WOMEN'S UNSPEAKABLE DESIRE IN BRITISH AND GERMAN MODERNISM

by

Sovay Muriel Hansen

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2022

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by **Sovay Muriel Hansen**, titled **Women's Unspeakable Desire in British and German Modernism** and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Manya Lempert

Dr. Manya Lempert, Dissertation Committee Chair

Date: ___4.1.22___

Barbara Kosta

Dr. Barbara Kosta

Date: 4/1/2022

Dr. Johanna Skibsrud

Date: 4/1/22

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

Manya Lempert

Date: 4.1.22

Dr. Manya Lempert
Dissertation Committee Chair
Department of English

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to begin by expressing my deepest thanks to my committee, for whose inimitable support I have no sufficient language. It is fitting that all three committee members are those who have generously mentored me the longest – since my very first day in graduate school. I began research for this project three months before the COVID-19 pandemic and have written the entirety in near-quarantine conditions. Nevertheless, my committee encouraged me throughout, a fact that has enabled me to persist even when it felt impossible.

My dissertation chair and mentor, Dr. Manya Lempert, has been nothing short of a veritable lighthouse throughout my seven years in the Masters and Ph.D. programs. It is no exaggeration to say that whenever I needed her, she was unfailingly there. She has patiently, kindly, and professionally borne witness to my intellectual process and has mentored me into the close reader, writer, researcher, critic, and thinker I am today. Her rigorous and generative feedback on my writing, from seminar paper to dissertation, has been entirely unmatched in its quality and insight. It was Manya's seminar, Modernism and the Novel Form, and our group discussions of Woolf, Mansfield, and Sinclair, that ignited my dissertation topic. Our rich working relationship and our countless, expansive discussions about literature these many years have been treasures that I will remember all my life.

I was determined to work with Dr. Barbara Kosta when I attended a public lecture of hers in 2014 before I had even applied to the Ph.D. program. From the first time we spoke it was clear that we would work together and that there was an intellectual and creative kinship, as well as a deep friendship, that would grow over the years. Barbara introduced me to Irmgard Keun and sparked my obsession with Weimar Germany. Her advice and unmitigated belief in my abilities have been ballasts in the most tumultuous periods. She has been my confidant in my successes and failures along the way and has taught me to trust my own assessment of my work.

Dr. Johanna Skibsrud was my first point of contact at the English Department when we met for coffee to discuss the Literature program. Her sharp intellect, creativity, and kindness were crucial contributors to my decision to attend the Ph.D. program. Johanna's dynamic and challenging graduate courses, empathetic mentorship, and honest counsel during the most difficult times have been crucial to my successful completion of the degree and my continued love of the literary.

Thank you to the Department of English for awarding me the 2022 David L. Patrick Dissertation Fellowship for my chapter on May Sinclair, the funds from which will support my scholarship for many months to come.

I want to thank all my faculty in both English and German Studies, whose excellent courses and mentorship were so formative in my developing research direction and in my approach to teaching. Thank you also to my many graduate colleagues in both English and German Studies, who made my coursework intellectually and creatively expansive. In particular, I want to thank Sina Meissgeier for being my dear friend from German Studies, often from afar in Leipzig, and for believing in me throughout our doctoral studies.

Thank you to Dr. Lynda Zwinger for her excellent course on the novel, my very first graduate course, which taught me how to really close read a text. Thank you also, to Dr. Zwinger, for having my back on many occasions, for encouraging me to trust my readings of situations and texts, and for loving my red boots as much as I do.

Thank you to Dr. Susan Miller-Cochran for seeing my potential and providing me with fulfilling professional opportunities outside of my own field, for making me a better teacher, and for baking me bread.

Of course, without Rachel Sims's close companionship, encouragement, and ferocious belief in me, there is no telling what my process and progress would have been, but it would have been far lonelier and less collaborative. Rachel has been my closest and most important comrade throughout our time together in the Ph.D. program and when we met that very first day of graduate school, she immediately provided me with unequivocal emotional and intellectual support. Rachel has consistently believed in me and my work when I could not. Our dissertation writing retreats are memories that continue to sustain my scholarly and creative inspiration.

Thank you to Katelyn Peters for her stories, her insight on life and the literary, and for her crucial proofreading during the homestretch. Thank you to Laura Strauss, Chris Christiansen, and Tim Horley for the lengthy, dynamic, and exhilarating discussions about my research and life itself. Thank you for taking my ideas so seriously while still making me laugh and reminding me of the world outside.

Maddie Page and Dr. Dylan Sabb – my bosom friends from childhood – have kept me tethered to reality with their constancy, pragmatism, steadfast friendships, and sense of heart and home. Janet Sabb and Sherril Howard offered their mountain getaways to me to ponder my projects and my life – thank you. Thank you to Sandra Cook, for tending to my education and my self from the beginning.

I am grateful to Dr. Sarah Wilhoit (my graduate student mentor!), Dr. Heidi Wallace, and Dr. Ruixue Zhang for paying fastidious attention to my writing, ideas, and perhaps most importantly, to my wellbeing for years. Thank you to Dr. Betsy Labiner, Dr. Daniel Kasper, Dr. Jayda Coons, Dr. Emily Lyons, Dr. Emily Thomas, and Dr. Casey Richardson for paving the way for me and reminding me of the view on the other side. Your words of encouragement and advice along the way have kept me moving forward.

I want to acknowledge my excellent students, who have made me a better, more careful reader of Mansfield and Woolf and who continue to inspire me with their own work and accomplishments.

Dr. Nancy Koppelman saw my potential during the first semester of college and challenged me to become a better reader and researcher and to reflect on why my education matters. Dr. Trevor Speller encouraged my love of literature and was the one who got me to consider getting a doctorate.

Teresa Shattuck, my dear aunt, gave me a home when I was far away from mine. George Daranyi's ongoing support has meant so much over these many years.

Tom Murray and Dr. Devon Thomas, whom I met so late in my degree, believed in my potential to contribute to their beloved project, *Wildcat Perspectives*. The rest of the Office of General Education, too, provided me with an important repast from my dissertation work that ultimately made my work better.

And of course, without Daniel Millstone's eminent optimism, patience, great cooking, humor, impeccable music taste, and unfettered belief in my capabilities, the road to this point would have been much harder and far less lovely.

And finally, without the unqualified and unconditional love and support of my dearest sister, mom, and dad – and the rest of my family and family friends – I would of course not be who I am or where I am.

In closing, I would like to thank *Katherine Mansfield Studies* for publishing my article, which is a truncated version of my chapter on Katherine Mansfield. Thank you to Dr. Gerri Kimber and Dr. Todd Martin for their incisive editing and polishing of my essay.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This dissertation, "Women's Unspeakable Desire in British and German Modernism," argues that the Weimar Republic's modernism should condition our understanding of literary modernism in Britain. My project contributes to the growing field of new modernist studies and argues for expanding the boundaries of British modernism to consider the ways in which the modernisms of other parts of the world ought to inform the field. My project asks and responds to the query: How is women's unspeakable desire for more from life represented and externalized in British and German fiction produced during and after the First World War? "Unspeakable" is meant here in its double sense: that there is no adequate language with which to discuss this desire and that this desire, were it expressed, would be considered appalling and indecent. I claim that in these texts female characters' desire is expressed by way of metonymy: that is, their desire is conveyed by way of objects adjacent to them in the narrative, so that they and their authors may avoid directly discussing taboo subjects and still communicate desire that eludes language. The field of modernist studies has long been dominated by an understanding of modernism as an artistic and literary movement that originated and flourished in Britain with canonical giants such as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf (as of the 1970s), all of whom still certainly epitomize literary modernism. However, many leading British modernists found second homes in Berlin of the 1920s, where they were able to live queer and more openly desirous lives in public. In the cases of Virginia Woolf, W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Katherine Mansfield, and others, their artistic work and particularly their discussions of desire, are often inflected by their time spent in Germany during the early twentieth century. The more permissive social and legal ethos of the Weimar Republic undeniably introduced new ways of understanding desire across the western world. Each of my dissertation chapters focuses on one such modernist and the way in which she uniquely uses metonymy to sidestep a lack of adequate language for her female characters' aspirations. Chapter 1 argues that the fiction of Irmgard Keun reveals how fashion plays a crucial role in understanding female desire in modernism. Chapter 2 argues that Virginia Woolf uses both objects in the natural world and fashion in her fictional narratives to register female characters' desires to make their secret, core selves visible. Chapter 3 examines the way Katherine Mansfield's fiction employs objects to obliquely address taboo subjects such as queerness, hatred of motherhood, and deep loneliness, all relevant to women's desire for different lives. Chapter 4 argues that May Sinclair's novel *Mary Olivier* (1919) constructs a protagonist who finds the material word inadequate to answer to her desires and she therefore resorts to abstract metonyms that her metaphysical Idealist philosophy constructs. Characters in Keun, Woolf, and Mansfield connect these transgressive yearnings to items in their proximity; Sinclair's heroine rejects the material world for the spiritual, and her epiphany is that nothing in this world can fulfill her desires. That characters' dreams of liberation accrue metonymically to a fur coat (Keun), to a lighthouse (Woolf), to an aloe plant (Mansfield), or to an immaterial realm (Sinclair) is a literary expression of these authors' feminism. Their fiction registers the repression and demonization of female desire, yet it foregrounds metonyms for life beyond the status quo.

