Modernist Aesthetics of "Home" in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and Rebecca West's The Return of the Soldier

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MODERNIST AESTHETICS OF “HOME” IN VIRGINIA WOOLF’S *MRS. DALLOWAY*
AND REBECCA WEST’S *THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER*

by

JAMES HARPER STROM

Under the Direction of Randy Malamud

ABSTRACT

The First World War wrought untold destruction on the physical and psychological landscape of Europe. For Britain, the immediate post-war period represented no less than a national “nostos,” or homecoming, and few social institutions were so fragmented by the conflict as the home. This thesis will explore the various conceptions of “home,” from the nation and the domestic sphere to post-war consciousness, through the lens of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier*. Though unique in style and scope, Woolf and West interrogate and revise pre-war notions of “home” and suggest a Modernist aesthetic of what it is to be both at “home” and at home in the world.

INDEX WORDS: Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Modernism, World War One, Home, Aesthetics, Britain, Nationalism, Domesticity, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Return of the Soldier*, Nostos
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

“To awaken is thus to bear the imperative to survive.” - Cathy Caruth

“Home” means many things to many people. It can be a house, a physical structure, finite. It can be a place, defined broadly: a country, a region or a city. Taken to its furthest extremes, it can denote a metaphysical locus, even one’s own mind. Samuel Johnson’s entry encompasses these connotations and concludes with “the place of constant residence,” a phrase so pregnant with contingencies as to lead one back to the beginning; and in the ensuing centuries the term has grown no more lucid. As a geographic or spatial descriptor, “home” remains arbitrary. “Home” is a word that doubles back on itself, a term that creates meaning by virtue of its very existence.

The inscrutability of “home” and its subjective, experiential quality, make it signify everything and nothing by turns, dependent entirely upon its context and connotation. It may represent comfort and stability, unity and prosperity. It may be a stand-in for the hearth and the flag, or perhaps suggest their absence or colonial imposition. It is everything that populates the mind of the one who conjures it in his memory. Whatever the intention, “home” is an imagined place, a fluid experience that has long since passed by the time it takes on the talismanic quality it carries in the popular imagination. Often it becomes an attempt to anchor oneself in the past and to invest in the established order, and when the past and present come into violent conflict, this uneasy partnership between the present and all that has come before cannot bear the strain.
Against tyranny and conservatism, modernity was a boon for humanity. Against the forces of change, it was portrayed as a threat to stability and the very existence of the nation. Given the infinitely mutable nature of “modernity,” it was the exclusive purview of neither. Latent in the concept of home is a battle over how it might best be preserved, and in the second decade of the twentieth century, the Great War forced “home” to the forefront of the popular consciousness.

“Old” and “new” ceased to exist as viable modes of situating the present. They were washed of meaning by a proliferation of ideas – social, political, and artistic – that mixed and mingled freely, and the Great War challenged the notion of easily qualified binaries: allies and enemies, friend or foe. Left in its wake was a haze of uncertainty and unanswerable questions: How many? Who died? For what was the war fought, and why?

It was a perfect storm of European and global reassessments and realignments. The Great War coincided with the twentieth century’s first flowering of civil rights; a generational shift away from nineteenth century attitudes towards a host of social and artistic conflicts; and the realization of an economic reality that girded the regressive policies of hostile states and challenged social assumptions in what would become the Allied States. The conflict that engulfed Europe interrupted what was still considered by many a belle époque, and its reality stunned the civilian populace at large. The philosophical battles being fought were not, however, wholly unfamiliar to the artists and authors of the age.

Virginia Woolf famously remarked that “on or about December 1910 human character changed,” and, while she referred specifically to the emergence of post-impressionism in the visual arts, such a sweeping statement nonetheless captures the climate of artistic and literary innovation in the first decades of the new century. Authors such as Woolf, Joyce, Ford,
Lawrence, and Proust, who straddled the divide and had been steeped in traditional forms, found themselves writing between traditions. There was an imminent literary reckoning, in form as well as aesthetics, and the Great War galvanized the careers of many: Ford published his masterwork *The Good Soldier* in 1915; Rebecca West followed in 1918 with *The Return of the Soldier*; D. H. Lawrence in 1920 with *Women in Love*; and Virginia Woolf with *Jacob’s Room* (1922) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Among continental authors, Proust began *In Search of Lost Time* in the decade before the war (1909) and would not live to see the publication of its final volume (1927), while Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* and Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers* would both grow out of the post-war decade and remain incomplete. Among such diverse authors was a common concern: the state of “home,” in all its guises.

Few, if any, social institutions were left untouched by the Great War, and those that endured were left shaken in its aftermath. Popular conceptions of home that had been, at best, tenuous before the war – “home” as domestic idyll and metaphysical seat of the nation – were left exposed to the criticism of a nation reeling from four years of conflict. Social and economic disparities were elevated from agitation by suffragists, socialist activists, and subversive artists to the level of undeniable and troubling public reality. The inadequacies of traditional forms in considering home and writing honestly about its multiplicity demanded a new way forward, a new conception of home that, if nothing else, reflected the shattered consciousness of a post-war world.

This thesis will explore the ways in which the crisis of home during and after the First World War is addressed by Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf in their respective novels *The Return of the Soldier* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Each offered her unique viewpoint of the war
experience in prose; between them, they forged an idea of “home” – an aesthetic of home – that was at once singular and thoroughly Modernist in its form and content.
“Suddenly one has come to notice the war everywhere. I suppose there must be some undisturbed pockets of luxury somewhere still . . . but the general table is pretty bare. Papers, however, flourish, & by spending 6d we are supplied with enough to light a week’s fires.”

– Virginia Woolf

The term “nostos,” or homecoming, has its origins in Book 22 of The Odyssey. Returning home to find his wife, Penelope, beset by suitors, Odysseus declares, “often, I ween, must thou have prayed in the halls that far from me the issue of a joyous return might be removed.”

“Nostos” implies both homecoming and happiness; an amalgam of anticipation and arrival. A homecoming “sweetly met” was the promise to the thousands of soldiers who enlisted and fought for England. However, the war they envisioned belonged to another century, and the war they met was more horrific than they could fathom: “Since defense offered little opportunity for the display of pluck or swank, it was by implication derogated in the officers’ Field Service Pocket Book. One reason that the British trench system was so haphazard and ramshackle was that it had originally taken form in accord with the official injunction” (Fussell 43). This small volume offered a gentlemanly and ordered portrait of front-line warfare, and it served only to widen the gulf between the anticipation and the reality of the carnage of the war. Official government

1 “νόστοι τελος γλυκεριο” (22.323). The phrase suggests both a general return and a homecoming from battle (in the original, the Trojan War), particularly one that promises to be “sweet met.” See Liddell and Scott.
literature projected and codified the war that it desired, and neither the architects of the war effort nor the soldiers anticipated the great debate brewing at home.

