Constructing the Generation of 1914: Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Virginia Woolf

by

Dana Leib
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Introduction

The First World War was called the Great War by the generation that lived through it—any other description seemed unnecessary. Although this was not the first massively devastating war in history or even the only war in recent memory, World War I had a profound effect on both intellectual and popular culture. Despite the fact that the War did not alter the landscape in Britain as it did in France and Belgium, the War resulted in lasting cultural impacts on the British population. The wartime experiences defined a group that came to be the Generation of 1914, and it is this concept of the creation of a communal identity through literature that will be the focus of this thesis.

The First World War spurred the creation of texts in which the intersection between literature and history is acutely felt. British authors needed to express their experiences of the War in both an individual and collective sense, and readers were looking for ways to contextualize and think about their experiences both on and off the battlefield. As both an English and history major, I wanted to find a way to bring together the two disciplines and draw upon them both in order to reach a fuller understanding of the cultural and intellectual changes the War wrought. To this end, this thesis will incorporate the methodologies of both disciplines, as I will examine how some of the literary works produced in the decade or so following the War addressed cultural concerns the War raised and helped articulate, and even create, the Generation of 1914. Although much work has been done on the literature that came out of the War and the ways in which it was a reaction to a cultural experience, much
less work has been done on how the literature created the cultural consciousness of post-War Britain. This work will consider the intent and impact of authors and their works on the creation of the generational identity of the Generation of 1914 and therefore suggest the way that literature functions not merely passively, but actively, in the shaping of cultural consciousness.

Although the Generation of 1914 is often discussed as a cohesive generational identity, it was in many ways an imagined conception of a generation that bridged the very real differences among the ways that groups of the British population experienced the First World War. In crafting what Robert Wohl has termed “the myth of the Lost Generation,”¹ authors had to find ways to focus on the commonalities of experiences that were differentiated by seemingly impregnable barriers such as those between the soldier and the civilian, the officer and the enlisted man, and the class hierarchies that broadly shaped and differentiated the British War experience. In this manner, the literature that came out of the First World War became a tool in creating the collective memory that structured the War’s presence in the British cultural consciousness. “Collective memory” in this case refers to “the symbolic order, the media, social institutions and practices by which social groups construct a shared past.”² The concept of a shared past is a powerful one in the context of the Wohl’s “Generation of 1914” as it became the narrative that bonded the nation and the generation together in the aftermath of events that could have instead created rifts

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among those who experienced the War in different ways. Shared memory is not
divorced from the memory of the individual, however, because those individual
perspectives give the collective memory the relevance and texture that it needs to be
grounded in elements of the truth. 3 Therefore, the use of individual stories to address
national concerns can effectively connect the individual to a nationally and
generationally shared experience, even if such a link is not explicitly claimed.
Specifically, literature can play a significant role in the creation of collective memory
because it does not claim to represent absolute fact but instead traffics in the
symbolic, which allows a literary text to draw together disparate elements and
symbols to create “a single text.” 4 In this way, the works addressed in this thesis
contributed to the collective memory of the War through the use of symbols and
motifs that represent aspects of a larger experience, which allowed the many different
War participants entry into this broader conception of the Generation of 1914.

**Forming the Generation of 1914**

Karl Mannheim’s theory of generational formation provides a theoretical
framework that explains how there can be a creation of a generational identity based
on a shared experience rather than simply cycling through generations distinguished
only by chronology. Mannheim argues against what he terms the “positivist idea” of
generation, which is based around the idea that there is a rational rhythm of life that
allows for the decline of one generation as another one comes of age. This positivism
owes much to the nineteenth-century valuation of the cycle of life and human history.

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3 Erll, “Wars We Have Seen,” 10-31.
4 Erll, “Wars We Have Seen,” 33-34.
According to the positivist model, determining the parameters of a generation is more of a mathematical exercise than anything else. Mannheim writes, “Presented in this light, the history of ideas appears reduced to a chronological table. The core of the problem, after this simplification, appears to be to find the average period of time taken for the older generation to be superseded by the new in public life, and principally to find the natural starting-point in history from which to reckon a new period.”\textsuperscript{5} Such a formulation does not take into account drastic changes in lived experience; instead, the only factor it seems to consider is whether people are living longer, which may affect the average length of a generation before it is determined to be “superseded” by a younger one. Because the positivist view of generations is based on the average length of a lifecycle, Mannheim argues that it could only effectively define a generation if everyone in a generation was born within the same few years and had children within the same few-year span. However, “birth and death in society as a whole follow continuously one upon the other, and full intervals exist only in the individual family where there is a definite period before children attain marriageable age.”\textsuperscript{6} In any society, births and deaths are constantly happening and there are relatively few “baby booms” in which many children are born within the same few years. In fact, the only way to really differentiate between generations via this mathematical model is within a single family, where the generations resolve themselves into distinct groups. Because Mannheim recognizes that the positivist model is not workable on a large-scale, social level, he argues that there must be what

he terms “generational entelechy”\textsuperscript{7}—a sense of generational unity. Rather than structuring a generation based on a sense of historical epochs that are distinguished more by their chronological reach and distance from one another than they are by any of the events they contain, Mannheim turns to an understanding of the importance of similarities of experience within one generation that separate it from others. It is with this conception of generation formation that the Generation of 1914 moves from a literary representation of the War experience to a cultural and national reality.

Mannheim’s notion of a necessary connection between a generation and some type of new experience dovetails nicely with the sense in wartime and post-War works that the First World War was a new experience for those who were a part of it. Although the British population had experienced wars before and in recent memory, the First World War entailed the use of new technology that killed soldiers in new and horrific ways, and it was the first in nearly a century to be fought just beyond the English Channel, which created new dimensions of space with which combatants and noncombatants alike had to contend. For Mannheim these new experiences that so fascinated War authors were also crucial elements in the construction of the Generation of 1914. He writes that “our culture is developed by individuals who come into contact anew with the accumulated heritage. In the nature of our psychical make-up, a fresh contact (meeting something anew) always means a changed relationship of distance from the object and a novel approach in assimilating, using, and developing the proffered material.”\textsuperscript{8} In his formulation, a new generation is formed when the people of that time come into contact with something new, which in

\textsuperscript{7} Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” 283.
\textsuperscript{8} Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” 293.
turn creates relationships that require new ways of thinking and ultimately becomes a holistic experience around which the sense of a generational identity can coalesce. In this framework, the Generation of 1914 resulted from the communal experience of the War. However, this relationship between the War and the conception of the generation highlights the importance of the work that writers such as Sassoon, Graves, and Woolf did in creating the idea of a single, encompassing War experience by emphasizing the similarities of their wartime experiences rather than the differences.

Mannheim’s conception of a generation as formed around a new experience that is unique to a time period provides an explanation for how a generation can mean more than a group of people who came of age at roughly the same time; this type of formulation places a higher value on a similarity of place and time than of age and creates a structure on which an idea of a national consciousness can be built. For Mannheim, that similarity of location does not necessarily entail creating physical space limitations to frame a generation. Rather, “[t]he fact that people are born at the same time, or that their youth, adulthood, and old age coincide, does not in itself involve similarity of location; what does create a similar location is that they are in a position to experience the same events and data, etc., and especially that these experiences impinge upon a similarly ‘stratified’ consciousness.”\(^9\) Although he does not explicitly state that a generation can have national or cultural aspects, such a formulation implicitly sets up this kind of analysis. When a group is “in a position to experience the same events and data, etc.,” it is not merely because they are all in the

right place at the right time but also due to the perspectives with which they approach these experiences and the manner in which they attempt to process and think about what has occurred and their role in these events. For these reasons, a national or cultural milieu can often provide the appropriate setting for the development of a generational identity that is just as much linked to a sense of space or common origin as it is a shared experience. Such a framework allows for the integration of older people into a generation, but Mannheim also provides a reasoning for why that integration might be difficult: “One is old primarily in so far as he comes to live within a specific, individually acquired, framework of useable past experience, so that every new experience has its form and its place largely marked out for it in advance.”10 Although older people can certainly share in the experiences that structure a generation, they often approach those experiences with different perspectives than their younger peers simply by virtue of having lived longer and seen more. Therefore, while the elder and younger groups may be experiencing the same events in the present, those events are being assimilated into different frameworks established by the past and may not result in similar relationships and ways of thinking that are so crucial to the formation of a shared generational identity. Mannheim associates these differences with why generations, despite being based on experiences, tend to map onto cycles of groups of people coming of age around the same time; however, this explanation also provides a method for considering the significance of a generational identity as evidence of similarities across groups that might otherwise be considered too stratified to share similar experiences.

In the context of the Generation of 1914, Mannheim’s theory of the importance of similarity of location in generational identity shows how experiences can be shared across social classes and even bridge the divide between soldier and civilian. As long as these apparently disparate groups approach their experiences with a similar worldview and have a similar framework for contextualizing and evaluating those experiences, they come from a similar “location” in Mannheim’s formulation. Literature such as that written by Sassoon, Graves, and Woolf plays that essential role of uniting their readers by providing them with methods of recognizing and thinking about the commonalities in their War experiences.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Mannheim’s formulation of generational theory and its relevance to the Generation of 1914 is the fact that this theoretical framework takes into account the ability of writers and thinkers who are members of a generation to shape it. Mannheim presents two possibilities by which a generation may create the intellectual and cultural products that later generations will associate with it. He writes, “On the one hand, the generation unit may produce its work and deeds unconsciously out of the new impulse evolved by itself, having an intuitive awareness of its existence as a group but failing to realize the group’s character as a generation unit. On the other hand, groups may consciously experience and emphasize their character as generation units.”

These self-reflexive works reflect the way that the authors considered themselves members of this generation even as they themselves shaped the ways in which the members of the generation thought about themselves and their experiences. As fictional autobiographies that

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explicitly deal with the experience of the War, Sassoon’s and Graves’ texts are explicitly concerned with the issues on which the Generation of 1914 required a stance. In many ways, both works can be categorized as the kind of self-aware generational production to which Mannheim refers in his second option, mainly because both works explicitly frame themselves as chronicles of the War and its emotional aftermath.

However, the extent to which they do so and are willing to present their experiences as requiring a new conceptual framework from that which came before differs greatly. While Sassoon is comparably more comfortable with formulations and narrative techniques that are indebted to earlier war narratives, Graves depicts his War experience as a substantially new one, and his formulation brought all British citizens together in their attempts to engage with the new realities of the War. In this way, while both authors could be viewed as belonging to the first group that Mannheim identifies, it is Graves who better exemplifies the self-aware writing of the second group. Woolf’s writing, on the other hand, seems to fit neatly into a self-aware category, but is organized around the War more obliquely. While her texts are broadly concerned with formalistic questions and experiments that would continue through her later work, the presence of the War becomes a catalyst around which her ideas could coalesce and provided a medium to grant her individual concerns larger cultural resonance. In this sense, Woolf, too, can be considered an author who consciously engaged with the shared identity of the Generation of 1914 and was aware of her role in shaping it.
Soldier and Civilian

In their works, Sassoon, Graves, and Woolf all question the extent to which the assumed dichotomy between soldier and civilian was useful or accurate. By using various narrative techniques to link the reader to the events described and to link characters within the novel who ostensibly experienced the War differently, these authors reflected the ways in which the line between the soldier and the civilian was blurred by the conditions of the First World War. A crucial aspect of that was the physical ease of moving both men and materials back and forth. As both Sassoon and Graves relate, there was very little transit time between the home front and the battlefield, and soldiers were often moved back and forth quickly. Sassoon describes his evacuation from his “billet at La Chaussee” to “a small white room on the ground floor of Somerville College” in Oxford as taking only two days.\(^\text{12}\) Because the crossing of the Channel was relatively easy, the only difficult part of the journey was getting from the trenches to the coast, and as long as the coastal destination was behind British lines, even that was rarely a strenuous journey. This relative ease of movement also allowed an active mail service to be maintained throughout the War, which meant that “[f]or those who could not see their families and friends, letters, packages, and newspapers served as vital connections between soldiers and their civilian lives.”\(^\text{13}\) Rather than being completely cut off from their civilian lives, the soldiers were able maintain a connection in the form of communication and familiar items from home. Similarly, those on the battlefield were able to write back about


their experiences with some degree of immediacy, so that the war stories those at home heard (or read, as the case may be) were not the ones repeated long after the fact but rather descriptions of events that had recently occurred, which allowed both the soldiers and the civilians to share in an event’s emotional aftermath. By emphasizing the ways in which the War experience transcended the bounds of the battlefield, these authors furthered the dissolution of the mental divide between the soldier and civilian.

The ease of communications allowed a wealth of letters to be sent home from the battlefield that further illustrated the continuities of the relationships that the soldiers were able to maintain with their friends and relatives across the Channel. In one letter describing a British patrol encountering German soldiers expanding their trench line, an officer wrote, “It was all like a dream, seeing a phantom spade rising and falling behind a mound of damp earth, creeping up pistol in hand through broken boughs and small tree trunks, peeping down into a six-foot pit, sighting four ghostly blue-grey figures and punctuating the whole grey unreality with four red pistol flashes.” The writer presents this image with small pieces of information that together create more of an atmosphere than they do a representative image of what the soldier experienced. He does not seek to definitively categorize his experience, but neither does he tell the recipient that it is beyond his civilian understanding.

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14 While field postcards that were pre-printed with phrases—soldiers crossed out the ones that did not apply—facilitated much more succinct communication from the battlefield, even those included the phrase “letter to follow shortly,” which indicated the high volume of letters traveling from the trenches.
Instead, he paints enough of a picture for the reader of the letter to continue the interpretive work and experience an imagined version of the events. These letters utilize their readers as an audience and make explicit appeals to the their imaginations in order to attempt to represent the events the soldiers experienced. One such soldier writes, “I can’t describe being shelled out. You must imagine it.”\textsuperscript{16} By integrating the imaginations of the readers/audience to describe an event, these letters suggest that the civilian experience was a necessary complement to that of the soldier and that both existed within the same sphere of the broader War experience.

