf and the Romantics different ideas about what should be expected of women. Nevertheless, Woolf takes a further step forward when analyzing the role and expectations of women. Whenever she writes about women or marginalized characters, Woolf immediately associates them with representations of Nature. The association of women and Nature has been a long-standing literary convention, but it assumes interesting connotations in Woolf's writing. Indeed, she does not simply correlate women and Nature, but also extends the metaphor to minorities and other marginalized groups. Woolf's correlation between women and Nature is also interesting for the original way in which she blends the two. Instead of solely talking about the condition of women or representing the poet's epiphany through Nature, Woolf combines the two aspects, and consequently gives them new life. While, at the time of the Romantic movement, it appeared normal for a man to be in communication with the world, women still had very limited liberties, and the cases in which they were allowed more freedom were quite rare; a fact that was beginning to change during Woolf's time. Consequently, it can generally be said that Virginia Woolf strongly reprised the themes that characterized the previous Romantic movement, but reworked them to better fit her time.

Mrs. Dalloway offers Woolf's reinterpretation of the Romantic interest in Nature and gender. In spite of being mostly based in the city of London, *Mrs. Dalloway* presents a very important natural component through the presence of parks and flowers. To explain Woolf's

possible pastoral inspiration, Shafqat Hussain argues that "earlier, the English concept of the pastoral came to signify a particularly nature-based aesthetic, but that aesthetic did not promote nature as something removed from society—rather, society was part of nature in a seamless way" (192). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf integrates natural and urban landscapes in her articulation of London. Instead of being two opposite components of the life of *Mrs. Dalloway's* characters, Nature comes to represent a peaceful reprieve from the hurriedness and artificiality of London's society life; a reprieve that the city's inhabitants can experience without having to leave the London to visit the countryside. Nature mainly populates *Mrs. Dalloway* through the flowers that Clarissa fetches for her party, the roses that witness her first and only kiss with Sally, and the ones that Richard brings her. Flowers are also present during Peter's and Septimus's strolls through Regent's Park, and are vivid in Lucrezia's memories of the Milanese gardens. During these crucial moments, flowers represent a breath of fresh air in London's urban environment. Within this context, Woolf's treatment of Nature appears to be particularly different from that of the Romantics, which clearly presented a separation between city and country.

Taking inspiration from the flowers, Clarissa, Septimus, and Peter make crucial discoveries about themselves. Whereas Clarissa often acts in a calm and controlled manner, she is incredibly free spirited on the inside. She engages in challenging quarrels with Peter Walsh, remembers kissing Sally, and overall appears to enjoy her personal liberties. However, Clarissa is also a society woman. Consequently, flowers assume a dual role in *Mrs. Dalloway*. On one hand, they inspire Clarissa to be her most spontaneous self. On the other, they also represent a way to communicate inside of London's urban society. Clarissa clearly requires them for the party, and interestingly receives them both from her husband and guests. Accordingly, flowers stand out as a source of both inspiration and enlightenment—as Nature often does in the works of the Romantics, while also highlighting the compromises

that need to be made when living in London's society. Ultimately, *Mrs. Dalloway's* flowers represent the compromises that Clarissa freely decides to make, as well as Peter's and Septimus's similar choices. Woof also employs her characters' connection to Nature to showcase the difficult conditions that women and marginalized people—here evidently represented by Clarissa and Septimus—have to face in London's society. While *Mrs. Dalloway* does not give Clarissa and Septimus relevant personal liberties, it does still allow them to make compromises between their deepest desires and the stances that they need to take in order to live in society. The differences between their fates ultimately hinge solely on Clarissa's and Septimus's different social and psychological circumstances, which allow the former to continue living in society and, conversely, lead the latter to commit suicide.

Going a step further than in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* sees an even more enhanced reprise of the principles of Romanticism. In fact, *To the Lighthouse* evidently presents a stronger link between the natural world and Woolf's feminist concerns. In relation to the key theme of Nature, the novel presents a strong correlation between Lily's moment of being and the spots of time which characterize Wordsworth's *Prelude*. In addition to both characters having key revelations in proximity to the water, the two texts hinge on Lily's and young Wordsworth's memories and the contemplation of the sublimity of Nature. This sublimity of Nature constitutes a central aspect of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, particularly in its second section, "Time Passes." In fact, similarly to what happens in the Romantics' representations of Nature, Woolf's novel presents her audience with a near and yet unreachable natural world. Consequently, Nature contains both elements of fear and wonder. A clear sense of wonder can be easily induced by being in the presence of evocative natural visions and phenomena. On a further note, Lily's experience with the sea mirrors the Romantic movement's experience with the Sublime due to her coming to terms with important truths about herself. It is only during *To the Lighthouse's* final scenes, when Lily

watches the Ramsays' boat as it approaches the lighthouse, that she realizes how to finish her painting. This realization helps Lily come to terms with herself as both a woman and an artist in Edwardian England. Woolf's writing appears to be devoid of any hint of a pantheistic principle. Whereas the Romantics believed that Nature evinced God-like aspects, there is a clear and total absence of the divine in Woolf's representation of Nature. *To the Lighthouse* presents an image of Nature that is devoid of reference to a superior being, and that is not participant in the physical struggles of human beings. In this sense, Nature in the novel is an indifferent spectator; a spectator that, while remaining close to the human world and at times functioning as a source of inspiration, nevertheless remains detached. When it comes to it, Nature does indeed not intervene to stop the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew.

In terms of women and their roles in society, *To the Lighthouse* represents ideas about gender possibilities that advance beyond those raised by the earlier Romantics and by Woolf's own *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *To the* Lighthouse, Woolf has Nature make Lily understand, through her bond with the sea, that she can freely be a woman and an artist in England's new Edwardian society. Even more, *To the Lighthouse* frees Lily of any expectations of marriage if she does not actually aspire to get married. Through Lily's final gaze at the sea, as well as the Romantic self-reflection inspired by it, *To the Lighthouse* conveys a clear message about women's role in society. Accordingly, the novel represents an important stepping stone in relation to Woolf's renewal of aspects of Romanticism, as well as to the union of Nature and gender in fiction.

The final step of Woolf's progressive renewal of the natural theme of the Romantics, especially in relation to gender and the rights of women and marginalized people, is represented by one of her most characteristic novels: *Orlando*. Although *Orlando* principally focuses on its protagonist's journey, as well as on their acquisition of a personal gender identity, it greatly relies on the presence of the natural world. Through the trees, which

characterize the novel from its very first scene to the last, Orlando gets a continuous influx of inspiration. Adapting to fiction the principles of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf parallels the experience of her essay's protagonist with the leaves to Orlando's inspiration through trees. Whereas *A Room of One's Own's* protagonist gets inspiration for her feminist speech from the vision of the leaves, Orlando relies on trees and on their reflection in the world nearby to discover their own gender identity. According to Davi Pinho, it seems that, in *A Room of One's Own*, "the silent power of nature, as the single leaf that detaches itself, and then the taxi, the human-made machine, are the medium between the woman completing an essay in 1928, a time when historicizing women's silence was imperative, and the thought of a long coming human being, the androgynous *Übermensch*" (109—110). In fact, the road to completing her essay leads *A Room of One's Own's* protagonist to revendicate the principle of the androgynous mind, and revendicating it for herself. A similar process also takes place in Woolf's *Orlando*, where, through the trees' inspiration, Orlando comes to the same conclusion. Orlando's story fundamentally relies on the presence of trees to reach androgyny. Inspired by the trees' continuous presence, Orlando, too, is in a direct dialogue with the natural world that surrounds them. Just like it happens in the writings of the Romantics, Orlando is inspired by the time they spend in tranquility, surrounded by the trees; a time which helps them come to the unity of the self, as well as allowing them to discover a gender identity that simultaneously leaves aside and contains aspects canonically associated with the single male and female sex. In another similarity with the Romantics, *Orlando* sees its protagonist's inspiration through objects that recall the trees in a metaphorical sense. In addition to the comparison between Sasha and an olive tree, Orlando's own manuscript, entitled "The Oak Tree," constitutes an important correlation with John Keats's work. Interestingly recalling John Keats's renown representation of an urn in "Ode On a Grecian Urn," "The Oak Tree" transmits similar ideas on the eternity of a writer's literary

productions, and represents a person's struggles to produce a truly significant piece of literature. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is thus characterized by a strong component of Nature, which can assume both physical and metaphorical connotations. Orlando's case generally constitutes a characteristic example of how Woolf promotes innovative ideas on the condition of women and of marginalized people. Going from being a man at Elizabeth I's court to turning into a woman after the experience at the British embassy in Turkey, Orlando claims their role as a writer and their androgynous gender identity when returning from a shopping trip to the city of London, as they watch the countryside unfold in front of their eyes. Being confronted with the idea that their real—and truest self—is none of those that they have previously lived, but rather the entire sum of these different parts, Orlando discovers a novel way of being. Through their final return to the initial oak tree, Orlando ultimately reconnects their past to their present discoveries, and learns to be a whole and uncompromised person. Orlando's way of living is certainly a new and not often documented one, which renders Woolf's open way of talking about it even more striking. In this sense, *Orlando* constitutes the apex of Woolf's reprise of Romantic concepts of Nature and of their correlation to her feminist ideas. Woolf's belief in the necessity of more freedom for women, in the marginalized people's major inclusion in society, and in women and the marginalized's ability to express themselves as people and artists are key concepts of the novel.