In his cultural history of the First World War, Jay Winter writes, “To remember the anxiety of 1,500 days of war necessarily entailed how to forget; in the interwar years those who couldn’t obliterate the nightmares were locked in mental asylums throughout Europe. [...] They knew both remembering and forgetting, and by living through both they had at least the chance to transcend the terrible losses of war” (2). Among the many challenges posed by the Great War was the navigation of this continuum of remembering and forgetting. The sheer magnitude of the war affected the population at home in ways unimaginable a generation earlier, and its novelty in scope and technological advancement posed a fundamental challenge to how war was experienced and assimilated into the national discourse. Modes of understanding and expressing the shock, horror, and mourning associated with previous wars proved insufficient in what amounted to a failure of language:

The collision was one between events and the public language used for over a century to celebrate the idea of progress. Logically there is no reason why the English language could not perfectly well render the actuality of trench warfare: it is rich with terms like blood, terror, agony, madness, shit, cruelty, murder, sell-out, pain, and hoax. [...] The difficulty was in admitting that the war had been made by men and was being continued ad infinitum by them. (Fussell 169-70)

The immediacy of the war bred a further irony. While the imagination had always been a tool for understanding (and, for some, exploiting) far-flung conflicts at home, that same faculty, aided by improved communication and media during the First World War, allowed citizens to better comprehend failure and exploitation on the part of the governments who initiated and prolonged
the war. Authors who for years had aligned themselves against governmental authority were
attuned to such manipulation. Karen Levenback writes, “Woolf seemed to suspect, particularly in
the early years of the war, that the government and the press were engaged in a conspiracy aimed
at hoodwinking the unthinking or searching young . . . into becoming players in the drama of
war” (13). The attempt to misrepresent the causes and realities of the war – to conspire against
the public trust and “hoodwink” young men into enlisting – would become a rallying point for
artists and ordinary citizens alike and invite a reassessment of the ideas so often exploited in
service of the war effort: home, nation, family, unity, identity.

Just as individual wartime experiences differed significantly and resisted the crafting of a
singular, national war narrative, Modernists responded less as a movement and more as
“modern” individuals with vague aesthetic similarities and a shared mistrust of accepted forms.
Winter goes on to note,

The overlap of languages and approaches between the old and the new, the
‘traditional’ and the ‘modern,’ the conservative and the iconoclastic, was apparent
both during and after the war. The ongoing dialogue and exchange among artists
and their public, between those who self-consciously returned to nineteenth-
century forms and themes and those who sought to supercede them, makes the
history of modernism much more complicated than a simple, linear divide
between ‘old’ and ‘new’ might suggest. (3)

The totalizing “Modernism” Winter argues against could not account for the diversity in form
engendered by the war. While the dialogue amongst artists was “apparent both during and after
the war,” such discourse could not anticipate the schism that would be produced by the war.
Chief among the social fault lines exposed were those in a domestic system that had been under
strain and a prominent subject of popular debate for nearly a generation before the war (Cohen 3). While differing considerably in scope and style, the post-war novels of West and Woolf take the return of a traumatized soldier as a catalyst for reappraising the notion of “home” and refigure how such an idea can be represented in fiction, given the failure of traditional forms in the face of political and social upheaval.

In his elegy to Sigmund Freud, composed as a second world war became increasingly inevitable, W. H. Auden wrote,

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,
when grief has been made so public, and exposed
to the critique of a whole epoch
the frailty of our conscience and anguish,
of whom shall we speak? For every day they die
among us, those who were doing us some good,
who knew it was never enough but
hoped to improve a little by living. (91)

Auden identifies one of the greatest challenges faced both by those whose lives were touched by the war and those who sought to interrogate the experience through fiction, navigating the complex nature of loss and its myriad social and political implications. Both Mrs. Dalloway and The Return of the Soldier approach this question by exploring the uncertain footing of a society still struggling to comprehend the magnitude of the war and to reconcile pre-war assumptions about family and gender roles with a post-war world. This shift amounted to an impossibility of “home” as it was previously known, and in this chapter I will explore the origins of Woolf’s and West’s new aesthetic.
The Failure of Arcadian Mythos and the Impossibility of Home

The aftermath of the Great War precipitated a massive realignment of population, as soldiers returned to their respective countries and displaced civilians sought to rebuild or relocate. It was a time of national homecoming, in which the countries involved were left to consider the causes and ramifications of the war. In Britain, four years of conflict produced a vacuum in which the most immediate sense of a national culture not defined by the war existed only in memory, and it was to this imagined Britain that so many expected to return. This literal and figurative homecoming amounted to a national inquisition into the social structures and assumptions that had been exposed by the war. These questions revealed a national identity built on myth and supported by economic and patriarchal disparities that teetered on the verge of collapse, exposed, as Auden writes, “to the critique of a whole epoch.” The national mythos that held sway in the generations before the war contrasted sharply against the reality of the front, and such a mythos consolidated the vision of nation-as-home that had begun to coalesce during the previous century:

From about 1880 there was then this dramatic extension of landscape and social relations. There was also a marked development of England as “home,” in that special sense in which “home” is a memory and an ideal. Some of the images of this “home” are of central London: the powerful, the prestigious and the consuming capital. But many are of an idea of rural England: its green peace contrasted with the tropical or arid places of actual work; its sense of belonging, of community.” (Williams, qtd. in Fussell 232)
Whatever pride was felt in London as a seat of empire and modernity, in this dichotomy between urban and rural it is the “green England” that formed the underpinning of British nationalism in the early decades of the twentieth century.  

Both West and Woolf interrogate the intersection of nationalism and the physical landscapes of the nation, with its diverse ecology contrasted so starkly between London, the teeming metropolis, and the industrial centers of the north, and the rural idylls venerated by the Romantics. Each novel situates itself in one extreme or the other – The Return of the Soldier set almost entirely on a country estate, Mrs. Dalloway in London – yet they could be more accurately understood as a dialectic between country and city that seeks an existential “center” between the two.

West and Woolf are undeniably cosmopolitan authors, each drawing life from the tumult and energy of London. Each also had a decidedly complicated relationship to country life. Renting a house outside the city during the war, with only her young son and a female servant for company, West suffered from a “morbid infiltration of the brain with discontent,” compelling her to write to fellow author Sylvia Lynd, “I hate domesticity. I don’t want to stay here” (Letters 26; original emphasis). The intersection between Woolf’s health and her experiences with country life have been well-documented, though, like West, she also had personal qualms with the various connotations of rural living. Though she gently admonishes Dostoyevsky for his impatience with village life in his short story “Uncle’s Dream,” Woolf nonetheless relishes sharing his opinion at length with her reader: “The provincial ought, one would think, by his very

Implicit in the invocation of “green England” is Northrop Frye’s figurative “green world,” which bridges the literary and historical “unity of man and physical nature” (Frye 130). What in Shakespeare suggested “magic, sleep and dreams, and enchanted forests or houses” represented for Blake, Shelley, and later Romantics “Eden in the unfallen world . . . the same place as England’s green and pleasant land where Christ also walked” (211-12).

See Lee, et al.
nature to be a psychologist and a specialist in human nature. That is why I have been sometimes
genuinely amazed at meeting in the provinces not psychologists and specialists in human nature,
but a very great number of asses” (Essays 113). The usurpation of the pastoral for political gain
represented a challenge to artists and authors whose work was either bound up in such subjects
or who simply sought to engage in honest dialogue regarding the war itself. “Patriotism in
literature is an insidious poison,” Woolf remarked in 1919 (Lee 338), and it would become clear
that guarding against the cooption of even the most basic human emotions – fear, anger, grief –
for ulterior means would necessitate a new mode of expression.