INTRODUCTION

"If women don't want to be men, what do they want?"[1]

"I am not in the least afraid to throw myself into the open sea." – May Sinclair[2]

When asked, "what counts as modernist fiction?" one might answer that "it is focused on the inner lives of characters – on the workings of their minds – more so than on the outer world." This is a true response, evidence for which can be found by reading, as just one example, *Ulysses* (1922) alongside *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891): the contrast between the time each devotes to plot versus character consciousness is stark. One has a hard time imagining a novel like Joyce's being written in the world that existed before the ruptures to life brought by 1914 – *Ulysses* is quintessential of a high modernist text in both form and content; it takes the complex human mind as its object of study, while linear plot is put on the back burner – a narrative aesthetic that mirrors the disruption the Great War caused to life's predictable progression and to conceptions of the self as unified. At the same time, it is due to this preoccupation with interiority that modernists have been accused of ignoring the reality of the outer, shared world, of creating characters who are dangerously solipsistic. Advocates for realism over modernism, like Georg Lukács as one well-known example, have even feared that modernist literature risks coming entirely untethered from an objective reality.[3] Of course, the field of modernist studies, equipped with the benefit of hindsight, has steadily complicated such binaries between realist and modernist fiction over the last century; what counts as a modernist text continues to broaden beyond narrow aesthetic criteria. However, this now-passé view of modernism, as being

---

[1] Sarah Grand, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" (1894). See page 141 of Nelson's *The New Woman Reader*.

[2] *A Defense of Idealism*, page 359.

[3] This is a reference to Georg Lukács's critique of modernism as a dangerously solipsistic alternative to realism, which he sees as far more community- and reality-oriented: as being grounded in shared reality. Lukács's suspicion of modernism is that it spends too much time inside the subjective reality of characters, rather than in the shared reality of the object world he sees realism inhabiting. See Lukács's *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1958).

unmoored from or uninterested in a shared, material world, continues to surreptitiously influence the way we read modernist texts: we assume that modernist literature won't engage with the material world in formally meaningful ways – rather, we look for formal salience in moments that focus on interiority, instances when the narrative looks inward.

This project asks readers to consider that modernist literature is also enamored with the material world and that it uses objects as anchors from which to explore characters' inner lives more expansively. This seeming paradox – that the outer world provides insight for the inner world – shouldn't be surprising, since "paradoxy," as Robert Scholes coined it in his 2006 book, is in modernism's very marrow. Scholes insists that we complicate the pervasive understanding of "true" modernism in terms of oppositions, for instance, highbrow modernism in total contrast to its contemporary lowbrow fiction of the uneducated masses. This is also my contention in this project, that we trouble our understanding of modern fiction as formally preoccupied solely with the inner world of characters. In my reading of a modernist text, a fur coat, for example, is of supreme importance to its form.

The modernist era (roughly 1895-1945) saw a crisis in language's ability to represent the immense novelty of the fin-de-siècle and the onset of the twentieth century. The end of the Victorian era and the commencement of the First World War were only two of the seismic fractures in the way nineteenth-century systems and power structures were understood. Conventional gender roles and women's traditional understanding of their place in society were irreparably shaken during this period, not least of all due to unprecedented masses of women entering the workforce. I argue that interwar modernist fiction written by women engages with

modernism's crisis of representation,[4] particularly regarding women's desires, and demonstrates that metonymy, more so than any other rhetorical device, allows those authors to generate new ways of understanding and articulating what their female characters want.

I attend to a selection of fiction of four female modernists: German novelist Irmgard Keun (1905-1982), and English-language modernists Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), and May Sinclair (1863-1946). In particular, I focus on these authors' female characters' desirous selves and the way those are dealt with in the language of a selection of short stories and novels. By "desirous" I do not mean merely "lustful." In fact, although lust is one important kind of desire, this project intentionally resists the way female desire is frequently diluted in criticism, considered only in terms of its proximity to sexual desire. A major premise of this dissertation is that moments of female desire in fiction ought to be allowed to be capacious. Female desire ought to be read as potentially encompassing multitudes, especially those aspirations that are taboo, otherwise unspeakable, and generally surprising – such as to remain unmarried, to be a philosopher, to be childless, to make one's own money.

Often, moments of female desire in literature are read as merely libidinous; the moments of desire that receive critical attention are very often those that are indeed sexual. This dissertation posits that moments of wanting, when closely read on their own terms, reveal a female desire much more dynamic and far-reaching. This project excavates textual instances in which metonymy is used to articulate female desires for which there is no adequate language. The interwar fiction that this project uses as its primary pieces of evidence is rife with female characters who grasp for language to convey desires that lie outside of the scant pursuits allotted

[4] For a thorough discussion of this feature of modernism, see Pericles Lewis's *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (2007). For Lewis, a "crisis of representation" is a generative way of viewing the era and its aesthetic movements.

to women, such as children, a home, and a husband. These instances of expressive difficulty are indicators that female desire has had insufficient language with which to discuss it. I see modernist fiction, in particular, showcasing women's struggle to break this silence.

One of the western world's early and most ubiquitous mythologies around female desire can be seen in The Bible, in which Eve's desire to eat from the tree of knowledge, and her acting upon that wish, prompt Adam and Eve's fall from paradise. Given the tremendous influence of The Bible, it is unsurprising that women's desire has been understood as needing to be controlled and as instigating catastrophe. Subsequently, the language that has existed in the Christian world to discuss women's desire – beyond its being a societal hazard – has been lacking. To attempt such an articulation is to navigate uncharted territory. The texts to which I attend here attempt such mapping.

Fiction that uses metonymy, a surrogate language of signifying objects, to communicate female desire is not confined to Britain and Germany. To be sure, my project's argument is a starting point for the study of this phenomenon transnationally. For example, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), considered one of the earliest modernist novels in the United States, shows the ways in which a woman's acknowledgement and fulfillment of her desires can be deadly. Chopin's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, is apathetic about her marriage and her children. The ocean, for Edna, is a cherished metonym for her vast desires for opportunities and ways of living outside of her marriage and motherhood. Her awakening to self-knowledge and erotic imagining occurs when she learns to swim on her own for the first time in the Gulf of Mexico. At the end of the novel, Edna returns to this same ocean, the object that stands for her larger dreams of emancipation, and (likely) drowns herself rather than face a life of traditional domesticity.

Chopin's novel, therefore, is a demonstration of what becomes of women who articulate and act on their desires. Edna's passion for Robert, a friend of the family, is more complicated than it first appears, in that he is a recognizable target of attraction (because he represents a tender heterosexual love, which is not taboo), yet he is the catalyst for Edna's aesthetic, erotic, and existential epiphany (which is definitely taboo and independent of attachment to him). Edna's affair with Robert is Chopin's attempt to render palatable and understandable Edna's rejection of her old self (the married mother), but Edna's rebellion concerns a breach of convention much more frighteningly novel than that of falling in love with another man.