Focusing on the themes of inspiration of Nature and reflection in tranquility, which characterize the poems of the Romantics, Woolf brilliantly reworks these ideas in her fiction to express Modernist concerns about the nature of the self in the world. Instead of giving attention to the universal message of the poet prophet, Virginia Woolf gives to her characters' relationship with Nature a more individualistic connotation. Accordingly, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando* respectively represent the personal struggles of Clarissa, Septimus, Lily, and Orlando. In these novels, Woolf frequently catches her

characters in the act of dealing with the difficulties of everyday life, and in the act of finding their own place in the world through the inspiration of Nature. Within this context, each one of Woolf's protagonists becomes an emblem of a broader fight; a fight for the rights and major inclusion of women and marginalized people in British society.

2. *Mrs. Dalloway's* Flowers

Woolf's use of Nature to highlight self-realization finds expression, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, through the flower symbolism. Flowers are catalysts that inspire Clarissa, Septimus, and Peter to embark on their personal journeys of self-discovery. That journey entails their reconnection with Nature, whether through memory or the moment. As they spend their lives in London's urban environment, these three characters are more accustomed to visions of concrete, the interiors of houses, and attending frivolous social gatherings rather than to basking in the beauty of Nature. Within this context, flowers—usually found either in parks or flower shops—act as an element of disruption. Forcing the characters of *Mrs. Dalloway* to think outside of society's rules, flowers represent Clarissa's, Septimus's, and Peter's link to the natural world. When contemplating them, Woolf's protagonists come nearest to their true selves; they experience profound moments of being, and are free to explore their personal desires independent of society's constraints. Through their representation of both simplicity and rarity, flowers constitute the spark that ingnites Clarissa, Septimus, and Peter; a spark that makes them reach moments of being. Nevertheless, flowers should not be considered as separate from London's urban environment. While certainly constituting an element of contrast to the city's artificiality, flowers do not negate, but rather coexist with it. Consequently, *Mrs. Dalloway's* flowers seem to embody the compromises that Clarissa, Septimus, and Peter have to make between their inner desires and society's expectations.

Flowers play an crucial role in *Mrs. Dalloway*. They are an integral, though unspoken element, of the opening scene of the novel, for Mrs. Dalloway recollects herself looking out of the window and into the garden of her youth, aware that she is on the precipice of a new discovery. When "looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 1), she remarks: "how fresh, how calm,

stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 1). The flowers in the garden clearly initiate a moment of revelation for Mrs. Dalloway; they represent the starting point of her epiphany. Through the proximity of Nature, Mrs. Dalloway develops uncertain and even negative feelings about her future life into London's society. However, the effects of her epiphany do not last long. Accordingly, Mrs. Dalloway is soon forced to return to society, and her previous realization is very quickly forgotten in the miasma of city life.

Flowers also tend to appear in other turning-point scenes in *Mrs. Dalloway*, always representing a breath of fresh air in the characters' urban life. For Clarissa, flowers are crucial components of important life events, whether she is choosing them for her party or remembering the moment she kisses Sally with the vase of roses nearby. Roses in this scene represent Woolf's unification of Nature and sexual awakening. Roses appear again when Richard brings them to her as an expression of his love. They operate in the text as both a sign of Mrs. Dalloway's nature and the sexual choices she makes. Flowers also signal moments of insight in other characters. Peter Walsh comes to new and sudden realizations when, after coming across yellow tulips during his evening stroll, he seems to realize that "life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it, here, this instant, now, in the sun, in Regent's Park, was enough" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 72). While Clarissa and Peter really have an important relationship with flowers, Septimus shares a much deeper bond with the natural world. As the narrator of *Mrs. Dalloway* chooses to highlight, "red flowers grew through his [Septimus's] flesh" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 62). Septimus's deeper connection with flowers suggests his separation from London's urban society, and highlights the elements that set him apart the most: his PTSD and need for death. The scene showcases

Septimus's peculiar position as an outcast and a war veteran. Having survived the First World War and suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder, Septimus appears to be connected to Nature on a more profound level. Septimus's marginalized position allows him to tune out all the white noise, and to focus on the real essence of life. While Septimus's specific condition grants him a deeper connection with the natural world, he is unable to pacifically break free from society's constraints. He does not have the tools to properly treat his mental condition, nor will he ever be allowed to fully return to society. A deeper involvement in society life is precluded to him. This same impossibility determines Clarissa's, Septimus's, and Peter's need to find alternative solutions; solutions that, through the symbolic mediation of flowers, bring them solace—and, sometimes, even joy, but can never grant them true freedom or liberty of choice in society. The only way to obtain true freedom or liberty of choice is returning to Nature or embracing death.

Flowers operate ambiguously in relation to Mrs. Dalloway—both as symbols of festive joy and life, and as markers of the social compromises she frequently has to make. Upon first meeting her, the readers of *Mrs. Dalloway* can easily see in Clarissa the good spirit and joviality of an aged female figure. She immediately appears to be a well-tempered society woman, whom the narrator catches in the act of organizing a party. While she shows herself to be a pleasant and jovial person on the outside, Clarissa undoubtedly carries grave preoccupations and old wounds on the inside. Being stuck in the society life she chose for herself when marrying Richard Dalloway, she actually seems to have lost a part of her inner self in the process. One of the first moments in which Clarissa's interior compromise comes into play is during her trip to the flower shop. On that specific occasion, her own contemplation of the flowers stimulates Mrs. Dalloway to relive crucial moments of her life. Woolf writes:

> There were flowers: delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilac; and carnations, masses of carnations. There were roses; there were irises. Ah yes—so she breathed in the earthy garden sweet smell as she stood talking to Miss Pym who owed her help, and thought her kind, for kind she had been years ago; very kind, but she looked older, this year, turning her head from side to side among the irises and roses and nodding tufts of lilac with her eyes half closed, snuffing in, after the street uproar, the delicious scent, the exquisite coolness (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 10).

In the current occasion, Mrs. Dalloway finds in her contemplation of and closeness to the flowers the necessary relief to "the street uproar" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 10). Her proximity to the flowers jolts Mrs. Dalloway's memories, and allows her to be closer to her younger and freer self. Consequently, Mrs. Dalloway feels "as if this beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 10). Flowers clearly work as a balsam for Mrs. Dalloway, who—in this brief moment—appears to be freed from certain demoralizing constraints. On a further note, Woolf's reference to Mrs. Dalloway's monster indicates the latter's need to win over society's artificiality. This artificiality is represented by people's false displays of pleasantry, and by Mrs. Dalloway's own compromises. As Katherine Sedon argues, Woolf "employs nature imagery as vantages into particular moments of being that portend the social retrogressions and psychological devaluations of aging women" (163). In a very interesting manner, Woolf connects Mrs. Dalloway's experience of Nature to her moments of epiphany, and to her recollections of the past; a past during which Mrs. Dalloway was not psychologically burdened by her age or by the societal expectations it tends to generate. Clarissa's reflections are indeed linked to her younger self's memories, but also to more recent memories of the First World War. Her musings on flowers interestingly end abruptly "when—oh! a pistol shot in the street outside"

(Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 10). While Mrs. Dalloway does not actually hear a pistol shot, the latter sound is the only one echoing in her mind while the motor car passes outside. On a general level, the motor car's interruption at the end of the scene appears to be particularly important, as it represents society's intrusion in Clarissa's life; an intrusion that will not allow her to reach the same sense of liberty or freedom as that later experienced by Lily Briscoe or Orlando.

Flowers in *Mrs. Dalloway* are markers not just of potential transformation and change but of Clarissa's choices and compromises, particularly her romantic and sexual choices. Symbolically, flowers have long been associated with women and female sexuality. They are, unsurprisingly, a central feature of one of Mrs. Dalloway's most important memories—her kiss with Sally. Clarissa and Sally find themselves alone in front of a vase full of flowers before they come together in an unforgettable kiss. The gesture is not surprising on Sally's part, but it constitutes an unexpected move from Clarissa. However, both women retreat from the lesbian possibilities of their lives and enter into heterosexual marriages as adults. The flowers that are there at their kiss initiate an important moment of exploration for Clarissa, but they also signal her future compromise. That compromise is also expressed in flowers—in the bouquet of roses she receives from Richard, the man she marries to conform to social expectations. Clarissa's choice to marry Richard lies behind her need for a different kind of psychological space and freedom, which nevertheless represents a sexual and emotional compromise. Sally's youthful enthusiasm will also be tamed into surprising surrender to conventionality. "The wild, the daring, the romantic Sally" is, as Peter Walsh says, "the last person in the world one would have expected to marry a rich man and live in a large house near Manchester" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 65). Even in youth, Clarissa does not seem to frequently abandon herself to such spontaneous and passionate gestures. Even her relationship with Peter—with its continuous quarrels and differences of opinion, abruptly

comes to an end due to Clarissa's need for stability. Having always felt the need to play by society's rules and expectations, Clarissa only gets in touch with the freest part of herself through the inspiration of flowers; flowers that constitute her principal link to the natural world. On remembering her kiss with Sally, Mrs. Dalloway reports the following thoughts:

> She and Sally fell a little behind. Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told to just keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the precious feeling—when old Joseph and Peter faced them (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 31).