In her essay on the “proleptic elegies” of the 1930’s, Patricia Rae establishes a fitting
point from which to anticipate responses to the Great War in the decades that followed and look
back to the years when national institutions and attitudes began to splinter. Rae defines the
proleptic elegy as consolatory literature produced in anticipation of trauma, “anti-elegies” or
forms of “resistant mourning,” and, while she recognizes that the elegy didn’t fall entirely out of
fashion during the period, she writes that “proleptically elegiac writing fiercely scrutinized”
traditional forms of remembrance, “weighing its merits, registering its ironies, and, in many
cases, pronouncing it inadequate or useless” (215). The primary function of the proleptic elegy,4
she argues, is to refute Arcadian propaganda (and its socioeconomic connotations) as a means of
consolation. “Arcadian” England – verdant, harmonious, and peaceful – appealed to the
imagined childhoods of those who suffered through the Great War, and it was only fitting that
authors in the vein of Trollope, Housman, and Hardy were especially popular at the front (218).

4 A recurrent example is Auden’s “Out on the lawn I lie in bed,” which progresses from
consolation in Arcadian spaces to anger at their inadequacy. Rae writes, “We see [Auden] in the end
indicting the escape into pastoral he had anticipated protecting him. He criticizes the ‘creepered wall’ of the garden and the ‘river-dreams’ that distract the privileged classes from ‘wretchedness.’ He envisions pastoral ‘privacy’ ceding to the floodwaters of social revolution” (227).
The death knell of Arcadianism was its commodification. Green spaces remembered for their solitude and authentic “Englishness” became commercialized as Britons sought out the Arcadian ideal. As the artifice behind these spaces became more apparent, defending Arcadian England as a justification for the War was no longer viable, a situation that would only increase during the interwar period and the seeming rush to a second world war. The result, Rae argues, was clear: the realities of the war “[destroyed] the viability of the idea that an Arcadian England, and its established strategies for commemorating and caring for its veterans, [was] adequate consolation” (222-4).

It was thus that “home” and any true nostos became an impossibility. The void in the national consciousness left writers in a unique position. When Auden wonders, “Of whom shall we speak,” he implicitly asks “how” as well. With regard to the Modernists, Rae answers by addressing one of the most severe deficiencies of nationalism: an appropriate means of mourning. Authors who approach the crisis of mourning and remembrance [encourage] remembering where memory has been repressed, and they expose the social determinants for troublesome amnesia. At the same time, they resist the narratives and tropes that would bring grief through to catharsis, thus provoking questions about what caused the loss, or about the work that must be done before it is rightly overcome. They raise questions about the social forces that have prevented the work of mourning from being accomplished, and they offer alternatives to the consolatory strategies that have been widely deployed and that threaten to introduce a whole new round of loss and grieving. (Rae 22-23)

In her novel, West presents the war experience against a backdrop that stands in contrast to Woolf’s, considering the effects of the conflict outside the bustling capital and positioning it in a
country estate. West’s setting is, in essence, Arcadia, secluded, rarified, and representative of the ethos to which so many soldiers longed to return. It was, however, a vision of England only tenuously grounded in reality. It was this “green world” for which men fought, based on fond (and often invented) childhood memories. In such an environment, Chris Baldry’s return and its consequences stand in stark relief and offer a necessary counterpoint to Woolf’s exploration of cosmopolitan mourning.
Figure 1. World War One recruiting poster, May 1915
CHAPTER THREE

“LUSTRE AND ILLUSION”: (RE)IMAGINING THE HOME

“And now that she had none to worship she worshipped the memory, and looking on the world with clear eyes, was more scornful than was just of its tragedy and stupidity because she had lived in a dream and still cherished a dream.” – Virginia Woolf, of her mother

Prior to the First World War, “home” was an aesthetic language shaped almost exclusively by men. A brief survey of women writing about the state and nature of “home” reveals a tradition of frustration towards the uneven bargain inherent in the structure of the home, whether between husband and wife, father and daughter, or master and female servant. Such frustration is a common topic for those who were fortunate enough to be literate and, after education for girls became more widespread, to have their writing taken seriously (or, at the very least, not suppressed). Restoration poet Anne Finch writes in “To the Nightingale,”

Poets, wild as thee, were born,

Pleasing best when unconfined,

When to please is least designed,

Soothing but their cares to rest;

Cares do still their thoughts molest,

And still th' unhappy poet's breast,

Like thine, when best he sings, is placed against a thorn. (1)

The “thorn” was a universal reality for women writers not only in the form of censorship and general bias against women writers but also in the creative energy it consumed and the influence
it had over the writing process itself. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write, “Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy . . . she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face” (17). To be sure, the climate experienced by female writers varied widely between generations, classes, and numerous other variables, but the ability to take the reins of the prevailing narrative of domesticity would not emerge until the nineteenth century.

Virginia Woolf created one of the most famous, if fictional, examples of thwarted female literary ambition:

I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister; but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee's life of the poet. She died young – alas, she never wrote a word. She lies buried where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle. Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here to-night, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. (A Room of One's Own 189)

Woolf addresses Judith Shakespeare and women going about their domestic chores as much as she writes about self-determination and the obligations and prejudices that so often get in the way of the female writer. What she suggests is a means of talking about the home – of defining it
according to women’s desires, not their obligations or “duties” – and both Woolf and West approach this problem in their respective novels.

**Presence and Autonomy in *Mrs. Dalloway***

“He explained to them that history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And the ancestors whispering inside.” – Arundhati Roy

For Woolf, the home is an organic space that heaves and sighs under the weight of expectation. In her essay “Old Bloomsbury,” written in 1922 as a reflection upon the years between the Post-Impressionist Exhibitions and the First World War, Woolf captures the sensuality that such spaces evoke, writing of Ottoline Morrell’s home at 44 Bedford Square,

When one remembers the drawing room full of people, the pale yellows and pinks of the brocades, the Italian chairs, the Persians rugs, the embroideries, the tassels, the scent, the pomegranates, the pugs, the pot-pourri and Ottoline bearing down upon one from afar in her white shawl with the great scarlet flowers on it and sweeping one away out of the large room and the crowd into a little room with her alone, where she plied one with questions that were so intimate and so intense, about life and one’s friends, and made one sign one’s name in a little scented book – it was only last week that I signed my name in another little scented book in Gower Street – I think my excitement may be excused. (200)

Woolf recalls an exchange between friends, but, as a function of memory, the exchange itself is nearly buried beneath a torrent of aesthetic detail. The aesthetic becomes an integral part of the
exchange. One feeds into the other, informs its solidification in memory, and becomes a component as vital as the actual conversation between Woolf and Morrell – “so intimate and so intense” – an absent detail that is subsumed by the total experience. Hermione Lee offers a caveat to Woolf’s forays into nostalgia and autobiography, especially those composed as part of the Memoir Club, describing her often “deliberately self-restrained and jocular” tone as being in service to what amounted to “witty, stylish performances” (18). Lee’s attention to the performative quality of Woolf’s autobiographical reminiscences seems especially fitting with regard to the passage above, populated by an assortment of objects on the one hand and a broadly drawn, larger than life caricature on the other. One is left to reconcile Woolf’s fond recollection of the veritable set piece that was the Morrells’ drawing room with the profoundly stark and otherworldly domestic spaces she favors in her novels.

Woolf’s recollection anticipates what would become in her fiction a tradition of women who are defined by their relationship to the imagination, whether that of others or their own. In a letter to her sister, Vanessa Bell, following the publication of To the Lighthouse in 1927, Woolf writes,

I’m in a terrible state of pleasure that you should think Mrs. Ramsay so like mother. At the same time, it is a psychological mystery why she should be: how a child could know about her; except that she has always haunted me, partly, I suppose, her beauty; and then dying at that moment, I suppose she cut a great figure on one’s mind when it was just awake, and had not any experience of life – Only then one would have suspected that one had made up a sham – An ideal.