The connection between the home front and the battlefield was more than just an accident of the location of the War and advances in transportation and communication technology; in many ways it was an essential part of the War experience because it engendered a feeling that the entire nation was fighting the War. When attempting to come to terms with the experiences of War, both the soldier and the civilian have the same baseline perspective because every soldier was once a civilian and many civilians are potential soldiers. The two groups are not completely distinct but rather intimately related by their shared past and the potential for a shared future. This awareness of the extent to which the soldiers and civilians were connected parts of an entire British experience of the War allowed the civilians and the soldiers to feel a certain sense of responsibility to each other. In the case of the civilians, the connection to the soldiers on a national as well as a personal level meant that the War was never far from their minds. In fact, the “emotional connection to the war was a reality to which they clung, and despite talk of the separation between

\textsuperscript{16} “Letter from a Canadian Officer,” \textit{Letters from Armageddon}, 112.
home and battle fronts, many civilian diaries and letters suggest that they saw the gap as negligible."\textsuperscript{17} While the War’s effects might have manifested in different ways for those who were never on the battlefield, the experience of being a part of a nation at war was a powerful one on both sides of the Channel. The narrative projects of Sassoon, Graves, and Woolf all address the extent to which the War experience was one in which all participants could take on roles. Through their reflection and refinement of these ideas, they assisted in the incorporation of the broader national population into the War instead of emphasizing a divide between soldiers and civilians.

**Officers and Enlisted Men**

While the soldier and civilian identities and War experiences can be viewed as related, it is important to remember that those are not entirely cohesive categories. The term “soldier” can refer to officers as well as enlisted men—two groups with wholly different sets of responsibilities and expectations of treatment within the framework of an army that were often linked to British ideas of class. The idea that social class position was a statement about a person’s moral and social worth resulted in a situation in which “elites passed the rudimentary medical examinations at greater rates and joined the officer corps largely because they were deemed the right sort of people to do so.”\textsuperscript{18} The imposition of social class hierarchy into the military leadership structure added another element of distinction between the officers and the

\textsuperscript{17} Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War*, 110.

enlisted men, which both Sassoon and Graves acknowledge in their writings. For Graves, this evidence is found in congratulations he receives from his superior for performing well in an exhibition boxing match: “As soon as Crawshay heard the story, he rang me up at my billet and told me that he had learned with pleasure of my performance; that for an officer to box like that was a great encouragement for the men; that he was mistaken about my sportsmanship; and that, to show his appreciation, he would put me down for a draft to France in a week’s time.”

Although Graves qualifies this whole experience by specifying that his performance was entirely based on the other, more experienced boxer “accommodating his pace” in order to make him look good, from the outside his behavior embodies the expected conduct of a British officer. As his superior confirms by sending him to France after hearing of this incident, serving as an example for the enlisted men is perhaps one of an officer’s most important duties because it allows him to command respect and loyalty. By presenting the officer’s role in such a way, Graves highlights the importance the military placed on having officers that could represent a moral ideal for the enlisted men. The practical implication of this ideal was that he, as an officer, could not appear fallible to those he is supposed to command and had to maintain a degree of aloofness. The letters of the Indian soldiers who fought in the British Army serve as further evidence of this distinction. As outsiders to the officers/enlisted men dynamic, the sepoys saw very clearly that they “were often serving under men they

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20 Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 66.
The emotional, mental, and to a certain extent physical separation of officers and enlisted men is one that writers such as Sassoon and Graves would have to overcome in order to grant their narratives legitimacy that extended beyond their fellow officers.

Despite the many aspects of wartime life that differentiated the officers from the enlisted men, one of the main things the two groups had in common was the vast amount of writing that they produced about their experiences. Regardless of their place within the military hierarchy, “[t]he soldiers wrote so extensively about the war partly because they were immediately embroiled in it, and partly because, for most of them, it was easily the most traumatic event thus far in their lives.”

The huge amount of writing that soldiers produced during the War emphasized the impact that the War had on their lives as participants in the broadest sense, and it was not unique to their experiences as either enlisted men or officers. Instead, the volume of epistolary responses to the violence of the War from both sides of the military power divide indicates the truly pervasive impact of the War. Even though the majority of the letters went across the Channel rather than serving as intra-battlefield communication, military censorship procedure actually allowed the letters to become a method of communication between the enlisted men and their officers. The censorship of letters home by officers was common military procedure in order to prevent the accidental or purposeful leaking of information regarding movements of troops and materials, so soldiers knew that their letters would likely be read and

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22 Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 16.
possibly altered by their superiors. Such knowledge established the groundwork for a complicated dynamic between soldiers who knew that their letters would be read and officers who knew what their enlisted men were writing home: “Knowing that their officers might read their letter, the troops had every incentive to say positive things about those in authority over them; in general, however, they did not….These possibly risky complaints suggest that the letters contain other elements of frankness.”23 Because the soldiers knew their letters would likely be read by the very people they were describing, and yet they still included elements of critique in their letters, they created a space for honest communication. As Omissi notes in his analysis of these letters, the fact that soldiers seemed inclined not to whitewash their descriptions of their officers implies that they did not hide their real concerns about other aspects of the War, which meant that the letters could act as an area in which the officers and enlisted men could meet with their thoughts about the War. In crafting their narratives, Sassoon and Graves were able to take advantage of the role that writing played in linking the enlisted men and officers under the umbrella identity of “soldier”; in this manner, literature was able to pick up where letter-writing left off.

The distinction between the officers and the enlisted men is not only relevant within the framework of the military hierarchy, but it is also representative of larger class issues within British society. Although it is not always immediately clear from their writing, both Sassoon and Graves experienced upper-class British society to varying degrees—Sassoon was born to a disgraced branch of a wealthy family, while

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Graves was born middle-class and achieved enough academic success to propel him upwards—and both certainly breathed the more rarified air of Oxbridge. Sassoon and Graves were not unique in these backgrounds; many of the authors of the First World War came from similarly affluent backgrounds, and the pervasiveness of these narratives overrode the actual unequal distribution of the origins of the British Army. Instead of a truly proportional representation of the British population, the Army “was not a cross section of Britain. It included more clerks than miners and railwaymen combined. Contrary to the conservative mythology of ‘deep England’, the rural population was generally unmoved by an impulse to volunteer: the archetypal urban activity of omnibus transport had double the volunteering rate of agricultural workers.”

What Gregory describes as the fact that the rural population was “unmoved by an impulse to volunteer” is emblematic of the extent to which idea of responsibility for the future of the nation decreased in the transition from the upper classes to the more marginalized and less influential members of the populace. The apparent disconnect between the actual demographics of the Army and the perception of the entire nation serving equally is able to be resolved through the creation of War narratives that highlight the similarities of the ways in people from all social classes fulfilled their duties during the War. Rather than ignoring the narratives of the lower classes’ participation in the War effort, Sassoon’s and Graves’ work can be seen as part of a larger project to bridge the social class divide in the War experience.

The implications of the British class system went far beyond the battlefield and have been the subject of much critical concern. Given her well-off background

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and association with the Bloomsbury Group, Woolf could scarcely portray herself as a writer of the people, and she is evidently conscious of the influence that her elite milieu had on her writing: “Snobbery threads its way through Woolf’s fiction, condensing the contradictions and discomforts that surrounded the mass-mediated institutions of cultural and social distinction in which she found herself ensnared.”

While Woolf was certainly a product of her upbringing and social environment, the emphasis on formal experimentation in modernism afforded her an opportunity to explore how different social classes interacted and possible ways to bridge the gaps between them within the framework of their War experiences. Although certain characters, such as Mrs. McNab in *To the Lighthouse*, are given a much more superficial treatment than others in the novels, the fact that Woolf includes them in novels that deal so heavily with people’s interior lives and critical engagement with experiences illustrates how Woolf formally created a space in which different social classes could interact with one another. Because this space was one defined by considering the impacts of life experiences, Woolf emphasized that the War could serve as a catalyst for the type of critical engagement that could bridge social boundaries through the creation of a common approach to the War.

This formal inclusion of characters takes place through Woolf bringing all of the characters in both *To the Lighthouse* and *Jacob’s Room* into the same experiential and emotional space. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf constructs characters whose emotional identities are porous rather than focusing on characters as individuals whose emotions are entirely distinct from those around them, which allows her to

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diffuse experiences among all the characters. The singular experience of being at the Ramsays’ house structures the novel and provides the space in which all characters may engage with the feeling of loss that permeates the novel, both in the form of the death of Mrs. Ramsay as well as the larger sense of the lives that were lost during the War. By creating a space that draws all of the characters together and linking them to the same emotional project, Woolf shows how a shared emotional experience can construct associational relationships among people who would otherwise exist in separate social spheres.

The project is more explicit in *Jacob’s Room*, as the entire novel is framed around a character who barely appears but with whom the other characters interact and whom they eventually mourn. Because Woolf defines Jacob through his interactions with others, the reader sees him interact with people of many different classes and standings within British society. Jacob acts as the formal mechanism by which all of these different people are brought together, and represents the War’s ability to do the same. In the same way that Jacob’s death is a microcosm for the broader British experience of the loss of life in the First World War, his life represents the experience of the War and how many different people can interact with one another within that space. By formally integrating characters from such different walks of life into her novels that deal with the War, Woolf suggests that the War experience could fulfill the same role in British society as it does in the world of her novels. Because it was an experience in which so many different people were involved, the act of coming to terms with its impacts represented an opportunity to create a shared space for critical engagement that could bridge British social class
distinctions. In this manner, the appearance of Woolf’s social class biases in her War novels suggest that these issues should be considered interrelated, and that the War could be seen as an agent of social mobility.

Overview

In many ways, literature, and particularly fiction was the most appropriate medium for this project of overcoming the disparities in the wartime experiences of the members of the Generation of 1914 because it allowed authors to enlist a range of strategies for bridging, at least imaginatively, the divisions and disparities that structured British society. This thesis will focus on the work of three wartime and post-War authors who wrote from both sides of the battlefield divide. Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves both experienced the War as soldiers and then wrote about their experiences in the form of fictionalized autobiographies, while Virginia Woolf experienced the War as a civilian and created works that examined the ways in which concepts such as time, space, and death were viewed in altered perspectives due to the events of the War. While the specific authors this thesis examines were by no means the only voices on the topic of post-War identity, they were widely read and influential in many social circles.26 Though these responses tended to be ones that focused on the negative aspects of the War and its impacts, it is important to keep in mind that these are specific and individual responses to the First World War. Others responded differently, often with more nationalistic perspective; these writers, however, were not as influential in the construction of the idea of the Generation of

26 See Appendix A.
1914 that this work is interested in examining. This thesis will focus on Sassoon, Graves, and Woolf almost exclusively, not in an attempt to ignore the contributions of other writers and thinkers, but rather as a way to focus the work and place it in the context of these specific authors at their specific moment in history. With these concerns in mind, I have chosen to structure this thesis thematically instead of chronologically or by giving each author an individual chapter, though some authors are more strongly associated with certain issues than others, and several themes will be addressed in more than one place.

The first section will look at the fictionalized autobiographies of Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves and how they engaged with the broader aspects of the War experience. Instead of supporting a narrative that emphasized the gulf between the soldier and civilian experiences of the War as one that language could not bridge, their works focused on the commonalities between the wartime experiences of those groups. Sassoon’s and Graves’ writing suggests that there is no clear definition of when a person becomes a soldier and that complicating that identity opens it up to further examination regarding whether such War participants were aggressors or victims, or even whether such distinctions are meaningful. By self-consciously examining their own perceptions of events through the lens of these novelistic retellings of what occurred, Sassoon and Graves suggest that their readers, and the British nation as a whole, should similarly reflect on their experiences and that, in doing so, they will see that these apparent distinctions are in fact false dichotomies.

The second section will deal with Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and the ways in which her formal explorations of how time and space can be used in the
novel illuminate how the War can be framed as a national experience that must also be mourned collectively. In this novel, Woolf creates a work that deconstructs traditional literary notions of chronology and therefore calls into question the apparent constraints that such structures can place on the experience of life. By casting doubt on the ability of counted time to serve as an effective marker of an event’s significance, Woolf creates a framework that allows for the subjective experience of time to take precedence over more traditional views and therefore for the various War experiences to be related to one another as a series of interconnected events rather than a linear progression. Similarly, Woolf’s choice to formally structure the novel in a manner that mirrors the role Ramsays’ house plays as a location of meeting and association presents the War experience as creating a similar metaphorical space in British society. In placing these concerns within a novel that explicitly deals both with grief and with the War, Woolf suggests that these alternative ways of thinking about temporal and spatial relationships provide a way for private grief in the aftermath of the War to be shared in a national and communal space.

Similarly, the third section will focus on Woolf’s work in *Jacob’s Room* to craft a formal experiment into how a novel can depict the life of a protagonist who exists almost exclusively in the reflections of other characters, which allows Woolf to use Jacob’s life and death as a microcosm for the larger British experience of World War I and its aftermath. While scholars have argued that the experiences of soldiers during the War irreparably separated them from the civilians, Woolf instead presents the War experience as one that emphasized the continuities in British life throughout
the War and the connections among those who lived through it on both sides of the Channel. Although the novel seemingly establishes a series of dichotomies between presence and absence, life and death, and the soldier and the civilian, Woolf addresses these issues in ways that complicate such strict delineation and suggests the ways in which the British War experience was shared.
Chapter One:
The Fictionalized Autobiographies of Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves

Scholarship on wartime and post-War fiction has often focused on how authors were able to create a fictional meeting ground where the experiential chasm separating the author and reader or the soldier and the civilian can be closed. Scholars such as Samuel Hynes, and more recently, Allyson Booth have argued that World War I was an experience that inherently separated those who lived it on the battlefield from those who observed from the home front and that literature could only attempt to bridge what was essentially “two markedly different categories of experience, a discrepancy that complicated the gap that always separates language from experience.” In relying on a view of language as an incomplete expression of lived experience, these scholars portray literature from the First World War as attempting to bridge the distance between the War’s direct participants and its observers, but in doing so, such literature necessarily highlights that distance. However, rather than providing support for this narrative, Sassoon’s and Graves’ writing shows the ways in which these seemingly disparate experiences are, in fact, intimately linked.

In their works, Sassoon and Graves engaged with the assumption that literature about World War I separated people based on their experiences in the War. Rather than following the circular logic in which language cannot express experience and therefore experiences can never truly be shared, Sassoon and Graves invite the readers to think about their War experiences in a broader context of a national War

experience, and thus they expose the limits of such traditional scholarly views. In *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Sassoon’s creation of George Sherston as a fictional character based on himself enabled him to engage with and push against the idea that the experience of the War was irreconcilable or discontinuous with the lives of civilians. Similarly, Graves’ work *Goodbye to All That* self-consciously walks the fine line between novelistic memoir and traditional autobiography in order to involve the reader in the process of constructing a narrative of the War experience, which suggests that this project should be a national, communal one. Rather than bridging the gap between the writer and reader as well as that between the soldier and civilian, Sassoon’s and Graves’ writing reveals this dichotomy as false. Their writing illustrates how the home front and battlefield were both part of the same War experience and how people moved back and forth across these spaces. In complicating the soldier identity, Sassoon and Graves also engage with the idea that the soldier bears the brunt of responsibility for the violence of the War, and instead they present a view of the War in which there was no meaningful distinction between the supposed victims and aggressors.