Crucially, Edna only begins to recognize Robert as an object of her desire *after* she swims on her own in the sea. And like the heroines whom I address in this dissertation, Edna finds that her ultimate desire has little to do with men – Robert merely facilitates her quest for the version of herself that exists outside the home. When Robert leaves on a trip because he knows that they can never be together, Edna, in grief, returns to the sea. As she swims out deeper and deeper, her final thoughts about Robert are that "he doesn't understand." She realizes, in the end, that her desires are not compatible with the patriarchal world in which she lives and that death is perhaps a more bearable option than her married life. To name and awaken her desires – and thus, her multiplicity of selves – was a fatal decision within Edna's historical moment.

After the First World War, during which women entered the workforce, joined ambulance units, and generally got a taste of life and purpose outside the home, the horizons of what was possible for women changed irreparably. The interwar years also saw fissures in the forms of art that attempted to represent life: female authors manipulated language to push it toward new articulations of women's developing views of the world and their place within it. However, it wasn't just individual working women who were made new. Rather, it was society's

conception of gender roles that began to crack. Women had eaten from the tree of knowledge and could not help but want more from life. I account here for the way women's capacious desires are expressed with metonyms in modernist fiction; this in turn suggests an argument for modernist formal innovation having been potentially influenced by women's attempts to articulate new possibilities for what it means to be a woman in the early twentieth century.

i.1 The New Woman: "Lady of Desire"

Of course, women's demands for more from life did not begin after 1914. Before World War One and during the twilight of the Victorian era, a new generation of women had begun to take shape. These "New Women," writes Patricia Marks, "who wanted all the advantages of their brothers, asked for education, suffrage, and careers; they cut their hair, adopted 'rational' dress, and freewheeled along a path that led to the twentieth century" (2).[5] The New Woman's novel appearance was her primary calling card—she was visibly conspicuous and could be seen "perched on bicycles and smoking cigarettes" (2). The New Woman's performance of femininity on the public stage was one of genderbending that had not been seen before. She could be glimpsed riding her bicycle in trousers from her job to her own apartment flat, perhaps even meeting a friend for a drink along the way – she was in no rush to get home. No longer an idealized domestic lady of the Victorian Age – a rather tidy category – the New Woman ruptured gender roles in multifaceted ways: her iterations of femininity were as unpredictable and sprawling as the city streets on which she was a new, conspicuous fixture.

To be sure, there were also other, more pointed nomenclatures for the New Woman thrown around at the turn of the century. Novelist and essayist Lynn E. Linton is an example of

[5] Although we commonly associate the 1920s and 1930s as the time during which women's fashions drastically changed to be more androgynous, utilitarian, and skimpier, women's fashion between 1900 and the 1910s already started shifting in this "rational" direction. Cycling bloomers, for example, were worn for biking and other physical activities.

an anti-feminist writer who spoke about the New Women pejoratively. In her 1891 essay "Wild Women as Social Insurgents," Linton attacks the New Woman, particularly for her unfettered desire:

> We must acknowledge now as our Lady of Desire the masterful *domina* of real life—that loud and dictatorial person, insurgent, and something more, who suffers no one's opinion to influence her mind, no venerable law hallowed by time, nor custom consecrated by experience, to control her actions. Mistress of herself, the Wild Woman as social insurgent preaches the "lesson of liberty" broadened into lawlessness and license. (596)

Here, the New Woman is framed as a "Lady of Desire," as a "Wild Woman" who lives by her own will and who is her own mistress. Linton is clearly anxious about the sheer power of will of which these wild women are capable and sees them as social insurgents – figures capable of upending laws by doing as they please. Linton's polemic showcases the extreme anxiety that the conspicuous New Woman provoked in other women.

It is important to note that changes in the social winds and to Victorian conceptions of gender roles were already well underway in the mid-nineteenth century in England. Women began having access to higher education and there were changes in marriage laws as well. "The Married Women's Property Acts," writes Carolyn Christensen Nelson, "passed in 1870 and 1882, somewhat improved women's position in that women now had the right to own property after marriage" (x). Still, almost all professions were barred to women before 1919 and "without the opportunity to earn their own living, marriage was an economic necessity for most women" (x), especially since they were paid half of what men made. In 1918 English women over age thirty were given the right to vote and, in 1928, it was granted to women over age twenty-one. However, in the earlier suffrage movements leading up to these major victories, women,

including Virginia Woolf's own mother, signed "An Appeal Against Female Suffrage" in 1889 (Nelson xii). The New Women's aspirations were in no way shared by all women.

Actually, the New Women's aims were not homogenous among all New Women, either. A stereotypical view of the New Woman is that she was sexually progressive; however, what the correct sexual practices of women ought to be was one central issue on which there was a spectrum of belief. An interesting example of this variety can be found in the woman who originated the new designation: the neologism "New Woman" was coined by the English writer Sarah Grand in her essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" (1894). Grand saw men as generally morally inferior to women due to their pervasive sexual impurity and promiscuity. For Grand, chastity was a quality of utmost importance for both men and women of morality:

> Both the cow-women and the scum-women are well within the range of comprehension of the Bawling Brotherhood, but the *new woman* is a little above them, and he never even thought of looking up to where she has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy. (142, italics mine)

For Grand, the two types of women of the older generation are the cowed women and the licentious women, both of whom the "Bawling Brotherhood" – the immoral and spoiled men whom Grand sees as most men – have been able to control and manipulate. The New Women, however, have come to understand, through deep contemplation, that the central problem with society is that women are confined to the home and are not permitted to contribute to the public sphere. Grand saw the central issue as women needing to be afforded education and a life beyond

the home in order to be good wives and mothers. Grand's feminism, therefore, was still deeply engrained with the values of heterosexual domestic traditions.

According to Nelson, within two months of Grand's essay's publication, "New Woman" was being printed ubiquitously in "one journal after another" with capital letters (ix). It had become part of the English vernacular. And although there was the stereotypical New Woman – the bike-riding, cigarette-smoking figure described above – the New Woman was any woman who questioned the binary of women's and men's spheres, of the domestic and the public. The New Woman demanded that women and men be given equal opportunity and choice. In general, the New Woman sought to trouble the prevailing belief that gender roles were natural and innate and instead saw them as socialized and ideologically constructed. Like any category of people, however, New Women were not a monolithic group with unified ideas and beliefs; "what they did share was a rejection of the culturally defined feminine role and a desire for increased educational and career opportunities" in order to "be economically self-sufficient" (Nelson x). And what matters most for this project is the historical context of this new generation of women who had the ability to organize for more out of life than a home and family.

Importantly, some of these feminists penned novels. In the late 1890s, when single-volume novels began to be published and the public began to buy these cheap texts rather than only borrowing from libraries, publishers became more willing to take risks with the types of provocative books they would distribute. Women began writing popular novels that honestly discussed marriage and sexual desire in increasing numbers. Nelson points out that between 1891 and 1920 in England, there were an estimated 3,407 "feminist" novels written by 1,723 authors (xiii). The literary and cultural legacy that these New Women created, the ability to imagine more for the erstwhile gentler sex, continued into the next generations. Although a generation or

so after the "New Woman years" of the fin-de-siècle, the interwar fiction that this project attends to is the legacy of the original New Woman fiction, in that its female characters attempt to imagine and articulate, even if they do not achieve, more for their lives.

i.2 The German Context: Laboratory of Sexuality

The *Neue Frau* of Germany's Weimar Republic (1919-1933) was yet another iteration of the New Woman figure who existed in a more chaotic context than her British sisters. Germany's loss of the Great War and the subsequent fall of the Wilhelmine monarchy made space for its first experiment with democracy. The Weimar era ushered in entirely new and experimental possibilities for how to be a woman. Even so, this project's pairing of one German novelist with three British writers may seem strange: the German avant-garde and British modernism are not a common coupling in discussions of literature from the interwar period.