When kissing Sally, Clarissa feels that "the whole world might have turned upside down" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 31). In fact, it is only in this moment that the not yet Mrs. Dalloway comes into contact with a freer version of herself; a version that comes to her presented as "something infinitely precious, wrapped up," and characterized by a particular "radiance" that "burnt through" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 31). When suddenly finding herself close to the flowers, Clarissa connects with the true essence of the world, and becomes less burdened by society's expectations. If flowers symbolize female sexuality and the two women's homoerotic desire for each other, *Mrs. Dalloway* does not indicate that Sally and Clarissa are only interested in the female sex, though the bliss that they do not pursue thereafter certainly sheds a light on the limitations that society imposes on their relationship. The power of flowers and ambience in Sally and Clarissa's kiss scene generally lies in their ability to make the two women realize—and reach for—what they want. As Candis Bond argues, "*Mrs. Dalloway* not only blurs boundaries between the public and the private self, (. . .) but the

transgressive nature of scenic memory also breaks down barriers between interiority and exteriority more generally, embedding both within ideological systems and hierarchies" (71). Accordingly, "the scenic, or embodied spatial nature of particular memories in *Mrs. Dalloway* is foundational to Woolf's critique of the patriarchy, as well as to her imagining of a more liberated subjectivity for women" (Bond 71). Clarissa's link with the natural world can be interpreted as eye-opening. It does effectively rid her of society's constraints, even if only briefly. In fact, the moments in which Clarissa connects with Nature and her inner self are often hastily brought to a halt by the intrusions of London life.

These constant intrusions in Mrs. Dalloway's life appear to be the reasons why she does not manage to reach the truly significant levels of personal freedom and independence that Bond talks about (71). When comparing her situation at the beginning and at end of the novel, it seems evident that Mrs. Dalloway does not come to obtain the later Lily Briscoe's or Orlando's same social liberties. In spite of her sporadic moments of self-realization, which shine a light on her bond with Sally and the difference between her own exteriority and interiority, Clarissa's story ends in a way that is quite similar to the way it started. As her party reaches its ending, the woman still appears to be thoroughly entrapped in the society that has always bound her. While Clarissa makes an important personal choice when marrying Richard, that same choice comes with both positive and negative results. Quite evidently, Clarissa's marriage to Richard has allowed her to lead a more independent life than she would have had with Peter. However, Clarissa's choice also inevitably ties her to the ways of a society that she could have otherwise left behind. When presenting Clarissa's position at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf writes:

> She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not cry him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There the old lady had put out her light! the

> whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. But she must go back. She must assemble (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 172).

Clarissa's reference to Septimus's earlier suicide indicates how the woman has come to terms with the impossibility of London society's expectations. Being now "glad that he had done it" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 172), she seems to realize that the urban and social environment in which they live is oppressive; in particular, it holds great difficulties for people who are outsiders and socially irrelevant, either because they are ageing women or veterans struggling with a post-traumatic stress disorder. Accordingly, Mrs. Dalloway appears to have understood that the only solution to Septimus's increasing mental health problems and his consequent marginalization is death. However, Clarissa still feels that "she must go back" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 172) and join the gathering again. Consequently, *Mrs. Dalloway* does not end with a newfound social liberation for its female protagonist, but rather with her further entrapment in society's constraints. Whereas Clarissa has chosen to live this life and has managed to be happy inside it, she still has to renounce social liberties and sexual independence. Woolf dramatizes Clarissa's recognition of her own need to "assemble" or perform an expected gender role, which is a compromise as it is at once comfortable and limiting for her. The compromise that Clarissa makes resides in this specific choice, and interestingly connects her to *To the Lighthouse's* Mrs. Ramsay.

Similarly, Septimus appears to have made compromises and to be trapped by the circumstances he finds himself in. Simultaneously living in and outside of society due to his post-traumatic stress disorder, Septimus finds himself in a quite peculiar position. Indeed, he

still seems to be bound by society, which judges him—like his wife Lucrezia does—for his incapacity to abide by its norms. Septimus also plays a key role as the second protagonist of *Mrs. Dalloway*: the role of the outcast. Concretely representing an outcast and a reject, Septimus is consequently closer—like Lily Briscoe and Orlando—to Nature rather than to the urban environment of London. In fact, Septimus is not aware of the inner workings of London's society, while he certainly is in touch with the surrounding natural world. Woolf's narrator specifically remarks how "red flowers grew through his [Septimus's] flesh" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 62), readily identifying him as a part of Nature itself. While his wife clearly resents London's artificial environment and misses the Milanese gardens, Septimus does not seem to feel the same. Rather than only seeing London's artificiality, he shows himself to be deeply connected with the city's natural side. Certainly, Septimus's altered mental state puts him in a less concrete relationship with the outside world; his perception, in fact, is continually swayed by his memories of the war, and by his inability to be truly present in the moment. However, Septimus does not feel the loss of the natural world with such intensity since he carries its characteristics within him. Being so close to Nature, Septimus is better equipped to interpret its meaning, and to carry it with him. When thinking about his life and contemplating Regent's Park's flowers—specifically the red roses, he muses:

> Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them; and the flies rising and failing; and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper; and now and again some chime (it might be a motor horn) tinkling divinely on the grass stalks—all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 63).

After being reminded of "the thick red roses which grow on my bedroom wall" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 62), Septimus casts his gaze on the park. Attentively contemplating all of Regent's Park's natural features, he cannot help but realize the beauty of the world; a beauty that not even the urban environment of London can distract him from. Showcasing a principle that recalls John Keats's "'beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all'" (Keats vv. 49—50), *Mrs. Dalloway's* Septimus seems to possess a deeper understanding of the world than the novel's other characters. He is helped, in achieving this result, by his role as an outcast and his experience in the army; his marginalization and the traumatic remnants of his war experience have certainly made him see the world in a new light. Being completely disconnected from society, its norms, and even familial bonds, Septimus is left with no choice but to see the world for what it truly is. Septimus can come into contact with the world's true essence through his link to Nature. Diana Swanson argues that "in some cases, Woolf's narrators use nonhuman nature through simile or metaphor to describe human beings—usually marginalized people such as women or lower classes—a metaphorical move consonant with the dominant Western trope of identifying those lower on the social scale with nature" (59). She adds that "in other cases, nature becomes a soothing refuge from human cares or reflects the peace or turbulence of human affairs, again invoking traditional views of the nature/human relationship in the forms of the pastoral and the Romantic" (Swanson 59). Accordingly, Nature can act, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as a simultaneous means of revelation and peace. While the specific revelations that they reach usually stay with the characters, the same cannot be said about peace. In Septimus's particular case, peace is lost much more easily than it is achieved. In this sense, flowers constitute a temporal balsam for his wounds; a compromise between the life he cannot live and the death he sees as the only answer.

Whereas Septimus is less bound to society's norms than is Mrs. Dalloway, he is still troubled by those same differences that help him develop a more enhanced vision of the

world. For instance, Septimus's post-traumatic stress disorder deeply influences the way in which he interacts with—and perceives—the world around him. Generally, Septimus's altered perceptions facilitate his escape from society and his development of a truer vision of London's urban environment. However, they also leave him without the necessary tools to face the truths he has discovered. In his mental state, Septimus certainly cannot deal with the memories, the countless deaths, and the pain brought on by the world. In a similar manner, the beauty that he discovers in Regent's Park does not seem to be enough; it does not tie him to a world that is inevitably escaping from his grasp. It thus does not seem surprising that Septimus commits suicide. Throwing himself out of his apartment's window, he thinks:

> There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury lodging-house window; the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing. (He sat on the sill). But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. 'I'll give it you!' he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 137—138).

In his final scene, Septimus never abandons, even in spite of his suffering, the notion that life is good. He may not be sure about human society—his "only human beings?" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 137) seems to point out a general uncertainty towards the human race—but Septimus's belief in the world's inner goodness is never shaken. Once he acquires this vision, Septimus holds it dearly until the very end. Therefore, he goes a step further than Mrs. Dalloway, who always comes to the brink of discovery only to quickly return to her previous convictions—her constraints. Nevertheless, like Clarissa, Septimus cannot ultimately find a

concrete solution to his problems. It is this impossibility to find independently one's place in the world that leads Mrs. Dalloway to be content in her compromise with society, and that leads Septimus to commit suicide. Ultimately, Septimus realizes that life's goodness and his newfound desire to live it are not enough to surmount his mental health problems.