**Significance of the Battlefield**

In writing about the British experience of World War I, both Sassoon and Graves present the soldier identity as defined by more than presence in the trenches and therefore lacking a strict distinction from the civilian identity. For both authors, the idea of being a soldier seems to stem from subjective experience rather than any objective measure, as they both emphasize the unpreparedness of new troops. Graves
explains that the heavy losses his division suffered required reinforcements to be brought in that had varying levels of training: “Of the men, perhaps fifty or so had got more than a couple of months’ training before being sent out; some had only three weeks’ training; a great many had never fired a musketry course.” Despite the fact that these men were soldiers according to the most basic definition of the term, in that they were expected to defend their trenches and attack their enemies’ with the same fervor and skill as the more experienced troops, Graves makes his skepticism abundantly clear. Far from comforting himself with the knowledge that the army would not leave his division without a full complement of men to maintain its fighting force, Graves seems to doubt the potential efficacy of these soldiers. While Graves suggests that these unprepared men should not be considered soldiers, Sassoon goes further and makes the argument that the War put people in the trenches who could not be identified as soldiers. When Sherston’s battalion is relieved, he takes a moment to observe the incoming troops and thinks, “The sun had gone down on my own reckless brandishings, and I understood the doomed condition of these half-trained civilians who had been sent up to attack the Wood.” Like Graves, Sassoon identifies the troops’ unpreparedness as a lack of training, but for him their presence in the trenches does not override the fact that they are still civilians. Even though they might have some training and are now in an active warzone, they cannot be considered soldiers. While Graves merely doubts whether his reinforcements will prove effective, Sassoon goes so far as to characterize Sherston’s reinforcements as “doomed” civilians. Both authors describe a vast array of men who spent time in the

28 Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 80.
trenches during the War, but the fact that they carefully maintain the perspective that being on the field of battle does not automatically make a man a soldier suggests that this identity is perhaps ineffective—no War participant can fully be a soldier, and every War participant is a soldier to a certain extent.

In the same way that Sassoon and Graves complicate the idea of what defines a soldier, they also deliberately blur the distinction between the home front and the battlefield. Graves writes that, not only does news from home have an impact on a soldier’s performance and focus in the trenches, but also it “might affect a soldier in one of two ways. It might either drive him to suicide (or recklessness amounting to suicide), or else seem trivial by contrast with present experiences and be laughed off.”30 Rather than seeing the spheres of the battlefield and home as wholly separate, soldiers experienced these aspects of their lives as overlapping and mutually determinative. One could argue that the home front is always a part of a war experience because a soldier fights for the protection of the home and the familiar way of life, but these portrayals present a more complex view of the relationship because home is not merely the site of protection and comfort but also a continually affective aspect of a soldier’s life on the battlefield. Sassoon’s formulation of this problem focuses on the perspective through which the War is viewed from opposite sides of the Channel. When speaking to the editor of Unconservative Weekly, Sherston says, “As a matter of fact I’m almost sure that the War doesn’t seem nearly such a bloody rotten show when one’s out there as it does when one’s back in England. You see as soon as one gets across the Channel one sort of feels as if it’s no

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30 Graves, Goodbye to All That, 103.
good worrying any more—you know what I mean—like being part of the Machine again, with nothing to be done except take one’s chance.” As opposed to being most concerned about War when he is in the trenches, Sherston feels that it casts the largest shadow the further he is away from his post. On the battlefield, he is merely one piece in the much larger machinery of the War: responsible for little except the immediate safety of those around him. When he is back in England, however, the War looms much larger, and its national and global significance is evident. The relationship between the home front and the battlefield does not reflect the measure of distance from the point of greatest conflict, but it is rather a reflection of the mental and emotional state of the War’s participants. Both authors present the home front and the battlefield as integrated parts of the War that allowed the participants to physically and mentally move within and between them.

In Graves’ account, even being on the battlefield was an experience in the relativity of danger. Rather than depicting a uniform experience of constant fear, Graves describes how he and his fellow soldiers learned to quickly differentiate between the sounds of a bullet or bomb that was likely to injure them and the ones that were someone else’s problem:

I find that my reactions to danger are extraordinarily quick; but everyone gets like that. We can sort out all the different explosions and disregard whichever don’t concern us—such as the artillery duel, machine-gun fire at the next company to us, desultory rifle-fire. But we pick out at once the faint plop! of the mortar that sends off a

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sausage, or the muffled rifle noise when a grenade is fired. The men are much afraid, yet always joking.\textsuperscript{32}

Beyond the obvious observation that an experienced soldier could recognize that certain situations presented a more immediate danger than others, Graves presents the reader with a more nuanced experience than a simple dichotomy between imminent demise and complete safety. Instead, he shows how a soldier’s wartime experience tended to exist in this space of continuous yet relative danger. In such a space, even the weapons of war become tools for conducting daily life. In a letter home, Graves writes, “Our machine-gun crew boil their hot water by firing off belt after belt of ammunition at no particular target, just generally spraying the German line. After several pounds worth of ammunition has been used, the water in the guns—which are water-cooled—begins to boil. They say they make German ration and carrying parties behind the line pay for their early-morning cup of tea.”\textsuperscript{33} This combination of the mundane task of boiling water with the War-specific goal of strafing German supply parties illustrates the extent to which a soldier’s life in the trenches encompassed more than a single type of experience. Instead, the experience on the battlefield included these details regarding the necessary conduct of everyday life in such conditions and presented the continuity of such experiences rather than their disjunction.

Both Sassoon and Graves describe soldiers’ interactions with dead companions in ways that highlight the trenches as a place where life and death are part of the same experience. In Sassoon’s work, Sherston describes being uncertain

\textsuperscript{32} Graves, \textit{Goodbye to All That}, 96.

\textsuperscript{33} Graves, \textit{Goodbye to All That}, 94.
whether the bodies in trenches were dead or sleeping: “I was doubtful whether they were asleep or dead, for the attitudes of many were like death, grotesque and distorted. But this is nothing new to write about; just a weary company squeezing past dead or drowsing men while it sloshes and stumbles to a front-line trench.” In relating this episode, Sassoon is playing on the reader’s sympathies and understandings of the horrors of trench life, which often entailed the inability to dig proper graves and the resulting presence of dead bodies and body parts strewn about in trenches. However, he is also presenting the reader with a formal example of the type of continuity he describes. In this passage, it is ultimately irrelevant whether the men were in fact “dead or drowsing”; they could be either, or there could be a mixture of both. Regardless of their state, the “weary company” interacts with these bodies in the same manner: by squeezing past them to continue on their way. Graves goes further in his description of the War dead by showing the familiar ways in which soldiers interacted with the bodies around them. He relates the story of a body whose “arm was stretched out stiff when they carried him in and laid him on the fire-step; it stretched right across the trench. His comrades joke as they push it out of the way to get by. ‘Out of the light, you old bastard! Do you own this bloody trench?’ Or else they shake hands with him familiarly. ‘Put it there, Billy Boy.’” By continuing to interact with him in this relatively normal, joking way, this body’s comrades illustrate the continuity in the lives of soldiers; the deaths of their fellow soldiers do not meaningfully change their relationships. The juxtaposition of this apparently awful scene with the familiarity with which the soldiers approached it mirrors the readers’

35 Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 97.
familiarity with literary scenes that play on the horror of the trenches. For the readers, such a scene would not necessarily jar their reading experience, and in a similar way, both Sassoon and Graves show how death in the trenches was not separate from life but rather an extension and continuation of the same relationships and interactions.

Similarly, although the War could be presented as a wholly separate experience from that of “normal” life, Sassoon and Graves present the War as only one part of a larger drama of human experience. Sassoon explicitly details Sherston’s experience as a series of theatrical acts as he thinks over his experiences and seeks to find some type of order in them:

It was natural that I should remember Flixecourt. Those four weeks had kept their hold on my mind, and they now seemed like the First Act of a play—a light-hearted First Act which was unwilling to look ahead from its background of sunlight and the gloring beauty of beech forests. Life at the Army School, with its superb physical health, had been like a prelude to some really conclusive sacrifice of high-spirited youth. Act II had carried me along to the fateful First of July.

Act III had sent me home to think things over.36

In this personal narrative, the War takes up only a single act in the broader drama of Sherston’s life. While Sassoon relates each of these acts to the War, only the second one directly alludes to battle. However, by making the War the second in a set of three, Sassoon implicitly establishes a relationship in which both the first and third acts are necessary to properly frame the second. Therefore, although the War

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36 Sassoon, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 116.
occupies its own space within the theatrical motif, the experience is also intimately
connected to that of the home front both before and after the War. The extent to
which these experiences are interrelated is made even more clear by Sherston’s
establishment of Act I as taking place in the Army School at Flixecourt. He may be
technically in the War at this point, but Sherston evidently thinks of this time as part
of his pre-War experience of life. Even his return after the War was not simply a
homecoming but rather an opportunity to “think things over,” which portrays the War
as a continuing influence on his life. The War remains a defining feature in this
formulation of Sherston’s life, but it serves as a point of linkage rather than one of
disunion.

The Soldier’s Responsibility

A popular narrative in the critical literature on World War I concerns writers’
portrayal of the War as a great human drama without an author, which allowed such
writers to foist the responsibility for the War off of the participants. In this narrative,
World War I is understood as profoundly novel to the reality that the British people
had known in previous wars because this War could not be easily encapsulated in
terms of land gained or lost.37 Critics have focused on the War’s existence in a kind
of static, interstitial space: “The First World War was confusing because it was not
what wars were supposed to be like; it was not what life was supposed to be like. It
felt to many participants something in excess of what could be comprehended;

37 See, for example, the work of Samuel Hynes, K.M. Newton, Adrian Gregory,
Martin Green, Vita Fortunati, and Elena Lamberti.
something beyond humanity, beyond history.” World War I narratives structured around this idea of inhumanity allow the War to remain unexplained. If the authors accept the inhumanity as the framework for the events of the War and their actions within that framework, they do not have to explain how the inhumanity came into being or the ways in which they contributed to it. In this manner, the separation between the expected events of war and what actually happened in World War I could be extrapolated to mean a separation between people and their actions. When viewed through this analytical lens, the War allowed authors such as Sassoon and Graves to remove the responsibility for the War from individuals and place it beyond humanity and history. However, while Sassoon and Graves at times seem to accede to this narrative, rather than removing responsibility, their writing questions the meaningfulness of distinctions in responsibility between the soldier and the civilian as well as between the aggressor and the victim.

Sassoon’s Memoirs highlight the roles that the soldiers played as both victims and perpetrators of violence. In Sassoon’s estimation, the pendulum of responsibility swings heavily away from the soldiers of both sides and instead leaves all participants as victims rather than aggressors. When he describes the destruction of a battlefield, his sympathies extend to his enemies as well as to the dead who wore his uniform: “There were high-booted German bodies too, and in the blear beginning of daylight they seemed as much the victims of a catastrophe as the men who had attacked

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38 Max Saunders, “War Literature, Bearing Witness, and the Problem of Sacralization: Trauma and Desire in the Writing of Mary Borden and Others,” in Memories and Representations of War: The Case of World War I and World War II, ed. Elena Lamberti and Vita Fortunati. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 183.
them.”

Not only are all the combatants in this description “victims” without any identified aggressors, but they are also victims of a “catastrophe” that has no apparent cause. In this portrayal, the War is an event that acted upon the human participants rather than something for which they are responsible. Leed writes that “this notion that the event is autonomous, that it has no author, is the initial assumption upon which the combatant in war erects a vision of himself and his relationship to the realities that enclose him.”

Sassoon’s writing harnesses this rhetorical framing device to distance himself and his fellow soldiers from responsibility for the destruction the War wrought. Rather than seeking solace for his actions in the patriotic and militaristic rhetoric of “fighting the good fight” and defeating the enemy, Sassoon turns to this more introspective way of thinking about the role of the individual within the broader international conflagration of War. Significantly, this perspective allows for an integration of those with less direct roles to play in the War effort into the narrative, as it does not segregate people based on their actions. When he writes in a previously mentioned passage, “Visualizing that forlorn crowd of khaki figures under the twilight of the trees, I can believe that I saw then, for the first time, how blindly the war destroys its victims,” he is describing the recruits who were rushed to the trenches with little training; he later refers to them as “half-trained civilians.” In linking the civilian and the battlefield-experienced soldier and labeling them all as victims, Sassoon avoids laying blame at the feet of any individual or group, regardless of how their actions directly or indirectly led to carnage. Instead, he

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suggests that there is no meaningful distinction between aggressors and victims because every participant is a victim to a certain extent.

This carefully constructed lack of blame flows through Sassoon’s novel and is not only evidenced in the words he writes; even the form of the pseudo-autobiography he creates for George Sherston contains a confession of actions couched in the terms of a denial of responsibility. By choosing to write his novel in the form of a fictional autobiography for a fictional combatant in a real war, Sassoon presents his protagonist as someone who feels the need to tell his story. There is an element of compulsion in Sherston’s fictional desire to publish the work, which masks Sassoon’s desire to do the same. In this way, the novel, as an “autobiographical war [narrative] can be read as [a] spiritual confession.”

Crucially, Sassoon does not use Sherston’s story as a vehicle to apologize for the acts he committed in the War; instead, the form of the text allows him to detail what occurred and why the situation required his actions without taking responsibility for their consequences. Perhaps the best example of Sassoon’s desire to distance himself from responsibility for his actions is when he literally ranks the weapons he prefers based on how close to their effect he had to be: “It was difficult to imagine old Julian killing a German, even with an anonymous bullet. I didn’t want to kill any Germans myself, but one had to kill people in self-defence. Revolver shooting wasn’t so bad, and as for bombs, you just chucked them and hoped for the best.”

He highlights how difficult it was to imagine one of his fellow soldiers killing and, by extension, difficult to

\[\text{42 Saunders, “War Literature, Bearing Witness, and the Problem of Sacralization,” 190.}\]

\[\text{43 Sassoon, \textit{Memoirs of an Infantry Officer}, 19.}\]
imagine himself doing the same, despite that being what the soldiers were meant to
do in the trenches. Even as he mentions the methods by which he could kill Germans,
the structure of the sentences focus on the weapon rather than the person using it.
Sassoon presents his story in a form that creates a confessional relationship between
the writer and the reader and works within that form to dissociate soldiers from the
act of killing. Through this process, Sassoon creates distance between the actions of a
soldier and the logical consequences, which explains the lack of responsibility the
soldier feels.