(Letters 383)
The figure of Julia Stephen is a familiar one both in Woolf’s fiction and in her memory writing. Woolf’s reflections in *A Sketch of the Past* and “Reminiscences” detail the conscious, direct influence that Stephen – her speech, her stoic bearing, as well as her death – had on Woolf’s life and work, as well as the more subtle ways in which Stephen, even long after her death, seemed to shape the way in which Woolf interpreted the world. “How immense must be the force of life,” she writes, “which turns a baby, who can just distinguish a great blot of blue and purple on a black background, into the child who thirteen years later can feel all that I felt when my mother died” (79). One sees the same sort of otherworldly quality that so defines Mrs. Ramsay (“the harmony of her face”) in Woolf’s descriptions of her mother. This quality, the power to seemingly transfigure and control the very energy that comprises the physical space of home, would provide the basis for *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s first extended meditation on domesticity in the aftermath of the First World War.

Alex Zwerdling identifies the primary conflict in *Mrs. Dalloway*: between the political haves and have-nots, “those who identify with Establishment ‘dominion’ and ‘leadership’ and those who resist or are repelled by it” (130). He situates Clarissa squarely in the middle of this continuum, between the factions embodied by Dr. Bradshaw and Septimus, and concludes that Woolf constructs her as a conduit between the past and modernity, living so often as Clarissa does in her memory (142-3). Similarly, one can read Clarissa as an aestheticizing force whose domestic role in the novel not only challenges traditional domestic power structures but transforms the way in which the language of the home can be expressed. It is around and through Clarissa that Woolf constructs the domestic aesthetic of her novel, and Clarissa becomes the touchstone for considering its conception of home.
It is necessary to distinguish the development of an aesthetic of home from a unified feminist aesthetic. Many critics, most notably Rita Felski, have underscored the difficulty in approaching the latter, due to in large part to the sheer number of assumptions that would be required to posit such a theory. The home, as a germ for aesthetic development, can be considered one among many loci in which gender and myriad other social and political constructions interact, and “home” should not be read as a specifically gendered space but rather as one crucible in which the evolution of female language has taken place.

For a novel that announces an interest in domesticity in its title, the reader gets only a sidelong glance into the Dalloway household. Models of traditional family life are nowhere to be found, and an ebb in the social order is reflected in Clarissa’s feelings of alienation from both day to day domestic concerns as well as from herself: “She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (10). For Clarissa, life – “this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” – has come to embody what Emily Dickinson termed a sense of being “homeless at home” (Foster 26-7). While she acts as a mediating force between social and political factions in the novel, Clarissa also mediates the creation of home, in effect becoming an avatar for its formal and aesthetic interrogation.

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5 “The political meanings of women’s writing cannot be theorized in an a priori fashion, by appealing to an inherent relationship between gender and a specific linguistic or literary form, but can be addressed only by relating the diverse forms of women’s writing to the cultural and ideological processes shaping the effects and potential limits of literary production at historically specific contexts” (Felski 48)

6 “Fashioning what she is, / Fathoming what she was, / We deem we dream – / And that dissolves the days / Through which existence strays / Homeless at home” (Dickinson 1).
Clarissa Dalloway is perception personified. Woolf, in her autobiographical writing, often recalls places not only physically but spatially, describing in equal detail the present and the absent. Even her most seemingly concrete memories are, in fact, built upon multiple layers of obfuscatory language and ethereal, sensual descriptors:

Many bright colors; many distinct sounds; some human beings, caricatures; comic; several violent moments of being, always including a circle of the scene which they cut out: and all surrounded by a vast space – that is a rough visual description of childhood. […] A great hall I could liken it to; with windows letting in strange lights; and murmurs and spaces of deep silence. (Sketch 79)

This category of language is a cousin to what Roberta Rubenstein calls Woolf’s “poetics of negation,” in which an insistence on “nothingness” and its various syntactical iterations amplifies the absent object. Such play with absence “aligns Woolf’s work with the nothing produced by the First World War – a spiritual void that persisted through the postwar period during which she wrote – and with the work of other writers who attempted to give literary form to their cultural shock and emotional despair” (50). Woolf explores the limits of what it is to be present in her descriptions of Clarissa, who becomes the corporeal home in Mrs. Dalloway much as a monarch becomes the body politic of the nation. Clarissa drifts in and out of focus, “a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness,” threatening to dissolve alongside the “leaden circles” of Big Ben (4).

Woolf internalizes the home through the vehicle of Clarissa, privileging a vision of the home that is constantly changing, evolving according to the vagaries of consciousness:

Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there—the moment of this June morning on which was the
pressure of all the other mornings, seeing the glass, the dressing-table, and all the bottles afresh, collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself. (36)

Objects that might simply comprise the accoutrements of a lady’s dressing table in another context become part of the psychological constellation that is Clarissa’s memory. The very physicality of the mirror and bottles, their presence, seems to inform her plunge into the heart of the moment. As with Ottoline Morrell’s Persian rugs and pomegranates, the mind glances off of these objects on its way to “collecting the whole of” itself. The phenomenon that Rubenstein identifies in *To the Lighthouse* – the persistence of negation – is prefigured in *Mrs. Dalloway* as a persistence of self-possession. Woolf points towards an aesthetic that explores the ability of language to capture presence, be it of the home, of oneself, or the space between.

**Beyond Aestheticism in The Return of the Soldier**

Rebecca West is nothing if not elusive. Born Cicely Fairfield, she is known for both her writing and the breadth of subjects and genres it encompasses. Over the course of her career she moved deftly from editorials and cultural criticism to feminists tracts to novels, establishing a voice for each that melded perfectly to her own aims. To paraphrase Phyllis Lassner, the evolution of West’s thought and career challenges the coherence of our own critical models for understanding her work (43).

As a young journalist, West took a profound interest in the state of women, both inside and outside the home, writing on topics as varied as homeless women, training for domestic
service, gender and eugenics, and, understandably, marriage in the work of H.G. Wells.⁷ Even before the Great War, West approached the figurative and literal spaces of women in a social context. “I am rather afraid,” she writes in 1912, “that this wholesale confinement of human beings to a convenient sphere comes of the conception of woman as a large and perhaps more capable jellyfish whose flabbiness allows for her to be packed into any odd corner” (Marcus 360). Her early editorials and polemics on the curious relationship between women and the home foreshadow what would become the primary undercurrent of her first novel. On its surface it is the sort of timely narrative of shell shock and the family that proliferated during and after the war. However, West’s novel would be more accurately described as an exploration of the spaces of women and an indictment of the forms and attitudes traditionally associated with such spaces in fiction.