Within this context, Peter Walsh represents a quite peculiar case. Certainly, he and Sally are the characters, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, who generally appear to be less tied to society and its conventions. Accordingly, Peter demonstrates an open disdain for everything that London's social life entails, while Sally often appears to refuse its moral impositions. In Sally's case, however, her real involvement with society is soon revealed. In fact, Peter quickly shows his surprise in learning of her marriage to a society man, with whom she shares a house near Manchester. Similarly, Peter's own qualms about society life do not seem to be completely reflected in his behavior. While it is true that he spent time in India and does not seem to approve of the ways of London's society, Peter does indeed continue to engage with it. One of the main reasons behind his continuous involvement with society is certainly his inability to let go of Clarissa's refusal, and his constant need to search for her attention. Nevertheless, Peter shows up at Clarissa's party, and chooses to spend his time with people he clearly despises. As a result, Peter occupies a middle ground between Septimus and Clarissa; he shares the former's capacity of seeing London's society's artificiality, but never manages to escape it. In a way that is not entirely dissimilar to Clarissa's, Peter keeps coming back to London's society, and can never resist the need to see her. To better explain his key connection to Septimus, it is necessary to consider how Peter, too, comes to an important conclusion after strolling through Regent's Park. Having ventured into a field of yellow tulips, Peter contemplates the characteristics of London life, and remarks:

> A terrible confession it was (he put his hat on again), but now, at the age of fifty-three, one scarcely needed people any more. Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it,

> here, this instant, now, in the sun, in Regent's Park, was enough. Too much, indeed. A whole lifetime was too short to bring out, now that one had acquired the power, the full flavour; to extract every ounce of pleasure, every shade of meaning; which both were so much more solid than they used to be, so much less personal (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 72).

In this evocative passage, Peter possesses a new view inspired by the vision of the flowers. Suddenly, life seems to him much more beautiful, precious, and surely to be lived outside the boundaries imposed by society. It is indeed only in Regent's Park, one of the few places in London's urban environment where flowers can really grow, that he finally comes to terms with life's beauty and rarity; a beauty and rarity that are not as easy to find in London's social circles. Even though no character seems to ultimately obtain true freedom or independence in *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is nevertheless true that Peter is the one who comes closest to this objective. Generally, he tries to find less dangerous ways to abandon society than Septimus does. However, there is a crucial distinction that needs to be made. Whereas Clarissa and Septimus belong, as a woman and a PTSD patient, to two marginalized categories, Peter does not entirely. Quite evidently, he has not succeeded in society, and often finds himself in particularly difficult relationships. Nevertheless, possessing the great possibilities of all British men, he is certainly freer to make his own choices regarding his role in society, and to take whatever path he prefers.

Generally, flowers constitute a simple and yet crucial element in *Mrs. Dalloway*. As the principal representation of Nature in London's urban environment, they effectively hold a very important role there. According to Bonnie Kime Scott, "the city [London], of course, does offer an environment and nature enters there" (2). Usually being exchanged for pleasantries that are devoid of all meaning and thus being used as mere decorations, flowers establish their value by showing Clarissa, Septimus, and Peter the beauty and true essence of

life. However, *Mrs. Dalloway's* flowers do not ultimately manage to change the three characters' destinies. Clarissa and Septimus particularly find themselves incapable of effectively dealing with their self-discoveries. This impossibility importantly distinguishes them from *To the Lighthouse's* Lily Briscoe and *Orlando's* protagonist, as Clarissa and Septimus never obtain the same social freedom and independence that the other two will.

3. *To the Lighthouse's* Sea

Going even further than she does in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf builds on her representation of Nature when working on *To the Lighthouse*; a novel in which she deeply interlinks the lives of her characters with the natural world. *To the Lighthouse*, which Woolf wrote in memory of her late mother, represents the lives of the Ramsays over a timespan of ten years, and focuses on the changes that took place during that period. Such changes signal a turn in Woolf's handling of interiority, particularly in the case of the painter Lily Briscoe. In *To the Lighthouse*, Nature is the catalyst to that turn to interiority in the novel's characters as it was *Mrs. Dalloway*, and it constitutes the cause of their discoveries about themselves. Nature, particularly the sea, can be considered one of the novel's protagonists, and is the principal natural force with which Woolf's characters interact. As with *Mrs. Dalloway's* flowers, this natural element signals both positive and negative possibilities in the narrative. As the initiator of their interior reflection, the sea nevertheless can offer them salvation or doom.

Taking the form of diverse elements that extend beyond the sea, such as the grass and the wind, the novel's natural world is central to the story's development, and ultimately acts as a bringer of both life and death. In this sense, Nature brings moments of being upon Woolf's characters, as they engage in a cruel fight against it; whether they come out on top or not depends on the specific character involved. Their different endings strongly speak of Nature's ambivalent identification with a universally benign Mother or a cruel Stepmother, which is at the center, for instance, of Giacomo Leopardi's Romantic poems. In order to have such a strong effect on Woolf's characters, the natural world frequently takes the form of sublime landscapes, which also recall English Romantic depictions of the environment. Through their link to time, memory, and even mortality, the landscapes of *To the Lighthouse* are connected

to the sublime sceneries explored in the poems of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Whereas the poetry of the Romantics generally revolves around the contemplation of Nature and in their recollections in tranquility, Woolf's characters mostly look to the environment for answers to their personal and social anxieties. Accordingly, their doubts do not take the universal form of the ones of the Romantic poet prophet; on the contrary, they assume a more individualistic focus. Woolf's shift from an overall universal perspective to one that is more individualistic mainly appears to be possible due to the role that Nature plays in Woolf's novels, and particularly in *To the Lighthouse*. According to Kim Sigouin, "Woolf erodes sharp distinctions between human and nonhuman nature by demonstrating how irregular natural forces compel the individual to contemplate his or her place within a schema of shifting geographies," all by "situating the human body within the vast natural landscape" (167). In addition to the matter of space, there is also an important temporal component to consider, as the contemplation of Nature is connected to both physical space and the way in which Woolf's characters move through it. Emma Simone argues that the author's "emphasis upon the temporal nature of place has implications for understandings of the individual's inherent temporality" (65-66), while Derek Ryan observes how "in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf creates a supple textual framework through the productive entanglements of characters with their environments, the human with the nonhuman" (77). In this sense, the contemplation of Nature has clear repercussions on the inner reflections of *To the Lighthouse's* characters, influencing both their thoughts about themselves and how to they relate to time and space. As a consequence, Woolf's Nature regulates the bond that her characters can establish with themselves, while also regulating the bond that they can create with the external world. That bond is entirely based on the characters' interiorization of the natural landscapes they contemplate, and on the creation of a much more intimate relationship with Nature. It is only through the establishment of that relationship that Woolf's protagonists, such as the painter

Lily Briscoe, can free themselves from society's expectations, and come to terms with the innermost parts of themselves.

Nature concordantly seems to operate as a positive force in *To the Lighthouse*; a force that helps individuals like Lily to develop their personal identity, as shown by her ultimate realization that she needs to "get that and start afresh" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 158). However, Nature also has its negative side, as it impassively witnesses the death of the Ramsays and the destruction of their home. The ambivalence of Woolf's Nature, perfectly embodied by its capacity to be simultaneously a source of life and of death, shines through the author's description of *To the Lighthouse's* specific natural components. Differently, the negative influence that the natural, or nonhuman, world exercises on the one of the humans appears to be at the center of *To the Lighthouse's* second section, "Time Passes." Instead of focusing on the Ramsays and their friends, "Time Passes" exposes an almost cruel and certainly unforgiving Nature as its protagonist, with the human characters being reduced to brief mentions inside brackets. For instance, Woolf dedicates a marginal space to reference the deaths of Andrew, Prue, and Mrs. Ramsay, while the vast majority of the section focuses on the natural world's destruction of the family household. As Lostoski argues, the deaths of the family members "are confined to a few sentences within brackets that seem anecdotal to the rest of the text" (66). It then follows that the Nature of the novel's second section, which resembles the cruel Stepmother of Giacomo Leopardi's Romantic poetry, does not take on a positive role towards the world's inhabitants, but rather a negative one. With these considerations in mind, it can be said that Woolf's Nature, at least in this segment of *To the Lighthouse*, is a dominant presence, which has a direct influence on matters of time and space. Within the ten year gap caused by the advent of the First World War, the novel's natural world does indeed influence the state of the Ramsays' household, both in terms of the destruction of the physical building and the disintegration of the family itself. It is like a

monster that takes over the house and dramatizes its dissolution, until Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast bring it back to a shape that is hospitable for human beings. Accordingly, Nature plays the role of the destroyer, and acts as an impassive spectator to the deaths of the members of the Ramsay household. Its indifference appears to be of particular note, as it implies the absence of a pantheistic principle, and further distinguishes Woolf's take from that of the Romantics. In this sense, Woolf's Nature loses an important connection to the human world, and appears to be more detached from people's vicissitudes. Overall, Woolf's Nature assumes a complex dual function in her *To the Lighthouse*, which constantly oscillates between its positive and negative connotations.