For Graves, the question of responsibility is very much tied up in the potential
for a soldier’s actions to effect meaningful change. If an individual soldier’s actions
are unlikely to influence the outcome of the War, he does not assume any moral
responsibility. From this point of view, there is no functional difference between the
aggressor and the victim because neither one bears responsibility. When Graves
describes his manner of thinking about the War leading up to his enlistment, he
frames his pre-1914 self as somewhat willfully naïve about his role in the War:

I had just finished with Charterhouse and gone up to Harlech, when
England declared war on Germany. A day or two later I decided to
enlist. In the first place, though the papers predicted only a very short
war—over by Christmas at the outside—I hoped that it might last long
enough to delay my going to Oxford in October, which I dreaded. Nor
did I work out the possibilities of getting actively engaged in the
fighting, expecting garrison service at home, while the regular forces
were away. In the second place, I was outraged to read of the
Germans’ cynical violation of Belgian neutrality. Though I discounted perhaps twenty per cent of the atrocity details as wartime exaggeration, that was not, of course, sufficient.”

At the beginning of the War, the nation believed that it would end quickly and be only a minor escapade in the lives of the young men who fought it—Graves saw it as merely an interlude in his education. He also relates the view that only some soldiers would be actively involved in fighting and that the act of enlisting was really more of a gesture of support than it was an active desire and willingness to serve on the front lines. He evidently did not foresee himself actually fighting and affecting the War, so he did not seriously consider himself to be potentially responsible for the actions he might commit during the War. However, the question of responsibility becomes more complicated when Graves adds the succinct clarification that even his youthful skepticism was not “sufficient” to counteract the heightened moral rhetoric of the War. With the addition of this note of cynicism, Graves presents the pre-War mentality of the entire nation as one based on false confidence and assumptions about the moral purpose of the War and the role that soldiers played in furthering that goal. From this perspective, soldiers would be responsible for their actions because those actions would be understood to lead to definitive consequences for either a positive or negative outcome to the War. For Graves, the shift from the pre-War worldview to the one he developed after his further involvement with the War was not so much a change in opinion as it was a realization that he needed to come to terms with the fact that the War was not necessarily a good fight. Without a sense of moral clarity, there

44 Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, 60.
was no guarantee that an individual soldier’s actions were in the service of furthering a clear and positive goal, and without the sense that actions had a larger meaning, the actions of soldiers as aggressors and as victims are not substantially different.

Sassoon further develops the concept of the dissociation of the individual from responsibility in his battle, and particularly after-battle, scenes. As Sherston examines a dead German soldier, he soliloquizes on “what a gentle face he had, and remembered that this was the first time I’d ever touched one of our enemies with my hands. Perhaps I had some dim sense of the futility which had put an end to this good-looking youth.” Sassoon, through Sherston’s musings, refuses to accept individual responsibility for deaths in the War, even those of the enemy Germans. Instead, he characterizes the series of events that had brought about the death of this young soldier as something that would have happened regardless of his or any other individual’s participation. On one level, this perspective seems to negate the “historical hero” view of history, in which certain powerful individuals are crucial in creating turning points in history, but at the same time Sassoon argues that the smaller players like himself and Sherston could not impact the outcome of the War. In this manner, Sassoon suggests that soldiers cannot be responsible for their actions because the consequences of the War would occur regardless of any individual soldier’s acts; therefore, the soldier who lives is as much a victim of the War as one who died. This void then leaves Sassoon and his readers in the same situation as “a pair of hands (nationality unknown) which protruded from the soaked ashen soil like the roots of a tree turned upside down; one hand seemed to be pointing at the sky with an accusing

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45 Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 64.
gesture. Each time I passed that place the protest of those fingers became more expressive of an appeal to God in defiance of those who made the War. Who made the War?

Although he characterizes the hands as accusatory, Sherston recognizes that the hands are not accusing an individual, but rather the situation as a whole. Because they lack an association with a particular side of the conflict, the hands represent the totality of the War experience as one of destructive violence without a clear purpose or justification. By suggesting that no individual can be solely responsible for the violence of the War, Sassoon highlights the inability of War participants and authors to usefully distinguish the aggressors from the victims.

Creating a New War Narrative

By beginning his novel with an explicit statement of the apparent partiality of any war narrative, Sassoon presents his novel as one that is in conversation with the common trope of war narratives: the view that the violence of war is indescribable to those who did not experience it firsthand. Only a few pages into his work, Sassoon describes a memorable bath his main character enjoyed while on a break at Army School. Sherston asks the reader’s patience for such an odd detail by explaining, “Remembering that I had a bath may not be of much interest to anyone, but it was a good bath, and it is my own story that I am trying to tell, and as such it must be received; those who expect a universalization of the Great War must look for it elsewhere. Here they will only find an attempt to show its effect on a somewhat

46 Sassoon, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, 157.
solitary-minded young man.”\textsuperscript{47} The idea that a single war narrative cannot portray the totality of a war experience is not unique to writings about the First World War, so when Sherston suggests that readers should look elsewhere for a universalization of the War, he is taking neither a revolutionary nor a principled stance. Instead, the juxtaposition of the concept of the individualized and universalized war draws attention to the question and suggests that Sassoon is inviting the readers to see their War experiences in his narrative. Sassoon’s focus on the individualism of his narrative in fact highlights the breakdown of that logic, as it is this attention to detail that will allow his readers to understand the relationship that exists between his War experiences and their own. In this way, his novel self-consciously transcends its stated purpose of purely personal retelling and, on the formal level, invites the reader to examine whether these events and experiences are in fact unique.

While Graves took a slightly different approach to the presentation of his wartime memories, his awareness of his work’s existence between the realm of the autobiography and the memoir allows him to delve into many of the same issues raised by first-person introspection. On the first page of the text, Graves explicitly states that his work will “accept autobiographical convention,” which he proves by writing about his two earliest memories.\textsuperscript{48} However, such a statement immediately invites the reader to question Graves’ notion of what an autobiographical convention is and why the retelling of his earliest memories would have any bearing on making his work fit that mold. In allying the concepts of autobiography and his earliest memories, Graves implies that an autobiography follows a chronological order and is

\textsuperscript{47} Sassoon, \textit{Memoirs of an Infantry Officer}, 13.
\textsuperscript{48} Graves, \textit{Goodbye to All That}, 9.
based purely on the memories of the subject of the autobiography. By setting out these genre boundaries at the outset of his work, Graves puts the reader on the lookout for ways in which his text deviates from what he has explicitly stated he would do. When Graves admits that his work started out as a novel, the confession carries added weight: “In 1916, when on leave in England after being wounded, I began an account of my first few months in France. Having stupidly written it as a novel, I have now to re-translate it into history.”\textsuperscript{49} In this passage, the reader is introduced to two additional genres that Graves has considered. Although he characterizes his attempt to fictionalize his story as “stupid,” he also re-categorizes the current form of the piece as a history rather than an autobiography, which means that he cannot be both the narrator and the subject of the work and therefore creates distance between himself and his story. By presenting different ways of viewing his work as well as his vacillation in deciding between them, Graves invites the reader to participate in the same project and to serve as the final arbiter of the genre into which the work best fits. In this manner, he suggests that the reader and writer—and in this case, the soldier and the civilian—are involved in the same work of figuring out how to encapsulate the War experience. Like Sassoon, Graves suggests that the act of creating a narrative is a communal one, as was the experience of the War itself.

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In their fictionalized accounts of their War experiences, Sassoon and Graves engage with the narratives of the War that suggest that literature must bridge what would otherwise be an irreconcilable gap between the experiences of the soldiers and

\textsuperscript{49} Graves, \textit{Goodbye to All That}, 79.
those of the civilians. However, Sassoon and Graves both illustrate how those experiences are neither as cohesive nor as totally separate as one might think. By pointing out that being a soldier is not defined simply by spending time in the trenches, their narratives draw attention to the ways in which involvement in the War was not relegated to a single side of the English Channel. Similarly, they suggest that distinguishing between the aggressors and the victims within the context of the War was not an easy task because no participant was solely one or the other. In this manner, Sassoon and Graves suggest that the overall experience of the War could not be easily parsed into different spheres, but rather that the experiences overlapped and intermingled under the larger umbrella of the national War experience. In choosing to write their War experiences in fictionalized forms, Sassoon and Graves invite their readers to perform the same sort of internal examination of their War experiences, and they present the task of determining how to come to terms with the War as one that should be taken on by the nation as a whole.
Chapter Two:

Time and Space in Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse

In To the Lighthouse, Virginia Woolf explores the temporal and spatial boundaries of the novelistic form so that the reader experiences something other than a linear progression through a story. Although these formal concerns are ones that she explores in many works, To the Lighthouse shows her using the First World War both as a tool for the examination of these concepts and as proof of their relevance. Throughout the novel, Woolf prevents her readers from moving through the work in an orderly examination of a series of characters’ inner lives. Instead, she presents a milieu of characters grouped by their associations with each other but specifically localized around the Ramsays’ house. In this manner, Woolf gives her novel the same type of structure as the house itself: that of a single encapsulating space in which many different people move, so that they appear and meet at different points for differing lengths of time. In emphasizing the house as the single and connecting spatial entity, Woolf questions whether time can provide the same type of inherent structure for life that such a building does for space. In this manner, the work provides a framework for understanding the War experience in a similar fashion to how Woolf presents her formulation of time and memories: as both subjective and interconnected. Woolf’s decision to place these concerns in the context of a highly personal work about loss, grief, memory, and even war, demonstrates that, for her, they are not merely intellectual examinations but rather legitimate ways of approaching experiences that are meant to be applied to the world beyond the novel.
Through this work, Woolf presents the subjectivity of time and the communal aspect of grief as playing an important role in allowing people to come to terms with the sudden, distant deaths in World War I and how the nation mourned them.

While Woolf’s interests in temporal and formal structure are evident throughout the novel, they are dealt with most explicitly in the middle of the three sections. “Time Passes,” the shortest of the sections, is the only one that mentions the First World War and focuses on the Ramsays’ house when they are not present. During the War years, the house sits empty, with the exception of caretakers who occasionally visit and give the house its sole human interaction. Without people to mark the passage of time, the traditional focal point of the novel switches from character to setting, as the reader is forced to reexamine the ways in which the passage of time can structure the novel and life itself as well as when such structure is ineffective or inadequate at revealing the deeper meaning of experiences. By showing time functioning in a non-linear fashion and explicitly referencing the War in this section, Woolf illustrates the ways in which the experience of the War can be linked to the disruption of linear concepts of time and can best be understood in terms of associations, which allows her to establish a framework in which the personal grief can be shared and create a sense of national mourning.

In linking this novel so explicitly to her own personal loss and using it as a method of healing, Woolf shows how the novel itself can serve as a model for the type of emotional catharsis she describes. Woolf describes the act of writing *To the Lighthouse* as one that allowed her to work through her emotions about the losses she suffered as a child and young adult. The sudden death of her mother in 1895,
followed only two years later by the loss of her older half-sister Stella—who died only three months after her wedding—and her brother Thoby’s unexpected death in 1906, two years after her father had died, all had a great effect on her life that was revealed in her writing. While *To the Lighthouse* takes place in the context of family life, for Woolf the novel was intimately connected specifically to her memories of her parents, and writing the novel enabled her to place on paper what had previously occupied her mind. In a journal entry from 1928, Woolf writes, “I used to think of [father] & mother daily; but writing The Lighthouse laid them in my mind.” For Woolf, writing about her memories in this manner had an almost physical effect in the form of altering her mental state. Rather than being consumed with thoughts of her parents, those thoughts were safely captured on paper. Lee characterizes this process as Woolf “exorcising” her parents, which highlights the emotive power that these memories had over her and the significant work that writing *To the Lighthouse* did for Woolf’s sense of tempering the memory of her parents by writing about them. Writing about her memories does not entirely remove them from her mind, but instead the act of sharing them lessens their hold on Woolf and allows her to come to terms with her childhood experiences and the memory of her parents. In this way, the novel provides Woolf with a personal emotional catharsis that happens when she makes her memories and emotions public, which parallels both what happens within the novel and the work that the novel does for the reader.

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51 Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 80.
52 Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 81.
Structure of the Novel

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf overtly engages with the modernist concern with time and whether it provides a meaningful structure for life. Earlier versions of the novel form reacted to scientific and philosophical advances that made time an objective and measurable aspect of life, and authors incorporated such a temporal framework into their works. In his examination of the rise of the novel, Ian Watt writes, “The late seventeenth century witnessed the rise of a more objective study of history and therefore of a deeper sense of the difference between the past and the present…. [time] was minutely enough discriminated to measure the falling of objects or the succession of thoughts in the mind.”\(^{54}\) As the novel developed and these ideas become more engrained in plot structure and character development, the typical Victorian novel took on a form that could be easily divided into a beginning, a middle, and an end through which characters move in that order. However, the modernist novel, particularly in the wake of the First World War, was interested in exploring how “the realities of human experience [do not] arrange themselves as a sequence of events unfolding in calendar time but as an interrelation of all events, past or present, that shape the patterns of our lives.”\(^{55}\) By structuring *To the Lighthouse* in this association-based manner, Woolf situates herself among modernist writers who shared this concern for novels that reflect the interconnectedness of life rather than attempting to describe life in a purely linear fashion, and she relates these concerns specifically to the difficulty of capturing the experience of the War.


Even before Woolf officially began writing *To the Lighthouse*, she thought of it in terms of highly formalistic concerns regarding the shape of the novel and how the reader would move through it. Rather than seeing the novel as a cohesive image of, or approach to, the world, she envisioned it as “not a view of the world. Two blocks joined by a corridor.” Each of the three sections was quite literally a structural element in a configuration that lent itself more to a feeling of space than it did a clear sense of a directed narrative movement through the text. The description of “two blocks” shows that Woolf saw the first and final sections of the novel as essentially equal in meaning and narrative function, while the “corridor” takes on extra significance as the site of the transition from one to the other. Because she crafted her novel with such an awareness of the reading experience as movement through a physical space, Woolf clearly thought of the novel as a formal representation of its messages regarding the usefulness of space and time as structuring principles. Scholars such as Dayton Kohler have suggested different ways in which this might be true. In his article “Time in the Modern Novel,” Kohler argues that the novel represents the light from the lighthouse as it literally illuminates different aspects of life, with the “long flash of the beam corresponding to the first section…then an interval of darkness…and next a second, shorter beam of light.” While Kohler’s analysis clearly flows from Woolf’s idea of two similar things joined by a third, slightly different one, his analysis ignores the implications of the physicality of Woolf’s description of her project. Her vision of the novel is one of not simply the transitory experience of flashes of light that Kohler describes but of the

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creation of a physical space the reader inhabits. Unlike Kohler’s idea of a sequence of lights occurring in a particular order, the conception of the novel as representing a physical space allows Woolf to present the novel as a single set upon which many events are occurring simultaneously.