West did not see the home as a stage divorced from the action that takes place upon it. In *The Return of the Soldier*, the home itself seems to possess greater self-awareness than those within: “As usual the shining old paneling seemed aware of all that was going on and conscious that it was older and better than the people who owned it; the white nymph drooped over the black waters of the bowl and reminded one how nice, how neat and nice, life used to be; the chintz sang the vulgar old country-house song” (74). Like Woolf, West saw in the prevailing aesthetic of home a tendency towards fetishization, a willingness to let its physical attributes speak to the entirety of their meaning. West’s paneling speaks as surely as Woolf’s bottles about the ability the realm of the aesthetic to inform the content it ostensibly informs. Margaret Stetz offers an extensive analysis of West’s relationship to aesthetic value, and alongside her essay’s many excellent insights into West’s reluctant debt to Wildean Aestheticism, it highlights the

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⁷ For a history of the romantic relationship between West and Wells, see Ray.
inherent pitfalls in considering West or any female Modernist too strictly in the wake of a movement overwhelmingly propagated by men. Stetz’s essay also begs the question, what does it mean for a woman to adopt aesthetics as a mode of understanding, particularly when the aesthetic in question is that of the home and the domestic sphere?

Stetz grounds her argument by searching for West among her own characters, a stance that will ultimately prove problematic:

Kitty was also West herself, or the side of herself responsive to the appeal of exquisite china, exquisite dressing gowns, exquisite gardens, and, most of all, exquisite words. The novel’s plot may question the value of seeking after aesthetic effects, but the novel’s language paradoxically affirms that value at every turn. (3)

Such seeming contradiction extends well beyond the pages of the novel, and West’s own correspondence from the period during the writing of *Soldier* further muddles any attempt to pin down her opinion on the value of “aesthetic effects.” For all her professed hostility to Wildean Aestheticism (“no more a subject for art than a congenital cripple is for a picture”), she is not immune to the sensual, writing in 1916,

I want to live an unfettered and adventurous life like a [Bashibazouk], and spend all my money on buying clothes in Bond Street. Anthony looks very nice in his blue lambs-wool coat, and I feel sure that I have laid up treasure for the hereafter (i.e. dinners at the Carlton in 1936) but what I want now is ROMANCE. Something with a white face and a slight natural wave in the dark hair and a large grey touring-car is what I really need. (26)

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8 A Turkish mercenary (*OED*). Misspelled “Bashibagonk” in the original letter. See Malcolm.
Such a statement appears fundamentally opposed to West’s professed distaste with Aestheticism. In the letter quoted above, West briefly indulges in a moment of Orientalist escapism, idealizing the “unfettered” life of the itinerant warrior, before indulging in an entirely different sort of fantasy. However, before consummating such a fantasy, she qualifies in typically wry fashion, “Are these a girl’s natural aspirations when she is faced with last quarter’s unpaid gas bill […] or have I a wanton temperament?” What Stetz identifies as affirmation of pure aesthetic value in West’s novel I would instead consider an interrogation into how aesthetic value is understood. Stetz rightly disputes Samuel Hynes’s assertion that “beauty is only aesthetic, that it is unimportant, compared to love.” She nevertheless proceeds in the vein of the questionable rhetorical equivalence Hynes establishes, which suggests that, if beauty is only aesthetic, then aesthetics are concerned solely with beauty. Stetz’s argument amounts to an elucidation of West’s debt to Wilde, and while the point is well made that West and Wilde shared a penchant for linguistic flourishes and fine decor, Stetz fails to follow through on an important observation early in her essay. With regard to the home, West understood that “the creation and maintenance of such domestic perfection fell to women, who rarely were allowed other channels through which to exercise their sense of artistry or to feel the power of achievement fulfilled.” Far from nursing a clandestine infatuation with Wilde, West strikes out on her own and quietly subverts the inevitably gendered domestic aestheticism epitomized by Wilde and his contemporaries. Rather than offering another totalizing, masculine “ism,” West forges an individualist expression of aesthetic values that had been wholly absent in discourses on the home.

West herself implicitly anticipates her own aesthetic evolution. Her distaste for the “Augustinian complex” in fiction was acute, and she traces this “deep fantasy of dualism and the
need to wipe out guilt by suffering” to St. Augustine and finds it alive and well in the work of prominent modernists:

Lawrence “investigated . . . its validity by exposing himself to its emotional effects.” Proust justified “his sense of dualism by marshalling all the evidence for the horrid oddity of matter collected by his senses” and removing it “into the immaterial and therefore clean world of memory.” Joyce represented spirit in Stephen Dedalus and matter in Leopold Bloom, creating “a myth that perfectly expresses the totality of facts and emotional effects of the Augustinian complex.” This was “the ring-fence in which the modern mind is prisoner.” (West, qtd. In Scott 171-2)

It is for this reason that binaries such as those offered by Hynes (love versus beauty) so often fail to fully account for the depth of West’s innovation. Alongside the work of imminent stylists like Joyce, Proust, Lawrence, and, indeed, Woolf, West’s formal sensibilities, particularly in The Return of the Soldier, tend towards restraint. Such a straightforward reading of her formal sensibilities is inconsistent with West’s prose, and this seeming inconsistency could lead one to Stetz’s conclusion, namely that West is implicitly affirming the desire for “aesthetic effect.” An examination of the interplay between form and language in one of the novel’s earliest and most charged passages reveals West decisively refiguring such a passive notion of aesthetics:

It was the first lavish day of spring, and the sunlight was pouring through the tall, arched windows and the flowered curtains so brightly that in the old days a fat fist would certainly have been raised to point out the new, translucent glories of the

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9 West was immensely influenced by Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Soldier, and her 1915 review of the novel in the Daily News was “virtually a sketch of [The Return of the Soldier].” See Rollyson, Literary Legacy of Rebecca West, 24-8.
rosebud. Sunlight was lying in great pools on the blue cork floor and the soft rugs, patterned with strange beasts, and threw dancing beams, which should have been gravely watched for hours, on the white paint and the blue distempered walls. It fell on the rocking-horse, which had been Chris's idea of an appropriate present for his year-old son, and showed what a fine fellow he was and how tremendously dappled; it picked out Mary and her little lamb on the chintz ottoman. And along the mantelpiece, under the loved print of the snarling tiger, in attitudes that were at once angular and relaxed, as though they were ready for play at their master's pleasure, but found it hard to keep from drowsing in this warm weather, sat the Teddy Bear and the chimpanzee and the woolly white dog and the black cat with eyes that roll. Everything was there except Oliver. (3)

West’s catalogue of a meticulously appointed nursery, overflowing with sensuous tokens of childhood, is anything but art for art’s sake. Interpolated in her profusion of descriptive language is a narrative that reflects the tragic failure of Aestheticism. West embraces the most sensual aspects of the child’s nursery, lingering over the textures and colors of the room, not unlike the child Oliver might have done, had he lived. She seems to celebrate the possibilities that such a room evokes, animating it with the care and emotion that Jenny imagines the child’s parents might have felt, as well as the immediate pleasures the various toys would have given Oliver. The passage is anticipated by the fact that the child was dead in the preceding paragraph, but West’s lavish description of the nursery lulls the reader into imagining the life that should exist in such a room. The child’s profound absence is quietly referenced in the passage’s minute, even syntactical details (a fat fist “would certainly have been raised”; beams of sunlight that “should have been gravely watched for hours”; a formerly “loved” print of a tiger). The force of the
aesthetic makes the final sentence all the more devastating, despite the fact that both Jenny and the reader knows all along that the room belonged to a dead child.