Furthermore, Irmgard Keun, considered a popular novelist, is not a well-known writer in modernist studies circles (or even among German Studies scholars), unlike her British counterparts in this project. Nevertheless, I read Keun's two "New Woman novels," as I call them – *Gilgi: One of Us* (1931) and *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1932) – as pointing us toward important and underexplored considerations for reading modernist fiction. To begin with, Keun's novels pay striking attention to the surface of things: her narrative form focuses on her character's bodies, on their clothing, on their material possessions, and on the appearances and belongings of others. As I show in Chapter One, objects, and particularly fashion items, in Keun's novels are the dominant metonyms used to signal desire that female characters cannot articulate. Keun's New Woman novels also treat Berlin of the interwar years as a place of potential promise for these female protagonists: a place of self-actualization.

There is good reason why these modern characters would see Berlin as a mecca wherein their desires might be fulfilled. Robert Beachy's 2014 *Gay Berlin: The Birthplace of a Modern Identity* provides important historical context for my reading of Keun's novels, as it maps the history of homosexuality as a German – as particularly a Berlin – concept. Beachy not only points to Berlin as the site of origin of the concept of homosexuality, but also argues that the city was the veritable laboratory in which the invention of our modern understanding of sexualities as inborn identities, rather than mere deviant behaviors, took place. So, although Beachy's book focuses on gay sexuality in particular, his study provides support for my claim that Berlin was a place for the heightened visibility of non-normative desires of all sorts (non-male, non-straight, non-gender conforming, and so on).

Particularly telling and interesting, for my purposes, is that Beachy begins his book about the German capital by discussing W.H. Auden, a gay English poet, who moved to Berlin in 1928. Berlin wasn't just a mecca for gay Germans but was a place to which misfits from around the globe would make pilgrimages. Beachy references one of Auden's letters in which he describes Berlin as "the buggers daydream," suggesting its almost mythical, utopic quality for gay individuals (qtd. in Beachy, x). Berlin allowed gay English people like Auden to explore and begin to develop something of a sexual identity in a way in which London did not allow. In Berlin, queer tourists were brought face-to-face with the fact of gayness as a real subculture rather than a private existence.

In a journal entry from 1929, Auden recalls his experience on a train in which a woman flirted with him. He muses in his journal that he wanted to say "Entschuldigen Sie Madam, aber ich bin schwul" (qtd. in Beachy, xi), which translates to: "Excuse me, Madam, but I am gay." Beachy points out that Auden's use of "schwul" for "gay" is remarkable: its etymology shows

that it is the Berlin-specific vernacular for "gay" but also originally had criminal and immoral connotations. "Schwul" was reclaimed by the Weimar-era gay community (which was, of course, comprised of both men and women) and the word became the one that they used to self-identify. Strikingly, "schwul" came to have neutral or even positive implications by the 1920s among the young gay community in Berlin.

It is crucial to note that in the 1920s there was no English counterpart to "schwul," as all English words that meant "gay" had only negative connotations, such as: "queer, bugger, pederast, sodomite, molly, queen, fairy, and pansy" (Beachy xii). In England, then, there was no language for what Auden had language for in the Berliner dialect. Beachy emphasizes that "Auden's Berlin awakening is striking, and in the late 1920s he could describe his sexuality more articulately even in halting German than he ever could in English" (ibid.). English lacked an adequate vocabulary for gay sexuality in the interwar years, whereas Germany had cultivated an underground vernacular. Berlin was a place in which ideas that were unspeakable in English might be spoken.

In fact, Beachy's bold thesis that "the emergence of an identity based on the notion of a fixed sexual orientation was initially a German and especially a Berlin phenomenon" (xii) supports my own assertion that German modernism provided English modernists with ways of articulating otherwise unspeakable desire. For Beachy, homosexuality as an inborn identity, rather than as a way one chooses to act or be, was first "invented" by the Germans in 1869 as "*Homosexualität.*" This is where the English "homosexuality" comes from. Beachy's project is to historicize the invention of homosexuality, which he places squarely in Germany, beginning in the nineteenth century (xv). Indeed, the world's first homosexual magazine and rights movement were begun in Berlin in 1896 and 1897, respectively. Beachy notes that up until that point,

medical "science" had defined homosexuality as willingly perverse behavior to which morally weak individuals could succumb (5). Rather than gay sex or attraction being considered mere deviant, chosen behavior, "homosexuality" became an outright sexual orientation that existed innately within a person.

In addition to homosexuality as a concept and a subculture having origins in Germany, it was also particularly conspicuous there. George Mosse's 1985 *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* asserts a crucial distinction between the experience of queerness in cities across Europe, versus that of Berlin in particular: "It was the *visibility* rather than the mere existence of a homosexual and lesbian subculture that was important, for London and Paris also contained such a culture, but in Berlin it was more readily inspected, photographed, and written about" (qtd. in Beachy, 42, italics mine). Mosse's assertion that Berlin made queerness *more visible* than other major European cities substantiates my own argument about the way English modernism related to German modernism: nonnormative desire was made more visible in the Weimar Republic, a fact that was reflected in their aesthetic movements like literature and film.

Beachy's and Mosse's accounts of Berlin of the interwar years confirm that it was indeed a gay hub, or, as Auden has it, a "bugger's daydream," but most importantly for my purposes, it was *visibly* this way. It was the sheer visibility of the queer scene in Berlin that made it unique among European cities. Even Virginia Woolf emphasized Berlin's "ugly" appearance repeatedly in her letters after she took a trip there in the 20s. For Woolf, Berlin had a great deal of what Mary Douglas calls "dirt out of place,"[6] meaning, that which was usually kept out of sight in, say, London, was more visible in Berlin. This is what, I argue, was both disturbing and intriguing

[6] See Douglas's foundational text *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.

to Woolf about her experience of Berlin: the *visibility* of "dirt" like queerness – something that she was not used to back in London. Queerness on its own wouldn't have bothered Woolf, but its existence as a publicly conspicuous, named thing might have.

There were elements unique to Germany that allowed for this visibility of nonnormative desire, such as a tradition of permissive policing policies. Even as early as the 1880s, Berlin police – which had an official "Department of Homosexuals," a subdivision of the criminal police (Beachy 66) – had adopted a fairly tolerant stance toward the gay scene, where gays were allowed to live in relative peace in their particular locales. As long as the "gay behavior" was kept behind the doors of gay establishments and out of sight, the police would mostly leave well enough alone, since they could not argue that a public disturbance was being made. There are even rumored to have been high-ranking law enforcement officials in Berlin who were gay, who could have helped shape tolerant enforcement policies on behalf of their community (Beachy 47).

This legal permissiveness, in conjunction with Berlin having the world's first electric streetcars and streetlights in the 1880s, set the city up to be ultramodern in every sense of the word, since people and ideas could quickly move about the city. Berlin subsequently was given the nickname "the city of light" (Beachy 50), a place of acute visibility – when there is plentiful light in the streets, the "dirt" becomes more noticeable. Nevertheless, by 1900 Berlin was one of the most hygienic cities in Europe and by 1902 had an extensive underground subway system (two years before New York City did) (Beachy 52-3). To put Berlin's modernity into perspective, a contemporary urban historian, Peter Hall, contests that Berlin in the late nineteenth century was "the Silicon Valley of its day" (qtd. in Beachy 50), a reminder that it was a veritable

laboratory of modernity, a place in which cutting-edge technology and ideas were rapidly invented and produced. And, as Beachy has it, it was also a laboratory of sexuality (56).