Through the lens of Woolf’s description, the novel can be read as representing the Ramsays’ house, and Woolf intends the reader to experience the novel as one would the house: a whole structure that contains many events and people that are distinct from one another as well as interconnected. Woolf’s notebooks from when she was working on the novel highlight the importance of simultaneity in the narrative. She asked, “Could I do it in a parenthesis? so that one had the sense of reading two things at the same time?"58 Such a question shows Woolf struggling with the limitations of using writing to express lived experience. Because the act of reading is necessarily a chronological one—as the reader’s eyes scan the words in order to move down a page and onto the next one—it implies a sense of forward movement through a narrative that is not always reflective of the confusion and layering of thoughts and experience that occur in real life. By stretching a single moment of introspection into a long paragraph, Woolf allows her characters, and consequently her readers, to imbue that moment with the wealth of thoughts and memories that combine to create a single instant of experience. When Mrs. Ramsay is measuring the stocking she is making against her youngest son’s leg, she is also thinking about the house, her family, and her own memories:

58 Lee, Virginia Woolf, 471-472.
Books, she thought grew of themselves. Alas! even the books that had been given her and inscribed by the hand of the poet himself…disgraceful to say, she had never read them. And Croom on the Mind and Bates on the Savage Customs of Polynesia (“My dear, stand still,” she said)—neither of those could one send to the Lighthouse. At a certain moment, she supposed the house would become so shabby that something must be done. If they could be taught to wipe their feet and not bring the beach in with them—that would be something. Crabs, she had to allow, if Andrew really wished to dissect them, or if Jasper believed that one could make soup from seaweed, one could not prevent it; or Rose’s objects…for they were gifted, her children, but all in different ways. And the result of it was, she sighed, taking in the whole room from floor to ceiling, as she held the stocking against James’s leg, that things got shabbier and got shabbier summer after summer.59

The passage takes care to note near the beginning and the end that, throughout this introspection, Mrs. Ramsay is simultaneously committing a single action: holding a stocking against her son’s leg to see whether it is long enough. The simple outward action, one that does not take an extended period of measuring or active thought, frames Mrs. Ramsay’s internal soliloquy regarding the entropy of the house. Within the single moment that it takes to complete such a basic task, Mrs. Ramsay’s seemingly extended series of thoughts about the objects that she and her family bring

into the house become less of a chronological progression and more of a layering of instantaneous memories and realizations. As Woolf herself noted, it is the parenthetical statement to James that forces the reader to flip the apparent framing and size discrepancies of the statement and the accompanying thoughts. Rather than a long internal monologue surrounding a short piece of speech, as the page presents, Woolf reveals to the reader that what is actually happening is a single spoken sentence encapsulating a whole internal experience. By presenting the novel to the reader as an entity containing many things happening at once, Woolf is able to experiment with traditional novelistic boundaries of chronology.

**Non-linear Time**

Although a non-linear approach to time appears in many modernist works both before and after the First World War, for Woolf the concept was indelibly linked to the War and became a part of the way her fiction expressed the experience of the War. Her work, like those of other writers of the time, could scarcely avoid being affected by the War and the way it threw ideas of social order and progress into doubt. Emerging from a ferment of writings on the continual advancement of human knowledge and development, such as James George Frazer’s claim that “[e]very great advance in knowledge has extended the sphere of order and correspondingly restricted the sphere of apparent disorder in the world,” the War acted as a powerful counterpoint. While the First World War was accompanied with significant increases

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in scientific knowledge and new technologies, it created chaos instead of order. As Woolf illustrates in her descriptions of decay and disrepair into which the Ramsays’ house falls during the War, time is not always a linear path to progress. After the Ramsays left the house, “The swallows nested in the drawing-room; the floor was strewn with straw; the plaster fell in shovelfuls; rafters were laid bare; rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind the wainscots.”61 The effects of time were not development but rather the house’s gradual descent into chaos, as if no humans had ever controlled the space. In the aftermath of the War, “the writer can no longer take for granted the realities and community beliefs of an earlier society, [so she] grows more concerned with the elaboration of technique and the discipline of style.”62 Because post-War authors began to see time as uncoupled from its former inherent associations with order and a linear movement toward progress, they were free to explore how time could address other formal concerns in their writings. In Woolf’s case, she was able to use World War I as a point of intersection between her private interests in time and memories and the broader formal concerns about the use of time in modernist works.

The effects of these altered perceptions of time can most clearly be seen in Woolf’s subversion of traditional methods of discussing time and its impacts. Although the section entitled “Time Passes” begins with the seemingly simple concept of day becoming night, Woolf quickly complicates this image by presenting the reader with non-traditional ways of relating different aspects of time to one another. As the narrator asks at the beginning of the third chapter, “But what after all

61 Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 141.
is one night? A short space, especially when the darkness dims so soon, and so soon a
bird sings, a cock crows, or a faint green quickens, like a turning leaf, in the hollow of
the wave."

The explicit question seems to frame the issue as one of the singularity
of a contained space; the emphasis is on the single night and how long it lasts before
turning into day. However, the final phrase in the following sentence places the
emphasis on repetition and frames night as a wave of darkness that washes over the
sky until it ebbs into daylight. This imagery not only shifts the focus from a night as a
singular entity to an endlessly recurring part of a cycle, but it also portrays daytime
events—such as birdsong and plant growth—as things that happen in the lee of the
encompassing darkness. In this manner, Woolf subverts the traditional view of day
and night as equal and opposing and suggests that the day only exists in pockets of
night. She further complicates this characterization of the power of night by making it
subject to another force: winter. The narrator goes on to describe how "[n]ight,
however, succeeds to night. The winter holds a pack of them in store and deals them
equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers. They lengthen; they darken." Woolf
again deemphasizes the presence of the day by focusing on how night moves into
night with no mention of what happens in between and portrays the entire process as
being overseen by winter. By overlaying one conception of time—day and night—
with another—seasons—Woolf undermines the idea that time can be linear and
evenly divided. Even her apparent concession to the regularity of time, the idea that
winter doles out nights “equally, evenly” comes with the implicit possibility that
“winter” could choose not to do so. The passage grants the season the agency of

63 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 131.
64 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 131.
active verbs and does not imply that the winter is necessarily obliged to maintain the
status quo. Woolf presents these ideas of night, day, and the seasons as relating to one
another in ways that cannot easily be parsed into a linear calendar. Implicit in this
critique of the simple divisibility of time is the idea that experiences cannot be easily
divided into distinct units either. In the aftermath of the War, this viewpoint becomes
especially salient as it suggests that the events of the War cannot be demarcated by
battles and that the experiences cannot be segregated based on roles.

In portraying the emptiness of the house and its lack of occupants, Woolf
shows how time folds in on itself and how the present is insignificant without the past
to give it meaning. The narrator describes, “What people had shed and left—a pair of
shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes—those alone kept the
human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and
animated.”65 Rather than distinguishing between the past and the present, the items
that are left behind represent the convergence of the past and present. The objects not
only define space literally—because they are items that are usually filled by bodies—but also serve as markers of time. Without the knowledge that they used to be filled, their emptiness would not be significant. Crucially, they were not left because they
had not been of use; instead, they were “shed and left,” which indicates that they were
removed from a dynamic relationship with time and placed in a static one. The
absence of people alters these objects’ interactions with time as it illustrates “how
once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking-glass had held a
face; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure turned, a hand flashed, the door

65 Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 133.
opened, in came children rushing and tumbling; and went out again. The description of the past is a dynamic one filled with action and motion, to the extent that the quote seems to elide the difference between the past and present. As the tense subtly shifts from the past perfect to the past, the reader loses the sense of perspective that places these actions in the distant past, and instead it begins to seem as though these actions had just occurred. By foregrounding the actions in her description of the past, Woolf makes it difficult for the reader to separate time into distinct units and presents these past events as an essential part of the present. For the house, its emptiness in the present only has meaning if it was once full; in the same way, the changes the War wrought only have meaning when juxtaposed against life before the War. Through this type of analysis, Woolf highlights the temporal relationship between the War and what preceded it as well as providing a way for those who survived the War to think about their role in remembering the events and their significance.

Woolf’s descriptions of the changes the house undergoes over time juxtapose the epic and the trivial, which creates an ambiguous framework in which any event, even the War, can be placed in either category. She makes the point that a single event happening after a great deal of time can be presented as both minor and as significant: “Once only a board sprang on the landing; once in the middle of the night with a roar, with a rupture, as after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing into the valley, one fold of the shawl loosened and

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66 Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 133.
swung to and fro." The board springing loose on the landing and the rock hurtling off a mountain are roughly equivalent events in this description. Both cases are associated with noise and permanent separation, but the specific language is heightened and equally linked to each event, so it is unclear whether one is drastically more portentous than the other. Although arguably the rock falling from the mountain could have more severe consequences than the board on the landing, Woolf overtly disallows such a distinction. However, the description does not focus solely on the potentially heightened drama of these events; it also includes the low-impact event of a scarf loosening and beginning to swing to and fro. While this event is not necessarily any more or less trivial than the board loosening or the rock dropping, it is given a much simpler treatment. By juxtaposing these three events and presenting them with such a combination of high and low impact, Woolf shows that events are not inherently powerful but rather take on the significance that people give them. In this manner, she brings everyone who experienced the War into the project of evaluating the cultural impacts of the War, because it is only through this communal process of reflection that the War can take on a national and cultural significance.

**Failure of Counted Time**

Within the conceptual framework that Woolf establishes, a single event can be considered either meaningful or trivial depending on how it is viewed rather than based on any inherent characteristic. When viewed through this lens, events in the War are stripped of any significance they might have gained or lost based on whether

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67 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 133-134.
it happened instantaneously or over time. Instead, Woolf allows the War and tales of War death to exist as ambiguous unless they are given specific context and meaning. She illustrates this point by giving her few descriptions of the War purposefully neutral language and leaving its significance uncertain. She places the description in brackets to further set it off from the details that surround it: “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous].” The language of this description is largely factual and content-neutral, but Woolf specifically modifies the description of Andrew’s instantaneous death with the adverb “mercifully.” Without that word, nothing in the description of Andrew’s death connotes anything inherently positive or negative about the manner in which the event occurred. By placing this comment in brackets, Woolf also recalls the work that she did in altering the way that time is represented in the passage where Mrs. Ramsay measures a stocking against James’ leg. In this passage, as in that one, Woolf takes the outwardly large and significant event—the violence of the War in general and specifically the attack that killed Andrew—and places it within a small and bounded section of the page. Such a technique serves the dual purpose of drawing the reader’s eyes as well as preventing this information from intermingling with the rest of the information on the page. In visually separating this description of the War, Woolf casts doubt on the role that time can play in determining whether or not an event takes on added significance; instead, she implies that time is only one element in the description of an event and does not lend it any inherent meaning.

68 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 137.
Woolf uses the bracketed statements in “Time Passes” to show how, at its most basic level, time acts as an equalizer rather than as a tool for differentiation among people based on the amount of time they spent experiencing a particular event or set of events. Nearly every time a character from “The Window” or “The Lighthouse,” the other sections of the novel, appears in “Time Passes,” it is in the form of a bracketed aside that gives information about what has happened to them during the intervening years. Each of the characters mentioned in the brackets is linked to death, which shows Woolf explicitly associating the bracketed statements with mortality. At the visual level, such a connection makes sense because a complete bracket must have an opening and a closing in the same way that a human life must have a birth and a death. On this level, the brackets remind the reader that, although time is passing in the passage as a whole, for each individual character it must eventually come to an end. Within the brackets, however, time plays a much less heavily symbolic role, as in Prue Ramsay’s bracket, which states, “[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well].”\textsuperscript{69} Within the bracket, time plays a minimal role by only establishing when Prue died and the vague sense of a possible positive future had she lived. By bounding Prue’s life so strictly with brackets and then giving little significant information about what happens between them, Woolf deemphasizes the importance of linear time between two points. Taken as a whole, the bracketed statements allow Woolf to stress that each person is given a set amount of linear time, but it is not the linear time that will define their lives. By

\textsuperscript{69} Woolf, \textit{To the Lighthouse}, 136.
negating the role that linear time plays in defining a person’s experiences, Woolf emphasizes the commonalities that all participants in World War I shared regardless of the amount of time they spent engaged in the War effort.

Mr. Carmichael is the only character mentioned within a bracket that does not include a death; instead, he serves as the reader’s connection between the War and literature. As the passage transitions from the time during which the house is inhabited by the Ramsays and their guests to its unoccupied period, Mr. Carmichael symbolically and literally ends the focus on people: “[Here Mr. Carmichael, who was reading Virgil, blew out his candle. It was midnight].”70 In connecting the allusion to Virgil to the action of blowing out a candle, Woolf links Virgil to the idea of death and references Virgil’s role as Dante’s guide through the underworld in *The Divine Comedy*, an explicitly literary choice as Dante makes clear in the first canto of *The Inferno*.71 By playing on this association, Woolf uses Virgil for much the same purpose and directs the reader to think about the ways in which literature can act as a bridge between the living and the dead. Although Mr. Carmichael’s first bracket does not deal with a literal death, the idea of death is certainly present. Similarly, his second bracket alludes to death in the form of the First World War, as the reader learns that “[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry].”72 Again, Mr. Carmichael connects literature and death, though this time the idea of death is not a general one but rather alludes to the violence of the War. While Woolf

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70 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 131.
72 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 138.
does not provide a reason for the War’s creation of a renewed interest in poetry, the previous connection to Virgil suggests that people turn to literature as a guide through a form of the afterlife. Therefore, although those reading Mr. Carmichael’s work survived the War, they have found themselves living in a life after the death of the pre-War lives they knew, which has suddenly made Mr. Carmichael’s poetry more relevant. While he is not linked to the literal death of a character, Mr. Carmichael nonetheless represents the relationship between literature and death by showing the ways in which literature becomes a method to assist people in coping with their new realities in the wake of the death and destruction of World War I.

While Woolf de-emphasizes the importance of linear time, she highlights the role that a single moment can play as the tipping point between two possible futures, and therefore she emphasizes the potentially outsized importance of seemingly mundane actions within the much larger framework of the War. She presents time as elastic so that any single moment can be stretched to hold many possibilities, and an entire future path can be portrayed in the one moment that might or might not lead to it. The house experiences one such moment when Woolf writes, “For now had come that moment, that hesitation when dawn trembles and night pauses, when if a feather alight in the scale it will be weighed down. One feather, and the house, sinking, falling would have turned and pitched downwards to the depths of darkness.” She describes how the passage of time pauses in order for this moment to exist and its potential consequences to be acknowledged. The moment is given literal weight in the form of a feather, which recalls the earlier image of a rock falling off a mountain.