Masculine manipulation of the home via indulgence in Aestheticism reinforced the notion that the home was, in effect, an ornamental space. West creates an aesthetic mode that is dynamic, not only troubling binaries but superceding them. West’s seemingly straightforward prose is calculated not to achieve “aesthetic effects,” to use Stetz’s phrase. The very idea of achieving a desired and pre-conceived effect is self-limiting. Rather, West means to effect through the careful and conscious manipulation of aesthetic language a sense of fluidity and flux that captures both the intra-war domestic milieu as well as the historically problematic relationship of women to the home. Bonnie Kime Scott remarks that, in West’s later fiction, “the sibyl, or wise woman, provides the position from which the problems of binary opposition and repetitive, destructive cycles can best be apprehended, figured metaphorically, and perhaps even figured out, or escaped” (186). In The Return of the Soldier, her first novel, West does not channel wisdom through a sibylline character so much as she becomes the sibyl herself. It is through her constant play with assumptions about form and aesthetic value that she escapes the masculine “ism” and gives the home an aesthetic language of its own.
Figure 2. “The Angel in the House,” by Julia Margaret Cameron, Woolf’s great-aunt.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE UNCANNY AND THE EVOLUTION OF “HOME”

“The uncanny is not a literary genre. But nor is it a non-literary genre. It overflows the very institution of literature. It inhabits, haunts, parasitizes the allegedly non-literary. It makes ‘genre’ blink.” – Nicholas Royle

In his 1906 essay, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” Ernst Jentsch writes, “In life we do not like to expose ourselves to severe emotional blows, but in the theatre or while reading we gladly let ourselves be influenced in this way: we hereby experience certain powerful excitements which awake in us a strong feeling for life” (11). His essay would prove to be a watershed in both psychoanalysis and literary criticism that would be utilized a decade later by Freud in “The Uncanny.” Compared to Freud’s veritable exegesis of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” Jentsch’s essay is compact and resists rigidly defining the uncanny, even as he undertakes the first formal effort to codify the phenomenon into something resembling a unified theory. While Freud’s later work would offer an exhaustive blueprint for examining literature through the lens of the uncanny, Jentsch’s essay offers an elementary, though no less important, lesson in what it means to read and write literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. In short, he inaugurates psychoanalysis as a viable mode of understanding literature.

While Jentsch refuses to articulate a universal cause or experience of the uncanny, he nevertheless vividly illustrates a phenomenon whose experience varies widely from person to person, and he does so by considering the power that the narrative voice wields over the reader or, in an earlier era, the listener. The “powerful excitements” that such a voice inspires become a
form of experience mediated by the author’s words and form, an experience he terms a “strong feeling for life.” His is the first exploration, however brief, of the uncanny as both an experiential and aesthetic entity, one able to be conjured by language, and in my final chapter I will explore the particular affinity between the uncanny and the aesthetics of Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West as they relate to the concept of “home.”

Jentsch hints at the underlying psychological framework of the experience of the uncanny in terms that are both prescient and tragic given the paroxysm of violence that would engulf Europe a decade later, bringing the ambiguity and death at the heart of the uncanny to life in innumerable horrific ways:

The human desire for the intellectual mastery of one’s environment is a strong one. Intellectual certainty provides psychical shelter in the struggle for existence. However it came to be, it signifies a defensive position against the assault of hostile forces, and the lack of such certainty is equivalent to lack of cover in the episodes of that never-ending war of the human and organic world for the sake of which the strongest and most impregnable bastions of science were erected. (227)

Ambiguity is the enemy of certainty as celebrated by popular conceptions of science and the modern intellect, and one could attribute the “lack of cover” engendered by the onslaught of modernity on staid values and centuries old-European conflicts as a direct cause of the Great War. Jentsch traces such existential conflict even further, pointing out that, even in ancient Greece, “a dryad still lived in every tree.” Just as humanity’s imagination fueled its beliefs, actions, and conflicts in antiquity, the “demons” populating the modern era were entirely of its own making. The uncanny thus can be understood as a product of the primeval power struggle between humanity and the collective “other,” be it his environment or an expanding,
exponentially diverse population. In the early twentieth century this “other” was internalized and intellectualized by an age in which the world and thus international relations were growing increasingly complex, with new technologies, discoveries, and social systems previously unknown and unfathomable. Concurrently, the “other” was becoming less and less identifiable as human or “civilized” by the antiquated rubric of the 19th century.

In these novels the uncanny emerges in two particular areas: the returning soldier and the place to which he returns, the home. These entities form the nexus around which West and Woolf construct their novels, even when traditional definitions of “home” or even “soldier” fail to capture the mutable essence of both in the aftermath of the war. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Return of the Soldier* both chronicle the aftermath of the First World War. (Though *Soldier* ends *in medias res* with regard to the war, the sense of “an end,” for both Chris and his civilian family, is felt as acutely as in any traditional sense.) The effects that go largely unseen at best, and are, at worst, conveniently ignored, are felt most strongly in regard to the returning soldiers, Chris Baldry and Septimus Smith. It is in the liminal space between seeing (sight) and memory that the worst horrors of the war replay in the minds of soldiers and in the imaginations of civilians, and this gulf between the reality of the war and its perception on the home front intersect, often to disastrous effect. Woolf and West themselves lived through the war and, despite certain social advantages, they each witnessed the impact of the war on the home front as both civilians and as writers. It was in the latter capacity that they sought to forge a humanistic response to an event that rendered traditional forms and customs trivial and impotent. Such ambiguity invites the presence of the uncanny. Consider its etymology. In the original German, the term itself (*das Unheimliche*) is something of a paradox, its root word, *heimlich*, possessing definitions as

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10 For information about Woolf’s activities during the war, see Lee; for West, see Rollyson and Glendinning.
seemingly disparate as “homely” or “familiar” and “secret” or “occult.” As Freud writes, 
“heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it 
finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich” (“Uncanny” 225-6). The word itself is an 
aesthetic vessel that communicates its nature. Elisabeth Bronfen writes, “Because the uncanny 
in some sense always involves the question of visibility/invisibility, presence to/absence from 
sight . . . [it] always entails anxieties about fragmentation, about the disruption or destruction of 
any narcissistically informed sense of personal stability, body integrity, immortal individuality” 
(113). As they engage with the war and its echoes on the home front, Woolf and West actively 
experiment with the uncanny as they are challenged by these same issues.

The question remains as to why the uncanny, a phenomenon first codified in the context 
of psychological study and so often defined by its presence in the German Romantic ethos of 
E.T.A. Hoffmann, is a fitting mode of understanding two texts that are very much defined both 
by their “Britishness” and by their modernism. Such sensibilities are established nowhere more 
clearly than in Woolf’s own thoughts on the writing of her earlier war novel, Jacob’s Room: “I 
figure the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be 
seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist” 
(Diary, qtd. in Quigley 101). A social and literary polymath even by the standard set by Woolf, 
West too excelled at such “textual play,” “[exploring] formal, psychological, and mythic 
dimensions of modernism” (Scott 170).

Woolf’s often measured and writerly work in Mrs. Dalloway and Rebecca West’s 
uncluttered and spare narrative in The Return of the Soldier are each address many of the same 
Modernist concerns. Pericles Lewis identifies the Modernist “problem” as being one primarily 
of form, writing, “the modernist crisis of representation was two-fold: a crisis in what could be
represented and in how it should be represented, or in other words a crisis in both the content and the form of artistic representation” (2). I have discussed in the previous chapters the ways in which “form” extends far beyond artistic representation and includes social and political forms, not least of all the construction of “home” as nation and “the home” as domestic nation-in-miniature. Such “telescoping” of meaning, in which the micro and the macro constantly feed into one another, is vital to both Woolf and West. Their attitudes towards such linguistic ambivalence could be called a sort of social agnosticism. The specter of death raised by the First World War and the passing of a social order merge to form the profound sense of doubt that lies at the heart of the uncanny, namely “doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate – and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one’s consciousness” (Jentsch 8). Further, both are fundamentally concerned with beginnings, ends, and the ways in which time doubles back, from memories of childhood in the face of middle age to the trauma of war. Septimus Smith’s descent into psychosis and Chris Baldry’s twice-lived life are both the embodiment of an era and an indictment of its hypocrisies, even before each soldier ever return to England.