This account of homosexuality's German origins complicates canonical criticism on the history of sexuality. Beachy points to what he argues is Michel Foucault's oversight, in his *History of Sexuality* (1976), in not identifying homosexuality's German roots. Before leaving Foucault behind for the remainder of his book, Beachy explains:

> Although [Foucault] emphasized the word "homosexuality" and the work of the Berlin psychiatrist Carl Westphal, he never identified the urban context sources that gave rise to the neologism and its science as specifically German. Foucault's apparent oversight is even more glaring when we consider that homosexuality was only one in a series of German terms invented to describe erotic same-sex love as a fixed condition and social identity. Those who created this German-language terminology were advocates for legal reform, doctors who studied same-sex erotic behavior, and their subjects; all participated integrally in elaborating a science of homosexuality. The image Foucault has offered of a laboratory test tube in which medical professionals concocted new sexual identities is completely one-sided and misleading. (xv)

For Beachy, it is crucial that we understand the invention of homosexuality in its urban, German context, and he therefore finds Foucault's widely cited theory lacking in historical specificity.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Foucault provides us with an important history of the ways in which sexuality in general was regulated in order to enforce marriage and reproduction, both of which contribute to the health and power of the state. In particular, Foucault points out that "seeking strange pleasures" (893) of any sort was condemned. Part of the role that Berlin played during the interwar years in Europe was as a place to which one could pilgrimage to seek

out such strange pleasures. Berlin rendered visible and accessible strange pleasure-seeking. What's most useful about Foucault's language is that it points to how broadly so-called "strange pleasures" might be interpreted by the state. The point is in the bagginess of the category: such a lack of specificity allows for the policing of any sort of pleasure that the state considers strange at any given time. Part of what my study hinges on is the assumption that any pleasure-seeking on the part of women has always been considered strange – unless explicitly beneficial to the state's agenda (such as desiring a husband or children) – and is thus subject to censure by the state, or by the panopticon-like policing of the collective social eye. Lesbianism, for example, has no discernible benefit to the state, but also has the added threat, the added strangeness, of women seeking pleasure for pleasure's sake.

It is important to note that it wasn't at the dawn of the Weimar Republic that this vibrant, gay milieu appeared out of thin air. As Beachy notes, "not until the Weimar Republic were Berlin activists and publishers able to establish a vibrant homosexual press" but it is also the case that "the climate in Wilhelmine Germany was strikingly liberal, particularly in contrast to the rest of Europe" (91). Although it is true that the Weimar Republic was particularly hospitable to harboring a gay scene, it was also built on half a century of what was a specifically German leniency toward, and academic and legal curiosity about, the fact of homosexuality as a biological condition (albeit a defect—which is also important to remember) that must be acknowledged. Beachy states that "Britain offers the most striking counterpoint," since although it had, as did Germany, an anti-sodomy statute, it had absolutely no legal or publishing leniency. Advocating for homosexual emancipation or publishing on the subject, even for scientific purposes, was prohibited in Britain (91).

So, while the latter half of the nineteenth century in Germany saw a growing academic understanding of homosexuality and subsequent police tolerance of the gay community, Britain had none of that. Even by the Oscar Wilde trial of 1895, British thought showed a distinct lack of parity with Germany's understandings of homosexuality. This contrast matters when attempting to comprehend the way in which Germany was particularly poised, by 1919, to accommodate the famous gay scene of Berlin—the phenomenon did not appear out of the blue, but had been building steam for decades in academic, medical, legal, social, and law enforcement communities. Homosexuality was already, well before 1919, part of the fabric of German urban society in a way that it simply was not anywhere else in Europe and in Britain in particular. Indeed, Beachy quotes a doctor from Edinburgh in 1906 having said: "It is a great pity that medical men in this country, with almost unanimous consent, have agreed to ignore the study of sexual science in its bearing on practice" (93). In contrast with Germany, Britain of the early twentieth century had little academic or scientific discourse about minority sexualities.

Of course, nineteenth-century France had a notoriously tolerant stance toward homosexuality, which was fully decriminalized, and had little censorship in general – a residual effect of the Revolution (Beachy 93). But a vital part of Beachy's argument is that it was precisely Germany's soft criminalizing of homosexuality that allowed for greater knowledge of it, since such criminalization catalyzed activism that sought to study, understand, and publicly advocate for it. In France, gay behavior, as such, was tolerated, leaving little impetus for investigating same-sex attraction as a biological fact, leaving French academics and medical professionals in the dark compared to their German counterparts. Unlike in France where homosexual acts were legal, their illegality in Germany caused decades of intellectual debate on

what homosexuality was, leading to its invention as a concept, as a biological fact, as a sexual orientation, rather than mere deviant behavior.

Interestingly, though perhaps by now unsurprisingly, German literary journals of the late 1890s played an often-central role in identifying many non-German authors' works as "queer" before they had been (or even would be) recognized as such by the general reading public of their homelands. German literary critics even "outed" authors such as Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, and André Gide, much to the horror of their conventional readership (Beachy 111), perhaps beginning what would become a tradition of queer literary theory that continues today. Such loose censorship conditions allowed for an extremely robust discursive environment in which intellectuals could debate and grapple with the terms and concepts of all aspects of sexuality and homosexuality in particular.

Several internationally followed and sensational trials involving a German prince accused of homosexual activities (in conjunction with the robust intellectual and scientific discourse) led to a kind of mythos surrounding Germany's relationship to homosexuality. In France, Italy, and Britain alike, the vernacular for homosexuality took on, in the early 1900s, a markedly German denotation. For example, the Italians referred to the homosexual as a "*Berlinese"* while the English called homosexuality the "German custom" (Beachy 139). By the beginning of the twentieth century, then, not only was Germany's capital city's name a euphemism for gayness in other parts of Europe, but the implication was also that Berlin was a place that could potentially contaminate others with its deviant "customs." It is important to linger on this interesting disavowal in which places like Britain and Italy were engaging: because gayness was part of the public discourse (and public scandals) of Germany and was, therefore, quite visible, the rest of Europe could engage in the performative act of equating homosexuality with another, foreign

place. If a homosexual were a Berliner, then they were no longer an Italian, for example. Berlin, in this noteworthy instance, was metonymy for homosexuality and thus, by extension, all forms of unconventional desire. By the early 1900s, in any case, there was something decidedly queer about Germany that the rest of the world was beginning to notice and name.

After the end of the Great War this reputation of Germany's only increased, and for good reason. The Weimar Republic saw the establishment of the world's first facility for the explicit and sole purpose of studying sexuality: founded by physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld,[7] the Institute for Sexual Science sat at the edge of Berlin's Tiergarten Park – a place that was notorious for prostitution and gay cruising (Beachy 160). The institute offered:

> medical and psychological counseling on a range of sexual issues to thousands of individuals, including heterosexual men and women, homosexuals, cross-dressers, and intersex individuals. The institute also represented the first attempt to establish "sexology," or sexual science, as a topic of legitimate academic study and research. Nowhere else in the world was there so much as a university department or chair devoted to the subject, much less an entire institute. (Beachy 160-61)

That this institute was dedicated to "sexology" says a great deal about the way in which Weimar-era Berlin truly was a laboratory for sexuality and modern identity more broadly. Indeed, one of the institute's major functions was providing public access to information about sex, and it even had a museum of sexuality that was open to the public. On display were largely informational charts and images about sex and sexuality, but there were also titillating objects such as sex toys and pornographic sculptures.

---

[7] Hirschfeld (1868-1935) himself was gay and dedicated a great deal of his time to studying sexuality and particularly sexual minorities. Hirschfeld was also an advocate for gay rights and was Jewish. His position as a double-minority was therefore extra precarious leading up to the fall of the Republic once the Nazis took over in 1933.

This museum was an attraction for tourists, academics, and scientists from around the world. Some notable examples include Bertrand Russell's wife, Dora Russell, an English feminist, and the American founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger (Beachy 162). A physician from New York noted, after visiting the institute, that he wished to establish one like it in the United States but thought it would fail "on account of our prudish, hypocritical attitude to all questions of sex" (qtd in Beachy 163). The institute and its museum were total singularities and so was, it seems, Germany's attitude toward sex. This centering of desire, especially nonnormative desire, and making it *visible* was a defining characteristic of the Weimar Republic – one that set it apart from everywhere else.