Nature's ambivalence is also expressed through Mrs. Ramsay and her relationship to the natural world. In the section of the novel involving "The Window," Mrs. Ramsay's observation of the greenery reflects her own interiority, and she initially appears to embody the figure of Mother Nature. Setting her gaze on the trees outside, she reflects on her family, her complex and yet, at times, almost effortless relationship with her husband, and gradually comes to terms with her dominant matriarchal role. At "The Window's" end, she engages in a silent communication with Mr. Ramsay, which ends when Woolf writes "'Yes, you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow.' She had not said it, but he knew it. And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 100). This passage very well expresses Mrs. Ramsay's influence on her family's internal dynamics, later remarked by her absence in "The Lighthouse" section, and effectively shows her likeness to Nature itself. Drawing on the traditional depiction of Nature as female and mother, Woolf creates a Mrs. Ramsay who constitutes its highest representation. At first, the author reveals her to be a gentle and kind woman, but the reader soon becomes aware that she holds much more power than is at first apparent. Constituting the very heart of her family, or more properly its lifeblood, Mrs. Ramsay is at the same time nurturing and compassionate; not only

does she make sacrifices for her children and works to ensure that they have a good future, but she also stands by and keeps forgiving a husband who often proves not to be worthy of her. In fact, Mr. Ramsay often displays selfish, self-pitying, and individualistic behaviors, forcing his wife to support him in spite of his continuous denigrations of her. Not that long after he chides and forbids the visit to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay shows himself to be in desperate need of his wife, as "in that flash of darkness he heard people saying—he was a failure—that R was beyond him. He would never reach R" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 31). Consequently, Mrs. Ramsay's identification with the positive side of Nature shines through the entire section of "The Window," finding its general representation in her persistent shows of affection towards her husband, children, and friends. Woolf's portrayal of the woman's goodness reaches its peak, however, in her continuous attempts to provide Lily and Minta with stable prospects for the future, and in her hopeful dreams about her girls' adult lives. When contemplating the possible outcomes of Prue, Nancy, and Rose's lives, Mrs. Ramsay realizes the infinite possibilities that her sacrifices have set up for them; sacrifices that she seems to have willingly and even proudly made. In a very motherly way, Woolf catches her in the act of expressing the following thoughts:

> She [Mrs. Ramsay] was now formidable to behold, and it was only in silence, looking up from their plates, after she had spoken so severely about Charles Tansley, that her daughters—Prue, Nancy, Rose—could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers, in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 9).

Mrs. Ramsay thus acts as a liberating force, whose supposed sacrifices provide her daughters with a great variety of opportunities, and, even more importantly, with the possibility to choose. Accordingly, she represents a benign and sacrificial Mother Nature, who limits her options to grant Prue, Nancy and Rose theirs. Yet, it is important to note that Mrs. Ramsay

looks quite happy with her life and marriage, in spite of the difficulties that she clearly has to face when dealing with her husband and the unjust conditions of Victorian women.

On the other hand, Mrs. Ramsay also embodies the negative connotations of Nature. Like Nature itself, she shows herself to be, while certainly not indifferent or cruel, quite flawed. By forcing her daughters to dream about different lives in silence and by constantly trying to ensure their futures, Mrs. Ramsay does, in fact, not always act in their best interests. For instance, she meddles with Lily and Minta's marriage prospects, and seems to have difficulties imagining a life in which women do not marry. In both cases, Mrs. Ramsay ends up pushing for a union that either does not happen, or cruelly traps the people involved in it. This behavior, which undoubtedly stems from her kindness and good intentions, nevertheless turns negative, as Mrs. Ramsay fights to impose her personal beliefs on both young women. In this sense, she does effectively embody both sides of Mother Nature, as her kind and nurturing side coexists with an imposing adherence to traditional Victorian expectations.

This dual nature also characterizes *To the Lighthouse's* sea; a natural element that can alternatively be interpreted as a source of life or one of death. Generally, the sea seems to constitute a perfect representation of the female figures of the novel, as well as a possible solution to their problems. Patrizia Muscogiuri accordingly argues that the sea's voice "relates (to) the most elusive aspects of life and, most crucially, reclaims what is kept out of the phallogocentric discourse" (103). Moreover, she explains how this affirmation is particularly true in relation to "those left in the margins of both canonical writing and society, above all women, queer people, but also outcasts" (Muscogiuri 103). The sea helps these female and marginalized characters determine who they are, what they want, and how to achieve it. To reach their goals, they have to embark on a difficult and yet rewarding journey. That journey assumes different characteristics depending on the considered character, and it is never a simple nor a necessarily positive one. For instance, Minta comes to face the

difficulties of the sea only to find out that she is not ready to brave them, whereas Lily's strength and her profound link to Mrs. Ramsay enable her to run the risk. Due to the sea's nature, which simultaneously corresponds to that of a giver and that of a taker of life—hence the need for the lighthouse in the first place, a woman's quest for personal freedom, social liberties, and the possibility to choose comes with high risks; risks that do nothing but cement the possibility of failing. Patrizia Muscogiuri herself recognizes these risks, noting how "this 'voice' originating in the depths of the sea of life has a dual connotation, as it is both innermost (i.e. relating to the 'inner sea' of the individual mind, the latter being a classical metaphor which recurs frequently in Woolf) and social" (104). She also highlights how "in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), for instance, Mrs. Ramsay (but finally also Lily) is the one who hears the voice of the sea distinctly, murmuring to her, at times soothing and at times admonishing her" (Muscogiuri 104). In this context, the sea too assumes the characteristics of a benign Mother Nature, who tries to help Lily and Minta find their paths when they happen to be lost. However, Muscogiuri also argues that being "at times soothing and at times admonishing" (104) shows the sea's capability to be simultaneously a positive and a negative force. The rewards presented by it, in fact, come at the risk of drowning. And yet, Woolf does not intend to show that braving the sea should be avoided, for it is risk that can help women reach their goals. It is only through the sea that they can get rid of the social limitations imposed by their time, and free themselves from their personal, but, more importantly, social anxieties. Often, the greatest rewards do indeed come at the price of staking all that a person deems familiar and safe in their pursuit.

Lily and Minta are the two characters of *To the Lighthouse* who perfectly embody this engagement with risk and achievement through their interactions with the sea. Representing opposite sides of the same coin, they are both faced with the sea's helpfulness and cruelty, but end up taking completely different paths. Whereas Minta does not heed the warning of

the sea, which admonishes her about the sacrifices that she is about to make, as she chooses to accept Paul's marriage proposal, Lily listens to the sea. She not only remains firm in her rejection of a life with Mr. Banks, but is also rewarded with a new artistic vision by the natural element. On this basis, it could be argued that Lily and Minta's diametrically opposite endings depend on hearing or not hearing the call of the sea, and on taking the risks that would help ensure their dreams.

When it comes to Minta, she initially enters the scene as one of the Ramsays' family friends, who is about to become engaged—with Mrs. Ramsay's counsel and approval—to Paul Ryley. Following the Victorian tradition, Mrs. Ramsay has great expectations for their marriage, and imagines that Minta will become a perfect wife. The girl, however, offers a strikingly different view of the matter, as she allows Woolf to explore contemporary expectations of women, both inside and outside of marriage. In general, her marital decisions and fate appear to be powerfully tied to the sea. Just when Paul is about to propose, Minta's brooch, which she had inherited from her grandmother, falls into the sea, and the whole party frantically start searching for it. The scene, which makes up one of the most interesting parts of the book, leads to important revelations:

> The tide was coming in fast. The sea would cover the place where they had sat in a minute. There was not a ghost of a chance of their finding it now. "We shall be cut off!" Minta shrieked, suddenly terrified. As if there were any danger of that! It was the same as the bulls all over again—she had no control over her emotions, Andrew thought. Women hadn't. The wretched Paul had to pacify her. The men (Andrew and Paul at once became manly, and different from usual) took counsel briefly and decided that they would plant Ryley's stick where they had sat and come back at low tide again. There was nothing more that could be done now. If the brooch was there, it would still be there in the morning, they assured her, but Minta still sobbed, all the

> way up to the top of the cliff. It was her grandmother's brooch; she would rather have lost anything but that, and yet Nancy felt, though it might be true that she minded losing her brooch, she wasn't crying only for that. She was crying for something else. We might all sit down and cry, she felt. But she did not know what for (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 64).

In this specific passage, Minta's personal feelings of loss are linked with the power of the sea, which takes away precious life and memories. These same feelings prompt her to cry, emphasizing her present anxiety for all that has and will come to pass. The episode also appears to foreshadow a changing world in which humanity is about to plunge into the darkness of the First World War. With the conflict's advent and the sudden move to the modern world, Minta consequently experiences the erosion of old securities of marriage and union. In particular, her present struggle with the sea indicates the loss of an older worldview represented by her grandmother and her brooch; a loss that also leads to the change of women's roles in the modern period. Lily, who herself constitutes an important proof of this fact, notably remarks how Paul is in a relationship with "a serious woman, with her hair in a plait and case in her hand (. . .) who went to meetings and shared Paul's views (. . .) about the taxation of land values and a capital levy" (Woolf, *To* the Lighthouse, 143), thus indicating how much things had actually changed for the female sex. From this point of view, the sea that claims Minta's brooch and her connection to both her grandmother and the past can be considered as an unforgiving natural force. It is also a harbinger of change, and the loss of another way of being for women and for men. However, under the sea's apparently destructive action, lies a warning: if Minta continues on this path of engagement to Paul, she will come to lose more parts of herself. The girl seems to start grasping the idea while desperately searching for her brooch in the majestic sea, but she ultimately quells her doubts, and does not let them stop her union. Accordingly, the sea's act, even in its seeming cruelty,

embodies nothing more than a mother's harshness; a trait that is clearly necessary when preventing a daughter from making a severe mistake. The sea's taking of the brooch embodies both the element's positive and negative capacities. Minta will certainly face the consequences of not heeding the sea's warning, as ten years later Lily describes her marriage to Paul as follows:

> They were 'in love' no longer; no, he had taken up with another woman, a serious woman, with her hair in a plait and a case in her hand (Minta had described her gratefully, almost admiringly), who went to meetings and shared Paul's views (they had got more and more pronounced) about the taxation of land values and a capital levy. Far from breaking up the marriage, that alliance had righted it. They were excellent friends, obviously, as he sat on the road and she handed him his tools (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 143).