In this final chapter I will consider why the uncanny is a useful entry point into the creation of an aesthetic of home. The uncanny, from Jentsch to Freud and beyond, is often considered an aesthetic experience. As David Ellison argues,

The uncanny is that force, that energeia, which, in pushing beyond clearly established boundaries of all kinds, ends up possessing the naively unsuspecting would-be possessor (interpreter) just as the voice of the god penetrates the body of the oracle. Allegorically speaking, the uncanny stands for all texts exhibiting literariness, and Freud is one in a long line of readers, all of whom are condemned
to repeat the same mistake: that of trying to master or control uncontrollable semantic proliferation, the *polysémie* characteristic of literature. (53)

He goes on to note that “the uncanny is diabolical not just in the sense of aesthetic complexity … but also in the ethical sense. Uncanniness is a destabilizing threat to social norms and conventions” (73). Ellison refers to the deftness with which the uncanny can empty seemingly familiar words and forms of their traditional meanings, and one is reminded of Woolf’s comment on the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway*: “In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense . . .” (248). For both Woolf and West, the polysemic nature of “home” makes it an ideal locus for social commentary, and the unwieldy presence of the uncanny in their novels will complicate, confound, and ultimately transform all that “home” had come to mean in the decades leading up to the Great War.

**The Return of the Soldiers**

“I wonder if you find like me that you feel a sense of guilt when gifted people younger than oneself disappear into the void.” – Rebecca West, letter to Kingsley Martin

The returning soldiers offered a window onto the war and a physical reminder of its costs. However, as Paul Fussell writes, “Even if those at home had wanted to know the realities of the war, they couldn’t have without [experiencing] them: its conditions were too novel, its industrialized ghastliness too unprecedented” (87). The very act of returning – the soldiers’ literal nostos – is on the one hand a temporal marker that seems to define an end to the war, as
though their presence at home and their absence from the front suggests that the horrors “over there” no longer exist. However, the soldiers’ return is also a stark reminder of the vast rent in the fabric of everyday life and tradition that made up “home” during the years of conflict. The returning soldiers, so many broken and forever changed, were living evidence that the present would forever be a “post-war” world.

The soldiers are themselves uncanny presences: many returned as “ghosts of their former selves,” as the appropriately macabre figure of speech goes, curious figures who simultaneously embody both the static past and the jarring change of the present. For those civilians left behind, the soldiers existed outside of time, and conversely for the soldiers, they are returning to a world irrevocably, radically changed that must now compete with the imagined home of their memory. Such a juxtaposition was born of the war, and it was brought home by soldiers like Septimus, who “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress” but returned too broken to indulge such a fantasy any longer or to embrace the reality that awaited (MD 84). It is not without some irony that Septimus’s mental breakdown sends his wife retreating back to her own imagined home.

Just as Freud etymologically unpacked the varied and often contradictory meanings that underpin *das Unheimliche*, so can one read such ambivalence into the returning soldiers. Neither Woolf nor West portrays the return of Septimus or Chris as an objectively positive thing. Quite to the contrary, the very presence of each brings a creeping sense of absence and loss. Rezia’s “foreignness” and her sense of alienation in London are thrown into sharp relief by Septimus’s psychosis. He becomes, paradoxically, embodied absence. The same could be said of Chris, though his outward composure seems to make his own illness felt even more deeply by those
around him. West lingers over Jenny’s interpretation of Chris’s amnesia in a passage that is worth examining in its entirety:

Nothing could mitigate the harshness of our rejection. You may think we were attaching an altogether fictitious importance to what was merely the delusion of a madman. But every minute of the day, particularly at those trying times when he strolled about the house and grounds with the doctors, smiling courteously, but without joy, and answering their questions with the crisp politeness of an inquisitive commercial traveler in a hotel smoking-room, it became plain that if madness means liability to wild error about the world, Chris was not mad. It was our peculiar shame that he had rejected us when he had attained something saner than sanity. His very loss of memory was a triumph over the limitations of language which prevent the mass of men from making explicit statements about their spiritual relationships. […] But by the blankness of those eyes which saw me only as a disregarded playmate and Kitty not at all save as a stranger who had somehow become a decorative presence in his home and the orderer of his meals, he let us know completely where we were. (64-5)

Even Jenny’s description of Chris’s otherworldly illness embraces the sort of “literariness” that Ellison identifies with the uncanny. The line between life and fiction seems inexorably blurred. Like Septimus, Chris’s very presence in the home imparts to it an uncanny quality that creeps into the consciousness of all those who are attached to a space so laden with conflicted and contradictory desires. In many respects, West’s novel distills the domestic war scenario into its purest form, ostensibly before the war had even drawn to a close. Having been injured at the front and subsequently lost all memory of his adult life, Chris is returned home as an injured man
living the carefree, if confused, life of an adolescent, and West goes to pains to drive home the
tenuous nature of “home” in Chris’s mind. The unstable mental address to which Chris assigns
his notion of home becomes the world in which Jenny and Kitty find themselves. They exist in a
state of strained nostalgia, pining halfheartedly for a life that existed either in the far removed past or not at all. Even before Chris’s return, Jenny finds herself regressing into a childhood
where her cousin Chris was her playmate and confidant and where her infatuation with him
could be considered innocent and entirely platonic. Kitty, on the other hand, seems to remain
frozen in the life she led before the war, and before the death of her child, where she enjoyed the
life of a country wife with a young, virile husband, who held the key to limitless possibilities,
both socially and domestically. The reader is thereby placed in the often surreal position of
navigating increasingly unreliable, mutable, and intersecting layers of reality while never
enjoying the stability of any semblance of verisimilitude in Wes

The artifice that Chris, Kitty, and Jenny had mistaken for life crumbles away under the weight of

Discussing Jentsch’s original essay in relation to Hoffmann’s “Sandman,” Freud states
that “a particularly favourable condition for awakening uncanny feelings is created when there is
intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes
too much like an animate one.” Given the locus of Chris’s (re)memory in adolescence, as well as
that of Jenny’s nostalgia for their seemingly idyllic childhood together, West clearly places a
great deal of importance on the dynamics of youth. Freud talks at length about the significance of
dolls with respect to the uncanny, and his analysis resonates when considering West’s attention
to the childhoods of her protagonists and the lingering effect that they exert in her novel:
Now, dolls are of course rather closely connected with childhood life. We remember that in their early games children do not distinguish at all sharply between living and inanimate objects, and that they are especially fond of treating their dolls like live people. In fact, I have occasionally heard a woman patient declare that even at the age of eight she had still been convinced that her dolls would be certain to come to life if she were to look at them in a particular, extremely concentrated, way. So that here, too, it is not difficult to discover a factor from childhood. But, curiously enough, while the Sand-Man story deals with the arousing of an early childhood fear, the idea of a ‘living doll’ excites no fear at all; children have no fear of their dolls coming to life, they may even desire it. The source of uncanny feelings would not, therefore, be an infantile fear in this case, but rather an infantile wish or even merely an infantile belief. There seems to be a contradiction here; but perhaps it is only a complication, which may be helpful to us later on. (Freud 233)

Amid what Freud calls a contradiction lies a novel way of understanding the uncanny. This attention to youth, insofar as youth becomes a function of nostalgia and time as it fades, runs throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Return of the Soldier*, and in each, youth comes to represent a time before the imposition of social structures, a time that was in many ways more accepting of imagination over Dr. Bradshaw’s beloved “proportion” and the atmosphere of propriety in which, West remarks, “there wasn’t room to swing a revelation” (*RS* 8). In the context of these novels, the fear of the “living doll” – the injured soldier – is intimately bound up with fear and mistrust of the myriad things that he suggests about modernity, and connecting fear and desire along the aesthetic continuum to which Freud alludes is the uncanny. Woolf and West utilize the
uncanny not merely to underscore the connection of the present to the war and the near past, or even the Victorian world in which they came of age. Rather, the uncanny becomes the literary means by which they refigure “home.”