Between 1919 and 1933 there were no fewer than twenty-five separate homosexual German-language journals in Berlin alone (Beachy 189), and, by contrast, "there were practically no such journals published anywhere else in the world until after 1945" (Beachy 190). The scattered few that existed in countries like the U.S. and France, Beachy traces back to their influences by Berlin contacts (190). In addition to queer publications and literature, such nonnormative desire was made even more visible with the advent of the feature-length film in the 1920s. *Different from the Others* (1919) told—and *showed*—the story of homosexual love and the way laws and social stigma contributed to the misery and rampant suicide among gay men. Beachy points out that it was likely due to such early films that the Weimar constitution created certain qualifications for obscenity. *Different from the Others* was subsequently banned from public screenings a year after it was released and the argument made against it was that it was liable to corrupt the youth and recruit them to the "homosexual party" (Beachy 166). The film was therefore relegated to private screenings, such as at the Institute for Sexual Science.

Different from the Others belonged to the German film genre that came to be known as "enlightenment film," which was popular throughout the Weimar period and covered taboo topics such as venereal disease, abortion, prostitution, and substance abuse (Beachy 167). The genre functioned to shed light on topics that were normally kept out of public discourse, and the first of such films was tellingly called *Let there be light!* (1917), emphasizing the highly visible nature of non-normativity in Weimar Germany. Indeed, 140 such films were released by 1933. Undeniably, films that covered such topics were entirely unique to Germany throughout the 1920s and remained relatively rare elsewhere into the 1930s (Beachy 167). This Weimar-era way of articulating nonnormative desire and making it visible was the gold-standard in the world at the time. For this reason, literature of the Weimar Republic needs to be included in discussions of the nature of desire and its modes of articulation in modernist literature.

i.3 New Modernisms

Because of this project's focus on non-giants of literary modernism (excepting Woolf), and its consideration of the German popular fiction within modernism's context, it sits within the camp of "new modernist studies." In their edited collection of essays, *Bad Modernisms* (2006), Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz explain the parameters of the new modernist studies, which includes "at least two significant enterprises: one that reconsiders the definitions, locations, and producers of 'modernism' and another that applies new approaches and methodologies to 'modernist' works" (1). New modernist studies primarily considers works by authors other than Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Woolf and extends the primarily British focus to a more global one, redefining modernism to embrace "all writing published in the first half of the twentieth century – thereby transforming the term from an evaluative and stylistic designation to a neutral and temporal one" (1-2). Such new work on modernism maintains a commitment to

crossing theoretical, field, media, and national borders, to name only a few. In sum, new modernisms makes a habit of questioning any boundaries drawn around the field of modernist studies.

But modernism, since its very origins – Mao and Walkowitz remind us – has always been premised on a proclivity toward the "bad," has always leaned into shock value. Modernist art of any medium has always been nearly monomaniacal about breaking the rules and questioning, if not outright rejecting, what society has deemed aesthetic and social goods. "To this day," write Mao and Walkowitz, "no other name for a field of cultural production evokes quite the constellation of negativity, risk of aesthetic failure, and bad behavior that 'modernism' does" (4). "Modernism" evokes, and has always evoked, associations with confusing, esoteric, shocking, and even raunchy material.

However, Anglo-American modernism has also been considered in terms of its opposition to the European avant-garde, in that the latter is seen as more edgy and non-conformist (Dadaism, as one example), while the former merely maintains a "cozy relationship to the status-quo" (6). But modernism itself was lauded as the countercultural bad boy at mid-century. By the century's end, however, as modernism became accepted and admired for that very rebelliousness among the well-educated, it was charged with elitism, with collaboration in ruling-class interests and with looking down on popular culture. Nevertheless, modernism's dissident allure is having a renaissance:

> New directions in the study of modernism . . . have included efforts to recover oppositional stances occluded by institutional enshrinement and to scrutinize more closely how, in Marianne Thormählen's words, the "periodizing, characterizing, and

> valorizing" functions of the term "modernism" have shaped discussions of early-twentieth-century art. (Mao and Walkowitz 7)

New modernisms seek to excavate and reignite modernism's original badness but at the same time to question how much of modernism's rebelliousness was earnest and how much was a marketing strategy (Mao and Walkowitz 7).

To be sure, my own new modernist project relies on the assumption that discussions of female desire in the interwar years was a thorny business, one that had to be encoded in order to be marketable and even publishable in highbrow markets. At the same time, even as these discussions had to remain under wraps to avoid censure and even censorship, this project also recognizes that such encoding of female desire was also a generative act of meaning-making: with insufficient language to discuss capacious dimensions of female desire, authors were left to toy with the limits of what literary language could do, when existing symbolism isn't enough.

When there is not a known metaphor or symbol available to describe a feeling, one must resort to other forms of representation that need not rely on existing associations – like metonymy, in which a commonplace object proves shorthand for a more involved set of meanings. While writing bluntly about sexuality is one of the markers of some male modernists – think James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence – female modernists, if they wished to be taken seriously as artists, did not have that luxury. Female modernists who had aspirations to be considered real artists had to be quieter and more evasive about any discussions of sexuality lest they be condemned to the ranks of popular culture. The interwar period saw an explosion of popular erotic fiction, some of which was written by women, which conferred on them a lowbrow reputation that, once had, would be hard to shake.

Striking such a balance between being honest and remaining couth was one of Virginia Woolf's talents. In her essay "Virginia Woolf's Evasion: Critical Cosmopolitanism and British Modernism," Walkowitz discusses Woolf's reputation for being avoidant of controversy in her fiction. "Indeed," writes Walkowitz, "the tension between decent feelings and dissenting thought is crucial to Virginia Woolf's writing and to the project of many early-twentieth-century artists who sought to imagine models of social critique that would resist social codification" (120-1). For Woolf, her dissenting thought had to be conveyed decently and discreetly in order to not be dismissed. Walkowitz points out that past critics have accused Woolf's fiction of being "quietist and insufficiently patriotic because it speaks of fascism and war but fails to address those topics directly or appropriately" (121-2). But what Walkowitz argues is that Woolf's narrative strategies are avoidant of explicitness in order to create more space for critical and independent thinking about a given issue (123). In other words, Woolf's "evasiveness" allows her and her readers to look at an issue from a surprising or unseen angle.

For example, rather than describe a graphic war scene from a newspaper article that a character in her fiction reads, Woolf would be more inclined to provide the thoughts and feelings of a character upon reading such an article, or even a description of a plane rumbling deafeningly and distractingly overhead. To some of her contemporary critics such a narrative decision is avoidant of the unpleasantness of real life, but what Walkowitz's essay emphasizes is that Woolf's seemingly evasive ethos was actually in service of viewing issues and events from unconsidered perspectives, which she saw as the job of the artist. As Walkowitz astutely asks, "Is it more appropriate for artists to rectify the confusion of tones by representing only the direct, violent experience of war in the trenches? Or should artists represent a more expansive, more entangled conception of war, one that includes the spaces of newspaper, gentleman's club,

trench, and racetrack?" (124). Woolf was, of course, in constant pursuit of presenting a more entangled – and for her, accurate – view of complex issues and events. *What*, Woolf asks, *is worth our attention*?

In fact, Woolf's "evasive" writing style can be assigned to all of the writers I investigate in this project. Their avoidance of explicit descriptions and their reliance on metonymy is not a cop-out, but rather a generative act, creating new possibilities for description that go beyond overwrought understandings of female desire. Their indirect, even veiled representations of women's liberation were aesthetically and politically radical. Helpfully, Jill Richard's recent book, *The Fury Archives: Female Citizenship, Human Rights, and International Avant-Gardes* (2020), makes an explicit link between the first-wave feminism movement of the early twentieth century and the international avant-garde movements that developed contemporaneously: "First-wave feminism and institutional human rights came of age at the same time as the Dadaist word salad and the surrealist landscape. How might we understand these currents alongside one another, as part of the same historical moment?" (3) For Richards, it is not mere coincidence that international countercultural aesthetic movements such as Dadaism coincided with the first real feminist movement. Indeed, Richards emphasizes that the two movements were entangled such that they reciprocally constructed each other: "Each offered the other a conceptual vocabulary to imagine forms of life excluded from the rights of man and citizen" (3). Importantly, Richards's claim emphasizes the international nature of these avant-garde movements that helped construct feminist ways of knowing. As Richards states, women's wanting more has political implications worth taking seriously: "what that wanting looked like, then, there, at what must have seemed like a beginning" is a question that female artists raised consistently (28). Just as Richards's book is an archive of what women's wanting looked like at the intersection of modern feminist and

avant-garde movements, this dissertation attempts to take account of what capacious female desire looks like on the page of interwar modern fiction, where available language and unspeakable desire collide.

i.4 Metonymy

This "collision" shows up, I argue, in the form of metonymy in my chosen texts. It is in metonyms that I see this push and pull between available language and the attempted articulation of new desire taking place. In each of the following chapters, I provide readings of how I see metonymy functioning in particular pieces of fiction. Each author employs it uniquely but does so toward similar ends. If we look to the Latin roots of the word "metonymy," literally "change of name," we can learn a great deal about its nature. Metonymy allows the writer to change names, to substitute one word for another "on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relation" (*The New Princeton…* 783). In this project, the metonymy I see occurring in my chosen fiction is one of a conceptual nature. The metonyms are not established by any sort of material or causal relation at all, but are rather based on an attempt to conceptualize something that has no language available to designate it directly.