Through this excerpt of "The Lighthouse" section, Woolf provides her readers with a quite bleak image of Minta's life. Indeed, while she and her husband have at least come to an understanding and seem to be respecting each other, their relationship ultimately hinges on Minta handing Paul "his tools" while he sits "on the road" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 143). While the new direction that their marriage has taken speaks of major liberties of choice acquired after the war, it still relies on Minta submitting herself to Paul's desires, and on being grateful that she has not had it worse. If her future turned out to be so limited, it depends on the conditions of women at the time and on Minta's disinterest towards fighting them, but her rejection of the voice of the sea also represents a catalyst for her fate. It can, indeed, be argued that, had Minta been open to welcome the call of the sea, she might have gone down a different path; a path that not only might have been freer, but also much more rewarding.

Lily's story could be seen to constitute an alternative version to Minta's. When Woolf introduces her character, the young artist also finds herself under Mrs. Ramsay's tutelage. Having been invited to spend time at the Ramsays' summer home, Lily passes her days with Mr. Banks and Mrs. Ramsay, enjoying Mr. Banks' companiable presence and developing profound feelings of admiration and reverence for Mrs. Ramsay. From their very first interactions, it seems clear that Lily and Mr. Banks share a good friendship and common interests, but that they do not have romantic feelings for one another. This fact rings particularly true for Lily, who clearly does not enjoy Mrs. Ramsay's attempts to promote the match. In fact, she does not shy away from showing her disinterest towards both Mr. Banks and marriage, and—differently from Minta—manages not to get married. For most of her presence in the novel, however, Lily lacks a real awareness of who she wants to be. She knows who she is not and what should not be her place, but it is only in "The Lighthouse," when she stares at the sea and realizes how to complete her painting, that she understands the truth about herself. As she watches the remaining members of the Ramsay family finally taking their trip to the lighthouse, Lily's eyes are glued to the water; a vision that prompts her to engage in the following thoughts:

> Her eyes rested on the brown speck of Mr. Ramsay's sailing boat. They would be at the Lighthouse by lunch-time she supposed. But the wind had freshened, and, as the sky changed slightly and the sea changed slightly and the boats altered their positions, the view, which a moment before had seemed miraculously fixed, was now unsatisfactory. The wind had blown the trail of smoke about; there was something displeasing about the placing of ships. The disproportion there seemed to upset some harmony in her own mind. She felt an obscure distress (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 157—158).

At this stage of the narration, Lily finds herself unsettled by the vision of the moving sea, caused by its continuous shifting and the intervention of the wind. Her inability to settle generally speaks of her need to find the right inspiration for her painting, but also uncovers a great dissatisfaction about her own condition. It is solely after pondering it for some time that Lily starts putting the pieces together, until she finally hears the voice of the sea. Her experience with the sea is formative and contains echoes of what William Wordsworth experiences as a young boy in *The Prelude*. The young boy, when stuck on a boat, is evidently moved by the sublime vision of the mountains, and states "I struck and struck again / And growing still in stature the grim shape / Towered up between me and the stars, and still / For so it seemed, with purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing, / Strode after me" (Wordsworth). Similarly, Woolf's painter finds artistic inspiration in the sublimity of the water. Both scenes eventually culminate in moments of epiphany, whether they be identified with spots of time in Wordsworth's case or moments of being in Woolf's. As Alexander S. Fobes explains, "for the modernists, perhaps the most influential observer of moments was the English poet William Wordsworth" (81); moments that, according to Sangam MacDuff, do not consist of "the shock of the experience" but of "its associations," as they can take the form of "memories triggered by percepts—rain, wind, and so on—rather than connotations of the poetic language" (65). Thus, the voice of the sea, which Lily will keep hearing until the end of *To the Lighthouse*, opens her up to associations and a new vision; a vision of freedom:

> What was the problem then? She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay; it evaded her when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made

> anything. Get that and start afresh; get that and start afresh (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 158).

Standing in the grass while she gazes at the sea, her canvas in front of her, Lily realizes that she has to "get that and start afresh" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 158). Like everything else, though, Lily's ideas not only convey the need to restart her painting, but also her need to build a new life for herself. These ideas, like Minta's, find their inspiration in the sea, and ultimately give the young painter the push to fight for what she wants. As Patrizia Muscogiuri eloquently states, at first Lily "can find no message or vision there [in the sea] (…). In the course of time, however, she listens to the voice of the sea, intuits its 'message,' and gradually abandons all restraints" (104). Lily's abandonment of these restraints coincides with her overcoming of social expectations on women, and with her carving a new path for herself. As Ryan argues: "between Lily, her canvas and her final brushstroke, the ending of *To the Lighthouse* is not so much a celebration of the individual achievement of the female artist as it is collective creation beyond molar divisions. It is the moment in the text when Woolf's theorizing of sexual difference is located in the materiality of paint and canvas; it is the becoming-paint of sexual difference, the shaping of molecular intensities rather than molar forms, the latter of which, we know from early on in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily does not attempt to capture" (92—93). *To the Lighthouse's* ending thus signals Lily's self-discovery, and Woolf's promulgation of important feminist principles. In fact, the girl's final realizations appear to be the result of a woman's possibility to choose; the same possibility that Woolf wants for her sex. Whereas Mrs. Ramsay had seen a romantic potential between Lily and Mr. Banks, the painter embodies the possibility to choose by rejecting it, underlying how "she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 43). The need to make a choice is metaphorically represented, in *To the Lighthouse*, by the trials of the

sea; it is only by facing its difficulties and taking risks that one may fall, but one may also come out on top.

It can thus be said that Lily and Minta are only able to experience important realizations about themselves through the sea, and to either attain or come close to gaining freedom from the limitations society imposes on their sex. Not both, however, come to hear its voice; Lily does, but Minta does not. While Lily finally gains the inspiration and courage to carry out her vision, Minta remains entrapped by social conventions, and appears to be overwhelmed by the thoughts inspired by the sea. She is, in fact, caught in the act of crying for the loss of her grandmother's brooch, but Woolf promptly notes how "she wasn't crying only for that" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 64). With it simultaneously being a force of life and death, the sea can inspire contrasting feelings in those that admire its expanse, making them question whether it is right or not to take the leap into its immensity. Yet, Lily's story ultimately proves that running the risk is worth it; one can either drown, or swim to higher ground.

4. *Orlando's* Trees

Like the sea that challenges Woolf's characters in *To the Lighthouse*, the trees of *Orlando*—and, particularly, the oak tree—shatter the eponymous character's beliefs. Going from being a nobleman in the Elizabethan Age to, at least apparently, a woman in the England of the 1920s, Orlando frequently reshapes their personality and physical aspect with the passage of time. The character's reshaping of themselves—or, more appropriately, their general display of different sides of their personality—appears to be linked to Orlando's contemplation of Nature. In fact, Orlando's revelations about themselves often come with the contemplation of the natural world, and especially trees. Simultaneously representing, whether directly or metaphorically, a sturdy constant in the character's life and an element of change, trees accompany Orlando on their journey; a journey that will lead them to new discoveries about themselves, and to the formation of ideas on androgyny. In this sense, Woolf's Orlando evolves from being an almost stereotypically masculine figure to someone who is intrinsically both masculine and feminine, and who—through their link to Nature—challenges traditional ideas about gender. As Orlando's change is chartered in relation to trees, Nature's influence on them hereby becomes apparent, and constitutes a key element in Orlando's escape from society's constraints.

Dominating the scene since the story's very beginning through their constant presence, trees are alternatively symbols of stability and symbols of disruption. Trees function as symbols of stability as the young man Orlando uses the oak tree as a support. *Orlando's* own narrator highlights how the eponymous character "sighed profoundly, and flung himself—there was a passion in his movements which deserves the word—on the earth at the foot of the oak tree" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 5). The narrator also believes that Orlando "loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth spine's beneath him; for such he took the hard root

of the oak tree to be" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 5). Orlando seems to rely on and be deeply linked not only to trees, but also to their roots; a fact that indicates their link to their ancestral home, history, and traditions. Trees consequently constitute a very solid base for Orlando's life throughout the novel. A tree is at the back of Orlando and Sasha, and seems to support them as they engage in amorous activities. Similarly, another tree is—at a later date—at the back of the now Lady Orlando as they contemplate the Turkish landscape. These are just a few of the numerous instances in which the narrator represents Orlando relying on trees.