**At Home, Alone**

In keeping with its circular etymological origins, the uncanny evolves back to its beginnings in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Return of the Soldier*. Both as a literary device and an experiential sensation, it evolves from an unsettling encounter between memory and fearful present to something analogous to cleansing fire – Ellison’s “voice of the god” – and beyond, transforming from a destructive to a creative force. The uncanny becomes a virtual avatar of experience itself:

> [The uncanny] is suggestive of the foundation of experience as it is grasped, figured in *aesthetic* terms. The uncanny is feeling as it is available to be shaped, projected by the imagination, rather than appropriated conceptually in knowledge. So the ‘uncanny feeling’ points to the necessity of a more proactive imagination to give us a sense of ‘something other in’ cognition that is also beyond it, the aesthetic shading that blurs the boundaries of our endeavours to represent experience and thereby situate itself – obscurely – in these very borders. (Collins and Jervis 45; original emphasis)

The uncanny is latent in all experience. It is the ambiguity inherent in life, the gulf that exists between perception and meaning, emotion and reality. Figured as such, the uncanny would seem to be an objectively negative phenomenon. It thrives only in the interstitial spaces that cannot be
known at the moment of perception; for an “uncanny moment” to exist, its meaning cannot be known in the present. In Hoffmann’s “Sandman,” Nathaniel’s interactions with Olympia are only uncanny in retrospect, when it is revealed that his ideal woman is in fact an automaton, a doll. Even then, only the reader is subject to the full force of the revelation.

Woolf and West follow the trajectory of the uncanny in their respective novels, “[blurring] the boundaries of our endeavours” aesthetically and situating their work firmly in the borderlands between experience, perception, and memory. The home is just such a liminal space. Jervis highlights the fact that the origins of the uncanny lie in aesthetic experience – the physical triggers of memory – and through their manipulation of traditional models of home, Woolf and West approach the “something other in” domestic life.

Each novel ends in a remarkably similar way. The reader is left with the image of an individual: Clarissa at the top of the stairs, Chris “cured” and “every inch a soldier,” both seeming to recover something lost. However, one is also left with considerable ambiguity. Woolf leaves the fate of Clarissa Dalloway entirely to the imagination of her reader. West suggests that Chris Baldry’s recovery will lead him back to the front, his “cure” very likely condemning him to death. Death, after all, was the answer for Septimus Smith. Yet for all of their similarities, Septimus and Chris differ in one crucial way. Where Septimus is robbed of self-awareness by his psychosis, Chris experiences his illness as a process. Clarissa, in so many ways Septimus’s double, also survives a vaguely defined illness and the growing weight of time and memory as she moves beyond middle age. Yet she survives, and it is only through (and to) Clarissa that Septimus ultimately speaks: “Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the center within, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death” (180).
Chris and Clarissa both confront the uncanny in the context of their domestic spaces. This confrontation between the uncanny and the figurative site from which it draws its power changes both. In the dialectic that Woolf and West construct, the uncanny becomes a fundamentally creative process, and “home” is emptied of artifice. What was commonly understood as “the home” before the war is undone by it, and through their experimentation with the uncanny, Woolf and West evolve an aesthetic of home that renders it not a static thing but a participant in the dialectic between perception and memory. Woolf’s desire to show the struggle between “life & death” is realized in the most intimate of spaces, and the struggle is ultimately one between death and a revolutionary conception of “home.”

Freud’s analysis of the uncanny harkens back to one of his most influential works, On the Interpretation of Dreams, which contains what has come to be known as “the dream of the burning child.” In this narrative, a father lays down to sleep as his recently deceased child lies in an adjacent room lit by candles, an old man standing watch. As he sleeps, the father dreams that the child comes to him and pleads, “Father, don’t you see that I am burning?” The father awakens to find the old man dozing and his child’s bedclothes and arm on fire (Dreams 403). In analyzing this scenario and its critical responses, 11 Cathy Caruth writes that the dream is “the story of an impossible responsibility of consciousness in its own originating relation to others, and specifically to the deaths of others. As an awakening, the ethical relation to the real is the revelation of this impossible demand at the heart of human consciousness” (104). The crisis inherent in the uncanny originates in this conflict between the individual experience of reality and the shared quality of home – the primal birthplace of consciousness – whether in domestic spaces or in the world at large. The dialectic between the uncanny and the home in Woolf and

11 Caruth is responding primarily to the third and fifth chapters of Jacques Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis.
West’s novels embraces these fundamental crises, and in doing so, the uncanny becomes an aesthetic process in which fear and ambiguity give way to a reassertion of individual consciousness.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS

In *Family Memories*, written near the end of her life, Rebecca West describes her birth in a middle-class London home in 1892. It was one of many “remote heirs of the Adam and Nash tradition,” part of a development designed thirty years earlier to emulate the great houses of the eighteenth century. The attempted pedigree could not disguise its obvious modernity. It was “far away from the centre of things” in a now-unfashionable part of London; even at the time of West’s birth, the project was “a palpable failure.” Such artifice would come to define the Victorian era in the popular imagination, particularly as nostalgia became a tool of nationalism, and the idea of home-as-nation was subjected to “the critique of a whole epoch.” It would be foolish and inaccurate to suggest that traditional notions of home and domesticity ended alongside the armistice. Much like the causes of the war itself, antiquated conceptions of “home” were deeply entrenched, and their effects would endure, as would faith in them, long after their inadequacy was lain bare and Europe drifted towards another, even more devastating war.

West contrasts her birthplace with that of her husband, born in what was then the British colony of Burma:

[He] had come into the Asian light surrounded by a palace; and round his home was a city where architecture raised up pagodas and needle-fine spires, delicate as the anatomy within small flowers or fern bracts, but going up, up into the skies: and surrounding that were the forests and the seas and a land-based sea of people wearing bright clothes, people without end. (16)

In this brief description, so stark against that of her own birthplace, West deftly illuminates the figurative difference between the previous generation’s conception of home and that of her own,
created by countless writers of the early twentieth century and epitomized by Woolf and West herself. It is a vision of the home expanding ever outward, alternating realist immediacy with great expanses of time and space, wholly unique in its sense of form. In their respective novels, *The Return of the Soldier* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, West and Woolf forge an aesthetic of home that reflects the realities of post-war domestic life and captures the very essence of consciousness.
WORKS CITED