Most helpful for my purposes here is Barbara Johnson's analysis of Roman Jakobson's well-known distinction between metaphor and metonymy in his "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956). Johnson's essay "Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God"* (1987) turns to Jakobson's distinction to make an argument about how such rhetorical devices wield power:

> In metaphor, the substitution is based on resemblance or analogy; in metonymy, it is based on a relation or association other than similarity (cause and effect, container and contained, proper name and qualities or works associated with it, place and event or

> institution, instrument or user, etc.) . . . . far from being a neutral opposition between equals, these two tropes have always stood in hierarchical relation to each other. From Aristotle to George Lakoff, metaphor has always, in the Western tradition, had the privilege of revealing unexpected truth. (258-61)

Johnson makes the case that metaphor has been esteemed for showing us hidden truths by way of comparison, whereas metonymy has been seen as providing insight by mere happenstance – the connection metonymy makes between two things appears to be more tenuous, since there is no obvious resemblance at play. For Johnson, metaphor and metonymy have historically been accorded unequal importance. Johnson goes on:

> What has gone unnoticed in theoretical discussions of Jakobson's article is that behind the metaphor/metonymy distinction lies the much more serious distinction between speech and aphasia, between silence and the capacity to articulate one's own voice. To privilege either metaphor or metonymy is thus to run the risk of producing an increasingly *critical* discourse. (264)

For Johnson, metaphor has been the privileged trope and the trope of privilege. It has been thought to expose the essence that joins two entities that at first do not seem similar. Metaphor establishes relations and resemblances; it can be used by those with power to unify and simplify a term's connotations. Even as metaphor can be used to show resemblances, Johnson also sees it as having been used to deny difference, even when that difference actually exists and has been the cause of oppression of certain groups, for instance. For example, metaphor's ability to draw connections between two groups of people of different races can also be used in the same way to deny that there are different experiences being had by each. Metonymy, on the other hand, allows for difference. It does not insist on similarity but depends on a proximity that the author

wishes to express between two things. For Johnson, constant wobble between metaphor and metonymy, between totalization and particularity, is what actually allows for a truer account of things.

In line with Johnson's conception of the political stakes and dangers of privileging metaphor over metonymy, this project also insists on the power implications of paying attention to the way metonymy is used in fiction. This project does not, as Johnson's does not, seek to argue against metaphor's immense value in language. Rather, this project seeks to mind the gap that has existed in criticism on metonymy, especially in the fiction of the writers on whom I focus. An effect of this project is perhaps to imply a dethroning of metaphor. To pay mind to metonymy in this fiction is to notice the ways in which it unearths strange and unexpected meanings. Rather than metaphor's recourse to a tenor (a woman, say) and a vehicle (a rose, say), to equate her to the flower's established qualities (beauty, delicacy, value, etc.), the rose as metonym can signify women's same-sex desire (in Woolf, for instance), or any range of fresh meanings. Even a metaphor that is novel, audacious, and far from hackneyed relies on the vehicle's and the tenor's known characteristics. Metonyms, however, come into their own as characters assign meanings to them — female protagonists forge the conceptual link between chosen objects or terms and their weightier import. Whereas metaphor depends on existing cultural understandings of the vehicle, and metaphor's originality lies in the choice to yoke one entity to another, metonymy is free to depart from words' conventional resonances and to stake out newly suggestive terminology. In the chapters that follow, I show the way metonymy is used at the point where metaphorical language fails to capture what a character (and an author) means.

i.5 Chapter Summaries

Chapter One serves two purposes. The first is to analyze Irmgard Keun's New Woman novels, *Gilgi: One of Us* and *The Artificial Silk Girl,* as evidence for conspicuous female desire in the fiction of the Weimar Republic. The second is to demonstrate the way Keun's German modernist fiction, which subscribes to New Objectivity,[8] throws a wrench in our pervasive understanding of modern fiction as focusing on the inner world of characters over the external world. The Weimar Republic's own unique modernism, largely focused on surfaces, is important context for the ways we consider modernist fiction and how it treats female desire. Keun's novels, paired with Robert Beachy's earlier discussed study, show that the Weimar Republic was an anomalous global site for inventing our modern understandings of sexuality, desire, and how those can be presented, represented, and articulated. Keun's New Woman novels, as literary artifacts of this place and time, show the way female desire's modes of articulation were interwoven with the material world, especially with that of fashion. By way of both narrative form and content, Keun's fiction draws attention to the surface of things: her narratives account for what her protagonists Gilgi and Doris *see* around them as they navigate chaotic cityscapes. Keun's protagonists seriously contemplate the material goods they have and want and are very preoccupied with their appearances; they know that the way they look will determine their job opportunities and financial stability. Keun's novels render female desire explicit and conspicuous and articulate it by way of the sartorial.

Chapter Two argues that Virginia Woolf uses objects in her fictional narratives of "The New Dress" (1924), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Between the Acts* (1939) to convey female characters' desires to render their "core," private selves visible and

[8] *Neue Sachlichkeit* was an aesthetic movement particular to Germany of the 1920s that responded to the romanticism, abstractness, and idealism of Expressionism. New Objectivity emphasized a focus on the unsentimental object world and did not shy away from the grotesque realities of everyday life.

knowable. This chapter also close reads key passages from Woolf's letters that she wrote leading up to and after a trip to Berlin in 1929. These letters demonstrate Woolf's confused fascination with Berlin: I argue that the city is metonymy for Woolf's queer desire for Vita Sackville-West and for nonnormative, improper experiences in general. The letters show Woolf's ambivalent relationship with Germany and its abject allure for her. Woolf's letters reveal her shock about and attraction toward the visibility of Berlin's "ugliness" – Woolf's own word. Furthermore, her post-Berlin letters show that the city occupied her mind for a great deal of time afterward and perhaps even informed her later writing.

Chapter Three posits that Katherine Mansfield's female characters in her short stories "Miss Brill" (1920), "Bliss" (1918), "Prelude" (1917), and "At the Bay" (1921) long for more from life than their allotted social roles and lack the language to articulate that desire to themselves. I argue that in Mansfield's fiction such desire is lent to both sartorial and natural objects and that Mansfield relies on metonyms to make this designation, allowing maximum flexibility to create a new vocabulary of female aspiration and longing. Mansfield's personal writings, such as her journal and letters, also show her preoccupation with metonymy as a mode of articulating what she wants.

In my last chapter I focus on one of literary modernism's matriarchs, May Sinclair. In particular, I close read passages of Sinclair's favorite of her more than twenty novels, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919). In this novel, I find that the eponymous character gives up on the material realm to answer to her desires. Mary sees her desires and life as a woman in late-Victorian England to be wholly incompatible and so contrives her own metaphysical philosophy (Sinclair herself was a transcendental idealist) that declares that the material world is not the Real world. Mary employs abstract metonyms, such as "white light" and "Spirit," to stand in for her

suppressed female desire. These abstract metonyms also demonstrate the way in which language fails when attempting to discuss female desire, so much so that unearthly abstractions must be grasped at.