Conversely, the trees also represent an element of disruption—even of epiphany and shock, as they accompany Orlando on their journey through time and space. Sometimes appearing on the scene as literal trees and at other times as metaphors, represented by Sasha's character and by Orlando's manuscript, trees often incite observation and reflection in Orlando. Trees incite observation and reflection in Orlando when they contemplate the Turkish landscape, in a scene that exemplifies the paradoxical meanings of trees in the novel: namely, the bark at Orlando's back represents the principle of stability, while the vision of their homeland—in the form of a scenery dominated by trees—inspires in the character a moment of epiphany. Even more importantly, the novel's ending exemplifies this same principle, as Orlando rides out of the city of London and comes to terms with the complexity of their identity. On that occasion, Orlando's reflection is accompanied by their observation of the landscape: "trees, she said. (Here another self came in). I love trees (she was passing a clump) growing there a thousand years" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 211). Just as the sea in *To the Lighthouse* is a source of both life and death, trees assume a double meaning in *Orlando*, representing both constancy and change.

The trees' embodiment of the opposite principles of constancy and change can be found in the trees themselves, in their metaphorical representation through Sasha, and in their link to Orlando's manuscript. Sasha represents one of the first instances that leads to Orlando's

questioning of themselves and shocking realizations. At first a man, Orlando, whom critics interestingly suggest represents Vita Sackville-West (Elkins 132), shows themselves to be struck by Sasha's vision. The passage involves gender bending and blending, as Woolf writes:

> He had indeed just brought his feet together about six in the evening of the seventh of January at the finish of some such quadrille or minuet when he beheld, coming from the pavilion of the Muscovite Embassy, a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity (Woolf, *Orlando*, 17).

For the first time, Orlando seems to be attracted to ideas of androgyny; an androgyny that is hereby represented by Sasha, and that is reflected, in Woolf's life, in West. In fact, Woolf describes the Muscovite as a particularly ambiguous figure, which could either be a "boy's or woman's" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 17). When initially meeting Sasha, Orlando does, indeed, appear to be fascinated by her, and one could easily wonder whether their interest is entirely a romantic one or if it is founded on the protagonist's admiration. Orlando particularly admires Sasha and her freedom; namely, the freedom with which she dresses, expresses herself, and acts towards the people around her. While Woolf's narrator often compares Sasha to "a fox in the snow" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 17), he also thinks of her as the representation of "a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 17). But it is Sasha's identification with the olive tree that is important to Woolf's engagement with trees and Nature in this novel. Metaphorically a tree, Sasha inspires Orlando's curiosity. At this stage of the encounter with Sasha, Orlando cannot yet identify in her their own androgynous tendencies, nor can they realize them. However, it is by simply looking at her that Woolf's protagonist starts to wonder about their possible androgyny, and that *Orlando's* readers do, too. Accordingly, Sasha, through her connection with the olive tree, symbolizes both an element

of constancy and disruption. During her time in England, she is Orlando's rock—the only person who can brighten their day; and yet, she is also the one to plant the first seeds of doubt in Orlando's mind, putting them on a path that will lead them to the discovery of their numerous selves.

Nevertheless, this is not the only way in which Sasha acts in a disruptive manner. Her greatest act of disruption, perhaps, is the one that she does by leaving England. When Orlando realizes that Sasha is not coming to their midnight appointment, they come down in a heap of despair. Woolf effectively describes Orlando's pain in the following scene:

> The whole world seemed to ring with the news of her deceit and his derision. The old suspicions subterraneously at work in him rushed forth from concealment openly. He was bitten by a swarm of snakes, each more poisonous than the last. He stood in the doorway in the tremendous rain without moving. As the minutes passed he sagged a little at the knees (Woolf, *Orlando*, 34).

In this passage, Orlando suffers for the loss of Sasha—and, not any less, for her deception. Being confronted with the woman's actions, Orlando has to come to terms with the disappearance of his one true constant. The olive tree is no longer there; not to sustain them, and not to show them the way. They are, once again, alone in a world in which they feel foreign, and all the possibilities of finding themselves appear to be shattered. Consequently, Sasha's influence is only temporary, and her loss leaves Orlando without what is simultaneously his constant and his inspiration for self-discovery. After this difficult turn of the events, it will take Orlando the rest of the novel to gain the olive's tree wisdom, and the personal peace it aims to represent.

Throughout the novel, Orlando's manuscript, "The Oak Tree," appears to be a further element that incites the character's self-discovery—both in terms of their artistic development and of their coming to terms with their gender identity. Through its strong

symbolic link to Nature, "The Oak Tree" accompanies Orlando on their journey, simultaneously inspiring and reflecting the character's changes. Generally, "The Oak Tree" may make one think of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The two works treat themes of truth and beauty, and revolve around the representation of a work of art inside of another work of art. Moreover, they highlight the book and the urn's capacity to generate poetic inspiration. James Harker argues that "Keats is Woolf's primary example of the Romantic writer who 'is thinking more of the effect of the thing upon his mind than of the thing itself'" (9). And yet, whereas Keats's urn never changes and remains frozen in time, Orlando's "Oak Tree" seems to evolve with its author. Like the physical trees that are present in Woolf's novel, "The Oak Tree" effectively reflects both principles of constancy and of disruption.

Although "The Oak Tree" remains present in Orlando's life until the novel's very end, it is only at the beginning that it constitutes an untroubling constant. When the young Orlando shows their manuscript to the famous poet Nick Greene, they only seem to consider it the result of a pleasant pastime. This fact seems evident when the novel's narrator compares Orlando's poetic work to other boys' fun games, highlighting how "stealing away from talk and games, he had hidden himself behind curtains, in priest's holes, or in the cupboard behind his mother's bedroom which had a great hole in the floor and smelt horribly of starling's dung, with an inkhorn in one hand, a pen in another, and on his knee a roll of paper" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 45). Accordingly, Woolf shows Orlando to be passionate about writing, but still not fully committed to the job, nor having been changed by it yet. A similar principle is at the base of Orlando's encounter with Nick Greene. When they first meet, the poet and Orlando spend the evening talking amiably, and they seem to really get on well with each other. It is only after Nick Greene leaves the young Orlando's estate that the truth comes out, as he publishes his negative review of the first draft of "The Oak Tree:"

> Seizing the pen with which his little boy was tickling the cat's ears, and dipping it in the egg cup which served for inkpot, Greene dashed off a very spirited satire there and then. It was so done to a turn that no one could doubt that the young Lord who was roasted was Orlando; his most private sayings and doings, his enthusiasms and follies, down to the very colour of his hair and the foreign way he had of rolling his r's, were there to the life (Woolf, *Orlando*, 57—58).

Up until this moment, "The Oak Tree" had been Orlando's constant—almost a companion. After Greene's ridiculing of their character and manuscript, Orlando finds that while their devotion to writing does not waver, they start feeling a deep anguish towards the activity. Similarly to what had previously happened with Sasha, Nick's attack leads Orlando to burn "in a great conflagration fifty-seven poetical works, only retaining 'The Oak Tree,' which was his boyish dream and very short" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 59). Orlando's retention of "The Oak Tree" constitutes their desperate attachment to their poetic self. Evidently, Orlando's metaphorical link to the trees forms the core of their life, and the disruption they feel is provoked by Nick's negative opinion rather than by something felt while writing.

Only at a later stage of the narrative, after Woolf's protagonist has returned to England as Lady Orlando, do they start to experience the true heights of their poetic feeling. Lady Orlando principally starts to feel the true heights of their poetic feeling through their link to "The Oak Tree" and the natural world. In fact, Orlando feels relieved by coming again into the possession of paper and ink, and slowly enters what Elkins defines as "'The Age of Transition'" (134). Amy Elkins argues that "'The Age of Transition' continues the movement of space through time (Orlando transitions from male to female, from imperial ambassador to cosmopolitan socialite, from young man to full adult)" (134). Having gone through so many—at least exterior—changes, Orlando's artistic constant, too, starts to change. Not only does Orlando change their approach to writing, but they also start giving new form to their

manuscript. To demonstrate this point, it is important to note how *Orlando's* narrator relays the character's thoughts in relation to the writing of "The Oak Tree" in the following scene:

> (. . .) By an abrupt movement she split the ink over the page and blotted it from human sight she hoped for ever. She was all of a quiver, all of a stew. Nothing more repulsive could be imagined than to feel the ink flowing thus in cascades of involuntary inspiration. What had happened to her? Was it the damp, was it Bartholomew, was it Basket, what was it? she demanded. But the room was empty. No one answered her, unless the dripping of the rain in the ivy could be taken for an answer (Woolf, *Orlando*, 159—160).

As shown in this passage, Orlando's style went, through time, from lofty and well thought out to simple and impulsive; a change that the character was only able to come to by working on "The Oak Tree." Through the manuscript's extended metaphor and Orlando's strenuous work on it, they not only find their voice as an artist, but also begin to question "what had happened to her" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 159). Reflecting on their work, Orlando partially becomes aware of the personal and artistic development that they went through, and starts grasping the idea that there must be something more to their being. The latter point finds ulterior confirmation in the continuous tremors that Orlando starts to experience while writing "The Oak Tree," and that interestingly affect their hands. As Woolf reports, Orlando tries to soothe their tremors by buying a ring, but without success: "for it would seem—her case proved it—that we write, not with the fingers, but with the whole person" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 162). It follows that Orlando's interactions with "The Oak Tree"—and especially those belonging to the period of the character's transition—affect the entirety of their spirit, and call for the formation of a single and unified self. Only through the unification of Orlando's multiple selves can they achieve unity, both in spirit and in writing.