73 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 138.
74 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 142.
face and a shawl swinging in an empty house—moments that might have little impact in the broad scope of things but potentially massive effects on the smaller scale. Unlike the previous description, this one goes further by granting impacts to the seemingly inconsequential occurrence. With the image of the feather as the final tipping point on an imaginary scale, Woolf actually presents the reader with the idea that any single moment could be a turning point in time. Such a moment does not need to be loaded with obvious potential for change but can be simply an everyday occurrence. In the case of the house, “If the feather had fallen, if it had tipped the scale downwards, the whole house would have plunged to the depths to lie upon the sands of oblivion. But there was a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched; something not inspired to go about its work with dignified ritual or solemn chanting.”75 The force preventing the feather from falling and keeping the house’s possible future confined to its moment of possibility is neither the hand of a divine being nor a major decision on the part of a character, but simply the mundane fact that Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast, the caretakers, have continued working on the house. By taking their repetitive actions and creating a turning point, Woolf emphasizes the fact that time is composed neither of wholly distinct moments nor of entirely cyclical motions. Instead, there are many seemingly small instances that have the potential to create vastly diverging futures, and highlighting this fact allows Woolf to create a framework that integrates all War participants, even those whose actions may not have had an obvious impact, into the outcome of the War.

75 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 142-143.
Shared Memory and Loss

Woolf’s choice to remove people from the experience of time in “Time Passes” represented in miniature one of the larger projects of the book: an exploration of the diffusion of lived experience. An event is not defined by a single person’s experience with it, nor is one person’s experience of an event entirely unique and wholly separate from that of others who experienced the same event. Woolf incorporates this idea throughout the novel by assigning different parts of her own familial experience to different characters. While the novel is strongly influenced by her family history and childhood memories, there is no single character to act as the stand-in for Virginia Woolf in the Ramsays’ lives. Instead,

She is the child Rose, choosing her mother’s jewellery in the parental bedroom. She is the adolescent Nancy, making an empire out of a rock pool and drawing in her skirts at the sight of adult passion. She is Cam in the nursery being talked asleep by her mother, and Cam in the boat adoring and hating her father. She is Lily Briscoe, painting her picture, like Virginia Woolf writing this book.\textsuperscript{76}

Each of the characters, and particularly the Ramsays themselves, brings an aspect of Woolf’s own life experience into the novel and allows her to show how a single person’s life experience can be spread in such a way that it is shared by multiple people. By illustrating how her personal life experiences can become communal ones, Woolf creates a model for understanding how the seemingly separate War

\textsuperscript{76} Lee, \textit{Virginia Woolf}, 474.
experiences of individuals can in fact be understood as shared among all participants and the nation as a whole.

Woolf further explicates the idea of the communal experience by establishing that there is not one single experience that everyone shares but rather a space of commonalities that creates a framework in which every individual’s War experience can be seen as part of a larger whole. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf creates a model for this type of communal experience in the form of the shared grief over Mrs. Ramsay’s death. By spreading the visible mourning for Mrs. Ramsay’s death beyond her immediate family, Woolf creates a space in which readers can interpolate their own experiences and form a connection to the events being related. While Mrs. Ramsay’s death is undoubtedly strongly reminiscent of the sudden death of Woolf’s mother, in the fictionalized account the major mourning scene is not given to one of the Ramsay children, whose experience in this situation could be most likened to Woolf’s own, but rather to Lily Briscoe. As she contemplates her painting, she “felt that if [she and Mr. Carmichael] both got up, here, now, on the lawn, and demanded an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexplicable…then beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape; if they shouted loud enough, Mrs. Ramsay would return.”77 By attributing the pain and confusion associated with losing a loved one to someone other than an immediate Ramsay family member, Woolf encourages the reader to join in Lily’s anguish. The emotional fallout from Mrs. Ramsay’s death is not reserved for her immediate family, but the experience is spread to other characters in a manner that acknowledges the

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77 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 183.
connections among people that allow for shared experiences of grief. In this way, the reader can, by extension, experience Woolf’s pain at the death of her mother. The idea of filling an empty space that appears in Lily’s mourning also recalls Mr. Ramsay’s reaction to his wife’s death that occurred in the “Time Passes” section. In a bracketed statement, Woolf presents the reader with a highly visual representation of Mr. Ramsay’s grief: “[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty].”78 The image of the empty space left by the death of Mrs. Ramsay serves as a powerful link between these two scenes as well as an invitation to the reader to imagine the form of this empty space. Although it is nearly described in the image of Mr. Ramsay’s outstretched arms, Woolf stops short of giving the reader insight into Mr. Ramsay’s inner life in this moment. Instead, the reader must imagine the edges of the space that Mrs. Ramsay left unfilled and on some level experience the loss that Woolf describes. Through her encouragement of the reader to share the characters’ grief for Mrs. Ramsay and to use personal experiences of grief as a model, Woolf illustrates how mourning can become a communal experience. In this manner, Woolf creates a framework for understanding the War as a nationally shared experience that should also be mourned communally.

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In her novelistic exploration of grief and the chronological boundaries of the form, Woolf goes beyond examining modernist concerns through a personal lens. By

78 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 132.
choosing to link this novel specifically to the time period of the First World War and including the deaths of major characters in the same section in which the War is mentioned, Woolf reveals the extent to which she sees these explorations as linked to a broader national project of thinking about the impacts of World War I and how individual grief can become collective mourning. The novel’s use of a non-linear narrative serves the dual purpose of questioning whether time is an effective and objective measure of experience as well as emphasizing the role of association-based connections in understanding the significance of events. Because Woolf presents time as only one of any number of features of an experience, she is able to highlight the importance of subjectivity and how events take on the meaning people assign them. Additionally, Woolf’s fictionalization of her personal grief and diffusion of it among different characters in the novel allows the reader to experience her grief and provides a framework in which mourning can be a communal experience. By placing these temporal and spatial concerns within a novel that deals both with private grief and with the War, Woolf creates a work that suggests ways of reconciling the intensely personal experience of mourning with a national one.
Chapter Three:

Absence and Loss in Woolf’s Jacob’s Room

In Jacob’s Room, Virginia Woolf engages in a formal experiment both to test the boundaries of a protagonist-based novel and to use the novel as a method for representing and coping with the effects of the First World War. As a book written after the end of the War that takes place mostly in the past, Jacob’s Room affords Woolf the opportunity to construct a response to the War based on hindsight. The events of the novel are largely proleptic in that they only take on their true meaning after the reader reaches the last page of the novel and understands that Jacob dies in the War. With this knowledge, the reader begins to understand why the character of Jacob seems to be absent or unreachable throughout nearly the entire novel as well as why death and space are such recurrent motifs. The final page contextualizes the entire novel, and Woolf makes use of this context to examine the generation that came of age during World War I—and for whom the War became a defining experience—through the lens of the War in the same way that she examines Jacob’s life through the lens of his death. In this work, Woolf manipulates the motifs of death and space to reflect not only issues specific to Jacob’s death within the novel but also to illustrate how the War generates a public space in which private, individual grief can be experienced through collective mourning. In this manner, she establishes Jacob and his life as a microcosm for the broader British experience of the War.

While the concept of examining the First World War through the lens of spatial perception is not a new one, such scholarship has traditionally focused on how
the use of space and trench warfare indelibly separated the soldier from the civilian.

In her chapter entitled “Corpselessness,” Allyson Booth argues that, because the British civilians did not have the opportunity to deal with the physical corpses of the War dead, there was a “fracture between combatant experience and civilian perception of the war [that] ensured a combatant alienation so profound that the idea of homecoming became impossible.” Like many other scholars who took the view that the horrors of the First World War were by their very nature untellable, Booth’s argument presents this gulf in experience as unbridgeable. Though the absence of corpses did have an impact on the way in which civilians experienced loss during the War, such argumentation focuses solely on the dichotomies of the War experience rather than the continuities. Reading *Jacob’s Room* in light of Booth’s work and others like it foregrounds the choice that Woolf made to focus on the experience of civilian mourning and how it connected the civilians to the soldiers instead of separating them.

**Formal Experiment**

Based on Woolf’s personal writings about the process of beginning *Jacob’s Room*, it is evident that she thought about the novel as a formal experiment in representation, and that she even had its conceit in mind when she started. In her major biographical work on Woolf, Hermione Lee notes that, in her first notebook to mention *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf wrote, “I think the main point is that it should be

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79 Booth, *Postcards from the Trenches*, 22.
free.” More so than any other distinguishing feature of the work, the idea of the freedom to experiment with the structure of a novel’s relationship with its main character was the one that most defined this work in Woolf’s eyes. Before she even began writing it, she clearly envisioned it as an opportunity to explore the boundaries of the novelistic form and the ways in which it can be manipulated to create a more richly layered text. As Lee describes it, “‘free’ meant to be structurally adventurous, less weighted down by tradition, shorter, more condensed and fragmentary.” The focus on the structure and movement away from tradition is significant here, as it provides evidence of Woolf being interested in pushing against genre-specific expectations about the actions of the protagonist. Because she began her project with these goals in mind, each one of Woolf’s authorial decisions can be read through the lens of this intent. By naming Jacob’s best friend Bonamy—French for “good friend”—Woolf creates a tautology, in which Bonamy’s name is that which he is, that emphasizes Bonamy’s general role in the text over his specific characterization. His lack of a specific identity within the world of the novel allows Woolf to experiment further with the idea of unfilled space at the heart of a novel. Beyond making individual choices that create specific effects, the number of such moments in the text all come together to create Woolf’s experiment with novelistic form and structure: that of how a novel works when its main character is absent rather than an active protagonist.

80 Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 430.
81 Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 430.
82 Although much scholarly work has been done regarding the possible homosexual identity of Bonamy and his pining for Jacob, I am interested in the structural function the character is assigned, which is more textually prominent than the undercurrent of desire Bonamy feels for Jacob.
The idea of framing the novel as one about the space a person occupies, and eventually does not occupy, was evidently a part of Woolf’s conception from the very beginning. In the notebook she used when she began planning the novel, she wrote the heading for the section as “Reflections upon beginning a work of fiction to be called, perhaps, Jacob’s Room.” This excerpt also shows Woolf considering the impact that this specific image, of Jacob’s empty room, which appears throughout the text but with new force and meaning on the book’s final page, will have on both the individual reader and the work as an entire construct. Although the novel is read in the traditional order from beginning to end, Woolf structures it in such a way that the revelation of Jacob’s death on the final page adds a new layer of meaning to the entirety of the earlier portion of the novel and forces the reader to consider the question of the extent to which Jacob was absent throughout the text. Her decision to title the novel such that it refers most pointedly to its final and most pivotal scene reveals the value Woolf placed on this image as a lens through which the work as a whole should be examined. In the same way that the reader gains a much more nuanced understanding of the text after reading the final page, Woolf’s writing was informed by the knowledge and establishment of its main conceit from the initial stages of creation. Her work in *Jacob’s Room* must be read as a conscious examination of the boundaries of the novel in terms of the extent to which it is dependent on the presence and actions of main characters. Woolf’s techniques of structuring her novel around an absence enhance her broader authorial aims of writing about the impacts of the First World War on British society.

By crafting the book as a story around Jacob rather than about him, Woolf suggests that the internal and the external are not actually separate but rather interdependent. Rather than crafting a relationship of opposites between Jacob’s experiences with the external world of the novel and his interior life, Woolf does not provide the reader with such a clear distinction. Instead, she only allows the reader to glimpse the interiority of Jacob’s life through the external perspective of other characters, or through a few moments of superficial access to Jacob’s thoughts. By forcing the reader to consider the process by which one type of knowledge can be gained through the other, Woolf renders the subconscious desire to reconcile internal and the external experiences a conscious one. Such a project is particularly relevant in fiction stemming from the First World War, because one of its major concerns is how the participants in the War at its various levels can internalize their experiences and whether that internalization is an appropriate way to come to terms with the events and their effects. In her analysis of how Woolf deals with the Great War in her fiction, Karen Levenback refers to Woolf’s “indirection…where allusions to the war, like the name of the protagonist, Jacob Flanders (which immediately calls to mind the region of France and Belgium where much of the fighting and death of British combatants took place), suggest what the author has in mind.” Woolf incorporates the War into her characters’ internal lives on a formal level, so that the characters are continually associated with the experience of the War, instead of allowing the War to be a wholly separate part of the novel or an external aspect of the characters’

experiences. Her aggressive and deliberate indirection regarding the War’s presence within the novel blurs the distinction between the internal and external experiences of war and forces the reader to question whether one has meaning without the other. For this work, the title does more than identify a significant motif; it establishes the mindset with which the reader should approach the book. Rather than thinking of Jacob as the traditional protagonist—the major actor or propeller of the plot—the reader must recognize Jacob as a presence that permeates the book without being its main focus, in much the same way as the War remains a presence without being explicitly stated as such. Without a careful delineation of either Jacob or the War within the text, Woolf is able to frame the narrative around these ideas and examine the ability of unfilled space to create connections rather than boundaries.

**Jacob’s Absence through Death**

It is only on the final page of the novel that the reader learns that Jacob has died in the War; however, rather than leaving the reader with an image of Jacob, Woolf closes the book with a portrait of a space marked by human absence, a detailed look at the room Jacob leaves behind. Although the passage describes Jacob’s room when he is not in it, Jacob is very much a part of the way Bonamy and Mrs. Flanders experience the room; in his absence, his echo remains in the way that the movements in the room are described with their converse effects. Despite the fact that there is no action in the room, Woolf hones in on the limited motion that occurs: “Listless is the air in an empty room, just welling the curtains; the flowers in the jar shift.”

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86 Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 176.
describes the air’s lack of movement as a function of the emptiness of the room. However, the air’s listlessness is defined by the small changes that it effects, such as the welling of the curtains and the shifting of the flowers. Without these visual clues, the listlessness of the air would not be apparent, as the air would simply go unnoticed. It is the echoes of former presence of movement in the room that draw attention to the current absence of movement and vitality. In the same manner, “One fiber in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there.” The fact that the wicker chair creaks without any obvious cause draws the reader’s attention and begs the question of what could be causing the noise if there is no one to put pressure on the chair. Yet it is the lack of a physical presence that causes the noise as the wicker adjusts to a slightly altered shape in the absence of regular pressure. The echo that remains of Jacob in the room is not a permanent memorial, but rather a sign of Jacob’s influence slowly receding.