This is not, however, the only occasion in which "The Oak Tree" proves to be an element of change. Looking at the manuscript propels Orlando to search for the unity of the self, and—alongside with the contemplation of the physical trees—finally pushes them towards androgyny. This process becomes apparent near the end of Woolf's novel, when Orlando falls into a deep crisis. Having just finished shopping at a 1920s store and seemingly having caught the glimpse of an older Sasha, Orlando makes their way out of the city of London, when they realize:

> But (here another self came skipping over the top of her mind like the beam from a lighthouse). Fame! (She laughed). Fame! Seven editions. A prize. Photographs in the evening papers (here she alluded to "The Oak Tree" and "The Burdett Coutts" Memorial Prize which she had won (. . .)) (Woolf, *Orlando*, 211).

At this stage of the narration, Orlando finally becomes aware of the various parts of their self, and, through their thoughts about "The Oak Tree," acknowledges their poetic side. Orlando also comes to represent how "when we write of a woman, everything is out of place—culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 211). In fact, Orlando's apparently disordered and certainly fragmented line of thought showcases the brilliancy and originality of a feminine style. In this sense, the character's physical transformation from male to female affects their writing, and turns Orlando's style in one with clear feminine characteristics. Rather than being a negative connotation, Orlando's acquisition of a more feminine style indicates their role as both a woman and an artist. This acquisition also showcases Orlando's discovery of the more feminine aspects of their personality. It follows that "The Oak Tree" makes Orlando understand themselves better, and helps them find new ways to be a writer. Orlando is ultimately ready to enter the role of the artist.

Nonetheless, it is trees that represent the highest embodiment of constancy and disruption, and stand as symbols of Orlando's growth towards androgyny. Always at Orlando's back, trees sustain them in their centuries-long journey. A particularly important case forms the novel's initial scenes, where Orlando goes to visit the oak tree. There, the character seems to be in their natural element, and it soon becomes clear that it is in Nature that they spend most of their time. According to Woolf's narrator, the following events take place a little before Queen Elizabeth I's visit to Orlando's ancestral home:

> He sighed profoundly, and flung himself—there was a passion in his movements which deserves the word—on the earth at the foot of the oak tree. He loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth's spine beneath him; for such he took the hard root of the oak tree to be; or, for image followed image, it was the back of a great horse that he was riding, or the deck of a trembling ship—it was anything indeed, so long as it was hard, for he felt the need of something which he could attach his floating heart to (Woolf, *Orlando*, 5).

On the basis of this passage, trees generally stand, in *Orlando*, for something hard; something solid that offers Orlando support and foundations. While trees are not the only element to carry this metaphorical meaning—as shown through the images of the horse and the ship—they are indeed the most recurrent. When Orlando is in difficulty, they are often depicted as sitting on or leaning against a tree; a fact that occurs quite significantly during Orlando's experience in Turkey when they make their transition from male to female.

After an important celebration at the English embassy in Turkey, Orlando falls into an almost comatose state, from which they wake to find themselves in the body of a woman. Having witnessed the change with their own eyes and having barely escaped the riots at the embassy, Orlando flees the city of Constantinople, and settles with the gypsies in Turkey's inlands. At the beginning of their stay, Orlando appears to be welcomed by the gypsies, but

the situation changes when they find out about their different views. Orlando not only cares about material things—which the gypsies despise, but it also seems "that her God was Nature" (Woolf, *Orlando*, 93). Isolated and lonely, Orlando newly relies on a tree to sustain them. In a suggestive scene, the now Lady Orlando effectively highlights the trees' constant presence in their life, while also hinting at the disruption brought on by their contemplation. Sitting under a fig tree, Orlando looks at the Turkish landscape, and, suddenly moved by their own imagination, sees the following events taking place:

> Suddenly a shadow, though there was nothing to cast a shadow, appeared on the bald mountainside opposite. It deepened quickly and soon a green hollow showed where there had been barren rock before. As she looked, the hollow deepened and widened, and a great park-like space opened in the flank of the hill. Within, she could see an undulating and grassy lawn; she could see oak trees dotted here and there; she could see the thrushes hopping among the branches (Woolf, *Orlando*, 97).

At this point of Orlando's stay among the gypsies, their isolation leads them to experience visions of home on the horizon. This vision is particularly important for Orlando's journey, as it leads them to realize their need to go back home, and to be among their people. Diana Royer similarly argues that "sometimes, what Woolf's characters discover when becoming introspective over nature is that it can make one feel insignificant and connected with humanity in a necessarily unsatisfactory way" (181—182). In this sense, Orlando's vision of home and its oak trees further leads them to realize their incompatibility with the gypsies, and their separation from humanity. This realization, which comes to the Lady Orlando under the form of a foreign Nature, is an important first step for their discovery of their true self. In fact, it will lead them to go back to their country; a place where, being surrounded by Nature and not just by visions of it, Orlando will come to terms with their human nature and who they truly are.

On their return to England, Orlando goes through several important experiences and encounters. They participate in literary discussions with important writers, they meet a free and independent group of women who are not afraid to love other women, and they even find a spouse in the figure of Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. When going through these important experiences, Orlando does not change themselves, but slowly starts to become more and more aware of their true self. Their androgynous nature especially comes to light at the end of the novel, when Orlando drives from London to their estate. Catching them in the act of returning from a 1920s shopping trip, the narrator describes Orlando's reactions as they go out of the city and rapidly enter into the countryside. As the London trip comes to an end, Orlando enters into a moment of particular crisis, during which they completely lose track of their identity. Everything changes when they come into the presence of Nature. The transition between urban and country landscapes is needed to effect the gender transition in the novel. Sam Wiseman argues that "in the novels, urban experience often functions to undermine a culturally-constructed sense of self" (168). Similarly, he advocates that the presented urban experience, "insofar as it works to defamiliarize us, forces us to attend anew to our engagements with the physical world, Woolf suggests that it may do so more effectively than rural life" (Wiseman 168—169). Consequently, *Orlando*'s final scenes simultaneously embody the strain that city life puts on people, and the apparent disruption that it and the return to Nature cause them (Wiseman 169). However, this disruption is not negative, but rather frees Orlando from the social constraints that trapped them. At the same time, this disruption also forces them to search for their true self. Returning to the countryside and finding themselves in front of a spread of trees, their contemplation helps Orlando come to the present realizations:

> The whole of her darkened and settled, as when some foil whose addition makes the round and solidity of a surface is added to it, and the shallow becomes deep and the

> near distant; and all is contained as water is contained by the sides of a well. So she was now darkened, stilled, and become, with the addition of this Orlando, what is called, rightly or wrongly, a single self, a real self (Woolf, *Orlando*, 213).

Through their liberation from social constraints and their final union with Nature, Orlando clearly comes to a true understanding of their real self. This real self does not actually correspond to the young man who lived during the Elizabethan Age, nor it corresponds to the transformed Lady Orlando, or to the other specific identities that the character assumed through time. Orlando's real self is made up of the union of all these single identities, consequently making them the very epitome of androgyny. Lucas Crawford argues for the androgyny of Orlando, importantly stating how Woolf "has famously theorized 'the androgynous mind,' an idea derived from Samuel Taylor Coleridge" (Crawford 167), by which the Romantic author "meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous, that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (Woolf, qtd. in Crawford 167). Following Crawford's line of thought, *Orlando* easily constitutes a key example of a character's journey meant to redefine ideas of gender and reach androgyny. Rather than achieving a perfect androgynous look, as Orlando will maintain the aspect of a woman until the end, they are androgynous due to the perfect unity of mind that they achieve; a unity that importantly encompasses both feminine and masculine elements.

Therefore, *Orlando* ultimately constitutes Woolf's most successful attempt at freeing her characters from society's gender constraints. Throughout the novel, Nature takes the physical form of trees, while also being metaphorically represented by Sasha and "The Oak Tree," to inspire Orlando's development, and the achievement of an androgynous identity. While trees certainly constitute a constant in Orlando's life, their contemplation is often linked to moments of insight or even epiphany. It is only through this link and Orlando's connection to

Nature that they find their real or complete identity, challenge traditional gender conventions, and leave behind a society that does not seem to fully comprehend or accept them.

5. Conclusions

In Virginia Woolf's novels, Nature stands out as a symbol of potentiality. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, flowers embody Clarissa's, Septimus's, and Peter's potential. Flowers represent these characters' connection with the true essence of the world, and the compromises that they have to make to live in society. Similarly, *To the Lighthouse* sees the sea helping Lily Briscoe to achieve her artistic potential. Through the contemplation of the sea, the young painter finally acquires her artistic vision, and inevitably deals with its reflection on her own self. Not wanting to marry and having the possibility to choose her own path, Lily fulfils her potential by choosing to live as an independent woman and artist in Edwardian England. Ultimately turning to *Orlando*, the trees simultaneously embody the novel's protagonist initial rootedness and their potential for transformation. Having long been fragmented in mind and spirit, Orlando comes to the unity of the self through the inspiration of trees. This inspiration evidently links Orlando's potential for transformation to their roots, and leads to their acceptance of their androgynous gender identity. Accordingly, Virginia Woolf's representations of Nature reflect her characters' potential, and inspire them to achieve it.

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