With the opening lines of this passage, Woolf suggests that the boundary between permanent and temporary absence is a fine one that is easily crossed. The reader’s introduction to the space is through Bonamy’s comments: “‘He left everything just as it was,’ Bonamy marveled. ‘Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?’” The final question is the first indication the reader has that Jacob will not be returning to his room. Until that point in Bonamy’s musing, the descriptions could be of Jacob’s room in a state of disarray after he left it a few moments previously with plans to immediately return. There is nothing about the simple fact of his absence

87 Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 176.
88 Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 176.
from the room that indicates whether the absence is permanent or momentary.

Without the extra information that Bonamy provides, both possibilities exist: Jacob is both temporarily just beyond the room and simultaneously permanently distant. By allowing both possibilities to exist in the reader’s mind, Woolf suggests that absence itself occupies a neutral position in one’s consciousness; only with further contextualization does it gain an implied meaning of being ominous or of causing discomfort. With the addition of one simple question, Woolf shifts the reader’s awareness of Jacob from an enigma at the center of the novel to an example of an incomplete life. The movement from Jacob’s mysterious absence to his tragic absence is both swift and subtle.

Jacob’s absence from his room does not destroy the normality of the room; however, his absence due to his death represents a break from, or a gap within, the normal experience of the room. Without the knowledge that Jacob is dead, nothing about the state of the room would be particularly out of the ordinary. The items that Woolf mentions are not especially significant on their own—a bill, letters, social invitations—but they are items that particularly outline the life Jacob has left behind, one literally and figuratively defined by his hobbies, friends, and schedule. The most poignant aspects of the scene are the reminders of how much the space was formed around Jacob and the extent to which his emotional presence remains in the room. However, with the knowledge of Jacob’s death, the reader is presented with Jacob’s empty room as a space that is suddenly more meaningful and alters people’s reactions to that space. Similarly, although the First World War was not the first war in recent memory, the added elements of this War—in particular the new military technologies
and modes of death—went beyond what had been previously understood and expected. In the pre-War years, death was often viewed as part of the same experience of life as birth, which were both elements of a wholly cyclical process. The First World War, however, disrupted these cycles with the death of many people all at once with weapons that had not been seen previously. In Jacob’s Room, the novel addresses these ruptures in reality through “undertones, that is, in allusions, metonyms, and interrupted syntax….Just as the war would interrupt the progress of life, so too would it alter the context that made death acceptable…” It is not simply Jacob’s absence from his room that makes this scene so unsettling—he has presumably been absent from his room before—but the permanence and the reasons behind his absence create a disjuncture between Jacob’s death and the death that would be a normal part of pre-War life. By placing this moment and its accompanying realization for the reader within the confines of the apparent normalcy of Jacob’s room in disarray, Woolf highlights how this discontinuity of the War deaths exists within the larger continuities of life.

**Blurring the Distinction between Life and Death**

At the close of the novel, the reader’s awareness of the impending War becomes more acute as Woolf re-creates the sense of claustrophobia coupled with distance that characterized trench warfare in the British consciousness. The connection between the earth and the body became more complex for soldiers as the

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90 Levenback, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*, 41.
lines between life and death blurred: “The earth is where the dead are (or will be) buried, but it is also the place in which the living are located—literally in and under the ground—in trench warfare.”

There was a horror of the earth as a tomb for both the living and the dead, while at the same time a reverence for the earth that provided the only protection from enemy shells. For the soldier, space simultaneously expanded and contracted as the trenches became at once his entire world as well as the terrible hole in which he was trapped. The paradoxical nature of wartime space was not unique to the soldier, as the British civilians also contracted a sense of vertigo that was brought on by their physical proximity to, but mental distance from, the battlefield. Near the end of the novel, Betty Flanders is awakened by “the dull sound, as if nocturnal women were beating great carpets.”

She recognizes that the sound could be either the guns from the French battlefields, which were audible in southern English towns, or the sound of the sea. Tellingly, she does not reach a conclusion as to the cause of the sound. The sound remains ambiguous, which allows her to occupy a position both incredibly near to and far from the battlefield. What the soldier experiences as the fine line between protection and terror, the civilian experiences as the difference between empathetic solidarity and alienation. In either case, distance is no longer an objective measurement, but rather a part of a subjective experience of the War.

In the pre-War context, death can create an identity that forms a major part of a character’s everyday life. Elizabeth—later called Betty—Flanders, is identified as

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92 Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 175.
“a widow in her prime” who was made so by “the death of Seabrook, her husband.”\textsuperscript{93} In this case, death acts as a definitive end point that creates definitive consequences. Seabrook’s death is both a single event in Mrs. Flanders’ life and one that structures the life she leads without him. Because “widow” is an essential part of her social identity, Mrs. Flanders represents one of the ways death could be incorporated into daily life; her association with death became an integral part of her relationship with the world around her. In her analysis of the impact of the Great War on Virginia Woolf’s writing, Karen Levenback writes, “In her post-peace novels [those written after the 1918 Armistice], and most notably in \textit{Jacob’s Room}, Woolf suggests that until the war survivors were perfectly capable of coping with both the reality and the realities of death.”\textsuperscript{94} Before the War, the concept of death carried with it a sense of definition; people were able to comprehend and cope with death because it created a distinct barrier between life and non-life. Additionally, the rituals associated with death—the funeral, the tombstone, even the physical presence of a dead body to bury—supplied survivors with a physicality that could be handled as a reality. When Mrs. Flanders visits her husband’s grave, she observes, “True, there’s no harm crying for one’s husband, and the tombstone, though plain, was a solid piece of work, and on summer’s days when the widow brought her boys to stand there one felt kindly towards her.”\textsuperscript{95} The description of the tombstone places it firmly in the world of physicality, and its presence becomes the literal embodiment of the otherwise abstract concept of her husband’s death. Mrs. Flanders can visit the tombstone, touch the

\textsuperscript{93} Woolf, \textit{Jacob’s Room}, 15.
\textsuperscript{94} Levenback, \textit{Virginia Woolf and the Great War}, 40.
\textsuperscript{95} Woolf, \textit{Jacob’s Room}, 15.
tombstone, and use it as an object toward which to direct her emotions. In this way, the presence of the tombstone and the dead body interred beneath create a comprehensible emotional framework for death.

Battlefield death, however, did not afford the survivors this same physical presence with which to cope. In many cases, soldiers’ fates were unknown, and they were presumed dead because their “bodies were atomized completely and disappeared out of sight.”96 Without any other information, absence was assumed to mean death, albeit in a nearly incomprehensible manner. Even when their fate had been confirmed, in many cases “the dead were never found for burial.”97 Because bodies were always buried abroad, the mourners were left without the physical manifestation of death around which to structure their mourning. The absence takes on emotional, as well as physical connotations, because it removes the opportunity to maintain intimate connections with those who are missing: “…war cuts sons off in sudden death, what a mother has left is her now useless connection with his physical possessions.”98 War does not prevent any physical remnant of the dead soldiers from remaining behind, but it removes the opportunity for there to be a traditional presence of death in the form of a body to mourn. During World War I in particular, the idea that some deaths could not even be confirmed, that there was no dead body to bury at all, let alone in a local cemetery, created a new reality of death that could not be handled in the same manner as deaths before the War. Woolf reifies this difference by presenting Mrs. Flanders once more as the survivor who must cope with the death of

96 Tate, Modernism, History, and the First World War, 78.
97 Tate, Modernism, History, and the First World War, 78.
a loved one. As she holds up Jacob’s shoes in that final scene and asks, “What am I to
do with these?” she represents a nation of mourners who cannot fit these new
realities of death into their pre-existing frameworks for handling grief. By showing
Mrs. Flanders unable to cope with her son’s death in the same manner she was able to
cope with her husband’s, Woolf encapsulates in miniature the changes in the way
death was viewed in the pre- and post-War contexts.

In the text of *Jacob’s Room*, the moments in which children who would come
of age during the War interact with death become times in which Woolf presents
death as an ambiguous state of being rather than a dividing line between life and its
opposite. When her son Archer offers her a knife, Mrs. Flanders describes her son’s
voice as “[mixing] life and death inextricably, exhilaratingly.” Significantly, this
newly nuanced view of death is linked to the offering of a weapon that is meant to act
as protection, which emphasizes the dual-edged nature of violence: it can be both a
defense and an attack, and the distinction is often blurred. Similarly, the results of
violence can blend into one another, as Mrs. Flanders notices in her son’s voice.
Rather than simply resulting in either life or death, violence creates a space in
between the two extremes in which they are “inextricably, exhilaratingly” connected,
which foreshadows the wartime understanding of death that will “suggest that distinct
categories of being and nonbeing are more apparent than real.” Although people
may attempt to understand death as a bright line between life and non-life, such
simple separations become nearly impossible in a context of wartime violence,

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100 Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 16.
101 Levenback, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*, 42.
particularly during World War I, in which much of the fighting took place in the trenches—literally in the ground.

**Object-Defined Space**

Woolf presents the concepts of positive and negative space as similarly intertwined. When Mrs. Flanders “[holds] out a pair of Jacob’s old shoes”\(^{102}\) and wonders aloud what she should do with them, her confusion stems from the fact that they were Jacob’s shoes but cannot be any longer, which makes them both significant and problematic. The final two lines in the novel are perhaps its most poignant and underscore the paradox of Jacob’s presence through his absence. The shoes quite literally define the space he used to fill, and without them, that clearly defined space begins to dissolve and disappear. Without Jacob’s feet, the shoes serve no obvious purpose for Mrs. Flanders or for the room, but because Jacob is not there to wear them, the shoes become an echo of him. They simultaneously represent both his existence and the fact that his existence was not permanent. At the point where Jacob is outlived by his possessions, they become both more than and less than the summation of his life. Without the possessions to define his life, Jacob becomes a memory that does not have a physical presence, and without Jacob, the possessions become merely objects that do not have a cohesive significance. Jacob’s presence can only be felt through his absence as long as the absence exists within a clearly defined space that lacks that which would fill it. In this moment, in which Bonamy and Jacob’s mother are standing in his empty room, that absence is palpable. At the

\(^{102}\) Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 176.
instant of the acknowledgment of his loss, the reader experiences Jacob’s presence and his absence as interwoven.

In the final passage of the novel, Woolf provides a justification for the ways in which inanimate objects can take on time- and place-specific meanings that are by their very nature ephemeral. Although the room in question is Jacob’s room, and the important role that it plays in the narrative is based on that fact, Woolf makes it clear that the room had an identity before Jacob. She writes, “The eighteenth century has its distinction. These houses were built, say, a hundred and fifty years ago.” By giving information about the history of the building in which Jacob’s room is situated, she acknowledges in general, if not specifically, its long life and the many tenants it had before Jacob Flanders. In this way, she adds an element of universality to this poignant scene. It is highly possible that this is not the first time a family member or friend has stood in the room and wondered about the state in which a person left it without realizing he would never return. It is probably not the last time the room will experience such an event. This acknowledgment similarly highlights the paradoxical permanence and impermanence of absence. While Jacob will never return to the room, his absence will not always be the room’s defining feature. In fact, Woolf goes on to describe the features that do define the room: “The rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorways a rose or a ram’s skull is carved in the wood.”

These are the physical features that will remain unchanged about the room no matter how many occupants come and go. Woolf’s focus on these elements of the room before she reaches the ones that are strongly associated with Jacob illustrates the

103 Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 176.
104 Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 176.
depersonalization that is the flip side of the significance that objects retain in the absence of their owner. Although the objects in the room are imbued with a sense of Jacob and an inherent part of his memory for now, the same fact that now grants them special worth—Jacob’s absence—will also ensure their eventual return to having purely “their [own] distinction”\(^{105}\) because they will no longer be linked to him and his memory. The repetition of this idea of distinction, with its first occurrence referring to the eighteenth century and its second referring to panels, underscores the idea that both time periods and objects can be imbued with meaning, but those meanings are dependent on the viewer and the context rather than the objects themselves. Woolf does not modify the term “distinction” to add any specificity, but rather lets it stand alone, like the objects themselves.

Woolf increases the symbolic importance of the sheep’s head imagery by having it appear at the beginning and end of the text; at the beginning of the novel, the sheep’s head represents how death has a presence for society and individuals. While Jacob is playing on the beach, he wanders away from his mother until “he saw a whole skull—perhaps a cow’s skull, a skull, perhaps with the teeth in it. Sobbing, but absent-mindedly, he ran farther and farther away until he held the skull in his arms.”\(^ {106}\) Young Jacob’s first encounter with the remains of a death occurs without the mediation of his mother or any adult figure. Instead, he is presented with an object for which he has little context; he cannot even confidently identify it or whether it has certain physical characteristics, such as teeth. Although the skull is physically present, it remains somewhat of a mystery for him and is described ambiguously, as though

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\(^{105}\) Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 176.

\(^{106}\) Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 10.
multiple different descriptions of it coexist in his head. Woolf also presents the skull to the reader as an entity that has a significance beyond Jacob’s interaction with it. After Mrs. Flanders has pulled Jacob away, the reader is presented with a final image of the skull: “There on the sand not far from the lovers lay the old sheep’s skull without its jaw. Clean, white, wind-swept, sand-rubbed, a more unpolluted piece of bone existed nowhere on the coast of Cornwall.”\(^{107}\) This description attributes beauty and nobility to the skull, especially with its juxtaposition to the lovers. Although young Jacob might be unaware, such a description of the physical manifestation of death in the form of the skull creates alternative methods of reacting to death. Because the sheep’s skull has a physical presence when it first appears in the text, Jacob is able to react to and form relationships with this manifestation of the abstract concept of death.

When Jacob becomes a soldier, his loved ones experience his death as an absence, and the ram’s skull instead acts as a stand-in for a physicality that cannot be present. As Mrs. Flanders and Bonamy both stand in Jacob’s room, Woolf describes the room describes how “over the doorways a rose or a ram’s skull is carved in the wood.”\(^{108}\) The uncertainty about the identity of the carving is strongly reminiscent of the uncertainty regarding the skull that Jacob found on the beach at the start of the novel when he was a child. In that case, the skull—ultimately determined to be a sheep’s skull—was first described as “perhaps a cow’s skull, a skull, perhaps, with the teeth in it.”\(^{109}\) The visual confusion of each description lends itself to an overall

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\(^{107}\) Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 10.  
\(^{108}\) Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 176.  
\(^{109}\) Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 10.
difficulty of clearly visualizing death. A War death creates a problem of physicality that affects the efficacy of traditional coping mechanisms; without a body, without the physical presence of death, it becomes harder to comprehend. Therefore the presence of the ram’s skull focuses the reader’s attention on the ineffective ways in which Mrs. Flanders and Bonamy attempt to deal with Jacob’s absence by physically interacting with the things he left behind. Their difficulties stem from how “civilians knew only through receiving thirdhand muffled news…[which] led to denial as a way of coping.”\textsuperscript{110} The inability of the civilians to adequately handle wartime deaths is not a fault of those who were not in battle, but rather a consequence of the nature of World War I, which was close enough to feel immediate and far enough away to regularly receive inadequate news reports that further separate civilians from the news of their loved ones’ deaths. Because the image of the sheep’s head appears in both contexts, Woolf is able to show the reader how slight shifts in the ideas of death can have significant cultural and personal effects.

In its new context as a symbol of wartime death, the ram’s head also becomes a symbol of the sacralization of soldiers’ deaths, which Woolf viewed as a part of the War narrative that survivors imposed in hindsight. Woolf’s choice of a skull as the symbol that appears at the beginning of the text and at the end, specifically as a ram’s skull, makes an oblique reference to sacrifice in a religious context—particularly Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac that was prevented by the appearance of a ram.

This language of sacrifice becomes highly relevant in a discussion of how the civilian culture reacted to soldier deaths, because their “absence is sacralized. The war dead

\textsuperscript{110} Levenback, \textit{Virginia Woolf and the Great War}, 16.
are said to represent a sacrifice, which like Christ’s is supposed to be redemptive.”

By creating a narrative of martyrdom, the surviving populace is able to structure a relationship between the soldiers and the civilians so that they constitute two crucial elements of a sacrifice ritual: the sacrifice and those who gain from it. Such a narrative engendered feelings of both guilt and gratitude on the part of those who did not directly participate in the War because they have been saved, both literally and metaphorically, from the evils of the battlefield. Through her experience during and after the War, Woolf came to see this reaction not as a selfless acknowledgment of actions for the greater good, but rather as a symptom of survivor’s guilt. Levenback writes, “The peace would teach her that iconization and memorialization were less connected to death in the war than to a popular consciousness born not only of denial and fear but of survival guilt.” Woolf recognized that the idea of a soldier’s death as a sacrifice and part of a sacred narrative was among the aftereffects of war, when a culture attempts to come to terms with what was done on behalf of those who survived, rather than an inherent part of war itself. The presentation of the ram’s head in Jacob’s room after he has died allows her to pass this realization on to the reader, because it is the survivors (and the reader) who give the ram’s skull its significance in that scene and in the novel as a whole. As the evidence of death, such remnants are emotionally neutral until the survivors, not those who died, give them a meaning.

112 Levenback, Virginia Woolf and the Great War, 35.
Between Home Front and Battlefield

Attempting to assign meaning to wartime experiences was only one of the commonalities between the experience of the civilian and the soldier in World War I, due to the blurring of the lines between the battlefield and the home front. World War I was the first war in which “there was unprecedented militarization and mobilizations as ‘fronts’ in the fight for supremacy in the war.”114 Even the concept of the “home front” was a telling one, as the terminology clearly implied that the domestic sphere was just as much a part of the War effort as the battlefield itself. Despite the spatial separation, this popular rhetoric of the “home front” forged a connection between the soldier and the civilian so that both experienced the War on a basic level as combatants, albeit with very different spheres of activity, and could share in both its glories and defeats. Although the War experience of the civilian was certainly not the same as that of the soldier, “individual authenticity was to be achieved by a kind of commerce between the civilian experience of the war and that of those on the front.”115 By framing the home front as another place to do battle and the civilian as a necessary part of the national war machine, this narrative allowed for an entire national experience of the War. However, the attempt to propagate a communal war effort also complicated issues of domestic versus public space, especially regarding women. A common wartime propaganda poster exhorted women to urge their men to enlist, which “encapsulates all the contradictions inherent in the spatial rhetoric of wartime. Exploiting separate spheres ideology to conjure up a comforting (yet threatened) ‘feminized domestic space,’ it nevertheless urges women

114 Proctor, Civilians in a World at War, 110.
115 Levenback, Virginia Woolf and the Great War, 16.
to play an active public role by recruiting their menfolk.”\textsuperscript{116} The poster and other similar war rhetoric specifically focused on asking women to straddle the line between traditionally female, civilian roles—by sending their men off—and traditionally masculine, soldier roles—by taking part in the war effort first hand.\textsuperscript{117} This situation creates another linkage between the “civilian” who actively participated in the War and the returning soldier, because both return to a post-War society that does not have a place for the identities formed from their wartime experiences. For Woolf, this confusion provided fertile ground for further exploration in her more political (and feminist) projects. In \textit{Jacob’s Room}, she emphasizes the conflation of the domestic home front with the violent battlefield by having Mrs. Flanders wonder whether the “dull sound” she hears is from the guns across the channel or whether “nocturnal women were beating great carpets.”\textsuperscript{118} Neither Mrs. Flanders nor the narrator provides the reader with an answer, because it ultimately does not matter what causes the sound. Either one could be a part of the war effort, and the fact that they are nearly indistinguishable underscores the fundamental connections between the wartime experiences of soldier and civilian.

The question of Jacob’s presence and the role that he plays in a novel built around him flows throughout the text, but it is especially relevant in the final passage, when Woolf not only describes Jacob’s absence but also hints at Jacob’s responsibility for the situation. Many of the same lines that refer to Jacob’s being gone can also be read with an emphasis on the actor rather than solely on the action.

\textsuperscript{117} See Appendix B.  
\textsuperscript{118} Woolf, \textit{Jacob’s Room}, 175.
The first line of this section is Bonamy’s simple observation that Jacob “left everything just as it was.”119 Jacob is literally the subject of the sentence and the one who carries out the action. Bonamy implies that it was Jacob’s choice to leave things the way they were and that the casualness of the remnants of his life suggests that he meant to return but inexplicably changed his plans. The fact that Bonamy “marvel[s]”120 at the state of Jacob’s room evinces his surprise that Jacob chose to leave his room in disorder, as though the decision reflects poorly on him by revealing an irresponsible aspect of his personality. When he asks, “What did he expect?”121 Bonamy shifts the liability for Jacob’s absence onto Jacob himself, as though he should have foreseen this outcome and prepared for it. Bonamy’s response to Jacob’s absence represents an inversion of the understood dynamic that exists when a person perceives absence. The understanding of absence depends on the existence of an observer who expects something to be present when it is not. Without Bonamy “standing in the middle of Jacob’s room,”122 the reader is not immediately aware that Jacob’s presence is lacking. It is Bonamy’s presence in a room that is not his own and his association of it with Jacob that shows the reader what is wrong with the scene. However, when Bonamy speaks, he shifts the focus to Jacob, as if to suggest that it was Jacob’s choice to remove himself from his room. In this manner, Woolf presents Jacob as complicit in his own absence.

Through this question of responsibility for Jacob’s absence, Woolf implicitly directs the reader to consider broader questions of responsibility in the context of the

119 Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 176.
120 Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 176.
121 Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 176.
122 Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 176.
War. Identifying Jacob's Room as a “war book” grants the reader and Jacob symbolic roles as the Country and the Soldier, respectively, that can contextualize their relationship. Perhaps, as Stephanie Zappa suggests, “This holding of Jacob at arm’s length, this oblique view of the central character, begs the question: to what extent are we responsible for this ‘unknowing’? If, after all, our young men are to be raised to serve the Empire, we’re best advised not to get too close to them.” Rather than Woolf presenting Jacob as being aloof from the reader, Woolf asks the reader to recognize his or her own role in creating that distance. As the allusions to the War throughout the novel build upon one another and the reader’s sense of the impending cataclysm becomes stronger, the reason for the distance becomes clear: a national and cultural defense mechanism for a nation that knowingly sends its sons to war. Within this analytical framework, the novel occupies the tenuous position of being a post-War tale of the lead-up to the War. When the narrator interjects into a description of “simple young men, these, who would—but there is no need to think of them grown old,” there is a certain post-War disillusionment and bitterness regarding the fact that so many young men will not be growing old. This knowledge of the future while describing the past allows Woolf to present the question of the extent to which the War created, and resulted from, the distance between the Generation of 1914 and those that came before. With the benefit of hindsight, Woolf can force the reader to

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124 Woolf, Jacob’s Room, 43.
examine who bears the responsibility for the War and its consequences on both a personal and national level.

In *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf takes the opportunity to couple an experiment with the novelistic form to an examination of the cultural and personal impacts of the First World War. By examining Jacob’s life and death through the lens of the other characters, she was simultaneously able to comment on British society and its efforts to deal with the aftereffects of the conflict. For the generation that lived through the First World War, the concepts of distance and death became ambiguous experiences that in many ways mirrored the ambiguities the War created. Their appearances throughout the text show how the War presented Woolf with the opportunity to engage in an exploration of these issues on both the personal and larger social level. In this way, Jacob’s death became more than a personal grief; it symbolized the absence of a generation and the mourning of a nation in the aftermath of the First World War.
Afterword

The connection between the First World War and literary modernism has engendered much scholarship and will undoubtedly continue to do so. Although there are many different ways to examine the relationship between the events of World War I and the literature that emerged from it, this thesis has focused specifically on the role that modernist literature played in structuring the formation of the idea of the Generation of 1914 in post-War Britain. As scholarship on the War becomes further removed from the War itself, it becomes easier to elide the different ways in which the War’s participants experienced it, which illustrates just how effective these works and others like them were in creating the idea of a cohesive generation from a jumble of different War experiences and attitudes. Because the British War effort involved a multitude of people in a variety of ways, these differences in experience might have exacerbated divisions that already existed in the country. Instead the narrative of the Great War that is preserved in history is that of the Generation of 1914 experiencing the War and its aftermath as a unified group. This narrative is the one that authors such as Sassoon, Graves, and Woolf were influential in constructing.

When they wrote about the War, Sassoon and Graves were able to use their experiences to address the continuities of the War that reached across the Channel to connect soldiers and civilians. Crucially, those experiences were not limited to the time that both authors spent in the trenches; instead, by highlighting the influence the War had on their lives when they were not actively fighting, Sassoon and Graves suggest the ways in which the experience of the War extended beyond what is
traditionally thought of as the soldier’s role. Furthermore, they questioned what it meant to be a soldier during the First World War and whether that identity effectively encapsulated the various roles that participants played in the War effort. By showing how the realities of the War complicated the soldier identity, Sassoon and Graves opened up the War experience to encompass the variety of ways in which the British population participated in the War. Through the presentation of their War experiences in the form of fictionalized retellings, Sassoon and Graves played on the connection between the author and the reader to suggest that the creation of the narrative of the War experience is a communal one, just as the War itself was.

In two of her novels that deal with the impacts of the First World War, Woolf creates a framework in which the aftermath of the War can be dealt with in a national, communal space. *To the Lighthouse* reveals Woolf exploring the temporal boundaries of the novel in order to depict a subjective experience of time that emphasizes association-based relationships of people and events over chronologically defined ones. By highlighting the importance of shared space in the form of the Ramsays’ house, Woolf similarly presents the War as a space of shared cultural experience that allows for private grief to become public. In *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf addresses the ways in which death that is experienced as absence influences the grieving process. By constructing the novel around a main character who has died in the First World War, Woolf makes Jacob into a stand-in for all of the lives lost during the War and therefore links individual grief to a process of collective mourning. This formal structure for the novel also focuses on civilian mourning, which illustrates the extent to which the experience of the War was shared among the soldiers and civilians.
By formally addressing the ways in which the differences in experience could all be portrayed as part of a larger War experience, Sassoon, Graves, and Woolf conceived of the War as a singular experience that could form a single generation, as Mannheim’s theory suggests. It is not enough that this group of people experienced the War in their own ways, but rather there must be a sense of each person being a part of the same War and the same broader experience in order for the concept of a single generation to be an apt one. In their writings, these authors engaged with this problem and presented a solution by suggesting not only the ways in which differences in experience could be bridged, but also the ways in which such purported differences were in fact false dichotomies. Rather than representing a point of discontinuity in history, as many scholars have argued, the First World War can in fact be viewed as continuous with life before and after, and it is only through this lens that the nation could meaningfully come to terms with the experience.

Although neither the modernist literary movement nor the First World War have typically been portrayed or studied as emphasizing continuity over discontinuity, such an analysis opens up a potentially fruitful field of study that examines how new literary forms and historical perspectives can elucidate broader connections. While this thesis focused solely on Sassoon, Graves, and Woolf in the wake of World War I, much more exploration could be done that examines the impact that writers who were further from the mainstream had on this project of creating a generational identity. Similarly, since members of the Generation of 1914 would certainly have been alive at the outbreak of World War II, examining how the
Generation of 1914 interacted with its later counterpart could provide further insight into the long-term maintenance and significance of this generational identity.
Appendix A

Although there is not necessarily a single measure of how popular a work was, information such as print-runs and profit figures can give an indication of whether a work was successful in the sense of being well read soon after its release. In the case of a work such as Robert Graves’ Goodbye to All That, however, there can be little doubt of its immediate popularity. In the first month of sales, the book sold 30,000 copies, and by one year after its release, the book was “[climbing] the list of British best-sellers, [and] it was clear that Graves had written one of the most popular books of the Great War and added an irresistible catchphrase to the English language.”\(^\text{125}\)

Similarly, sales of Siegfried Sassoon’s Memoirs of an Infantry Officer were at 24,000 books barely a month after it was published, which places Sassoon at nearly the same level of popularity as Graves only a year later.\(^\text{126}\) For Virginia Woolf, a different, but possibly more meaningful, measure of the popularity of her works is the profit they brought her and how significantly that affected her income. In 1927, the year of the publication of To the Lighthouse, her income from books was £545, up from £356 the previous year.\(^\text{127}\) A jump that large highlights both the popularity of the book itself as well as the fact that Woolf’s name was becoming well known, which would contribute to later commercial success. Unfortunately for Woolf, Jacob’s Room, which was published earlier, did not have the advantage of this solid base of name-

\(^{125}\) Steven Trout, introduction to Robert Graves: Good-bye to All That and Other Great War Writings, ed. by Steven Trout (Manchester, England: Carcanet Press Limited, 2007), xi.
\(^{127}\) Lee, Virginia Woolf, 550.
recognition, so its initial print-run was much smaller—only 1,200 the first month and 2,000 the next. In this case, a better sense of its impact can be gleaned from its review in the Daily Telegraph, which told readers “if you want to know what a modern novel is like, you have only to read *Jacob’s Room* by Virginia Woolf.” Although the book did not immediately rise to popularity, reviews like this one showcase Woolf as a cultural touchstone and *Jacob’s Room* as a key part of her oeuvre.

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Appendix B

“To the Women of Britain,” published by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee in 1915.

“Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps,” published by the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps in 1917.

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