Sinclair is a fitting end to this dissertation because her modernist project offers a contrast to that of the other authors discussed here. Sinclair's fiction, philosophy, and poetry make use of the material world, but only in so far as it has abstractions to offer: Sinclair does not use common, concrete metonyms, unlike the other authors discussed here – she does not see the material world as adequate for presenting women's wants. In fact, Sinclair's fiction and nonfiction are rife with women who have given up on the material world's ability to articulate and make space for female aspirations and longing. At the same time, Sinclair pushes the limits of language and metonymy specifically, extricating it from its usual concrete form and pushing it into a more ephemeral existence.

Sinclair's writings do, as Lukács feared, seem to resort to attempting to escape the terrestrial world. To be sure, Sinclair's imagining of another, more Real world beyond this one, where desire does not exist because lack does not exist, does have nihilistic and fatalistic resonances. But Sinclair's literary and philosophical texts engage in the radical act of envisioning realities in which women are not shackled to their patriarchally circumscribed positions, even if that involves imagining other worlds. Such imaginings seem to be more than mere fatalism, even if they do, also, allow for simply giving up. Rather than merely bitterly resigning herself, however, Sinclair resorts to a mystical view of life, one in which another world can at least be glimpsed in literary texts.

CHAPTER 1

Irmgard Keun's Material Girls and Visible Female Desire in the Weimar Republic

In a 1927 *Die Dame*[9] article, "People of Today," Austrian novelist Vicki Baum tells the story of a modern woman, Ypsi, who obsessively reinvents her appearance to stay on-trend:

> Naturally Ypsi participates in the fashion, and since she began she has been dreaming what others have already dreamed for her. Ypsi has a great desire: she would like to be original. And a great fear: she could come off unmodern. (665)

In Baum's view, the modern woman is obsessed with refashioning herself into a simulacrum of the *Neue Frau* ("New Woman") figure that was a cultural archetype in the Weimar Republic (1919-1933). Baum diagnoses this materialistic trend-chasing as a sad, futile cycle: once one is thin, for example, curves are suddenly back in style. Being on-trend, therefore, is a destination that can never be reached.

But, what of this process of Ypsi's, this creative endeavor to reimagine and recreate what it means and how it looks for her to be a modern woman? A great desire of Ypsi's, according to Baum, is to be "original," and Baum points out the irony in this impossible task, that Ypsi mimics others in cultivating her unique look. Still, this chapter takes Ypsi's desire for an original self as a fruitful point of entry to think more about what the modern woman of the Weimar Republic wanted and how she articulated those desires. This chapter close reads the way New Woman characters, like Ypsi, attempt to articulate their desires, especially by way of fashion and other material objects.

---

[9] *Die Dame: Illustierte Fraue Zeitung*, which translates to "The Lady: Illustrated Women's Paper," was a popular illustrated women's magazine of the Weimar Republic. This lifestyle magazine catered to modern women in particular, containing stories, essays, illustrations, photographs, and advertisements. It had a distinct focus on fashion. The magazine was in publication from 1911 to 1943.

Furthermore, I contend that female desire was conspicuously visible in the Weimar Republic's metropolises, which were global meccas of sexual and artistic exploration. Striking literary evidence for this can be seen in the novels of German writer Irmgard Keun.[10] These novels showcase female protagonists who are entirely preoccupied with fashioning themselves into modern women and who monomaniacally pursue their own desires. This new visibility of female desire in cities like Berlin stemmed from the entirely unprecedented emergence of a class of working women who sought to avail themselves of the novel opportunities in the public sphere that the Weimar-era metropolises offered to women.[11] Berlin, in particular, was the epitome of the modern city, the site of radical experimentation in visual and performing arts, mass entertainment, literature, architecture, politics, and sexual liberation. It was a veritable laboratory of modernity—a space for inventing and understanding new and different ways of being.

Not only was female desire more visible in the Weimar era, I argue that it was also made uniquely *material*: that is, Weimar modernism was preoccupied with surfaces as loci of meaning, a fact that begins to complicate the pervasive understanding of modernism as marked by a singular obsession with interiority. Even a cursory look at the cultural artifacts of the Weimar era shows that fashion, especially for women, was crucial to creating, navigating, and performing the self on the public stage. Emblematic of this is Keun's 1932 novel *The Artificial Silk Girl,* whose protagonist, Doris, muses: "But now my outfit is complete, which is the most important thing for

[10] Irmgard Keun (1905-1982) was a writer in the Weimar Republic who wrote novels that focused on working women's issues and experiences in particular – a unique occurrence in fiction of the time. When the Nazis came to power in 1933 her books were banned and Keun fled to the Netherlands where she continued to publish. When the Nazis invaded Holland in 1940, Keun returned to Germany where she survived the war in hiding.

[11] For more on the novel working woman of the Weimar Republic, see Mila Ganeva's Introduction in her book *Women in Weimar Fashion* (2008), particularly page 2.

a girl who wants to get ahead and has ambition" (5). For Doris, fashion is a technology[12] she employs to stand out and turn heads; it helps her to get where she wants to go financially and career-wise. One's fashion renders the self visible and distinct in the wash of the metropolis. The precarious economic environment that issued from Germany's loss of the war, further exacerbated by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, was marked by material scarcity. Here, decadent items such as fine clothing and expensive ornaments were even more eye-catching, impressive, and alluring. Doris's desire for new possibilities for herself is directly bound up with fashion and the *meaning* it creates, the "language" it affords her.

But if fashion was more of a technology and discourse than a mere fatuous pastime for Doris and indeed, Keun, how does it then work? What does it signify? Dick Hebdige's 1979 study of the postwar British punk scene, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, offers us a clue. Hebdige argues that style in punk culture is subversive, "a form of Refusal" (2). Mundane, worn objects like safety pins or trench coats, Hebdige writes, encapsulate the tensions between the subculture and the dominant culture, precisely because such objects come to carry a double meaning: on the one hand, they have a known, ordinary connotation within the dominant culture and on the other hand, they have a meaning to which only the subculture is privy. However, this new meaning bleeds into the conventional understanding of objects and therefore ultimately augments their mainstream significance. In Hebdige's reading of punk style, key to that aesthetic is the revolting nature of it: torn or patched-together clothes or a safety pin through the lip or

[12] I am using this word very intentionally for two reasons: 1) I want to emphasize the way fashion was used by women as a practical application of knowledge and 2) that Germany of the Weimar Republic became highly industrialized and inundated with technological innovation. Fashion was the female counterpart to the technologies of men (machinery, automobiles, and the rest of the realms from which women were excluded) and was no less a practical application of knowledge that was used to accomplish desired ends.

eyebrow. The point of the aesthetic is to be repugnant to the mainstream taste—to shock and frighten.

Although I am in no way drawing a tidy analogy between British punk attire and Weimar-era women's fashion – the New Woman was not a subculture – Hebdige's theory of style helps us think about the ways working-class women in the Weimar Republic's metropolises related to fashion as a subversive communication tool, as a language. Hebdige's argument, that objects can encapsulate double meanings – speaking differently to those inside and outside a subculture, assists us in seeing the way the New Women, too, used style and fashion as signifiers both to themselves and to the traditional German culture. Among themselves, they were defying normative femininity; to conventional minds, they were an outrage to taste, tradition, and gender norms.

In this way, it is worth thinking about the extent to which the New Woman of the Weimar Republic created a counterculture aesthetic. Her style – shorter skirts, more androgynous shapes, the cigarette-as-accessory, and the *bubikopf* haircut (a very short, sharp bob that framed the face) – was certainly an act of refusal. It rejected prior expectations regarding feminine style in favor of a much edgier, more athletic, nondomestic, and skimpier appearance. However normative femininity was expected to *look*, therefore, was eschewed and subverted. The style of the New Woman, as Doris notes above, was not meant to capture positive attention alone, but to signal a certain level of resistance to women's past social roles. Rather than repelling onlookers, however, it was – perhaps most importantly – signaling a very *visible* desire to invent new ways of being a German woman. The New Woman's aesthetic is therefore a language to be deciphered for information about who she was, what she wanted, and how that ran counter to traditional understandings of womanhood.

Attempting to articulate the meaning of style for Weimar's New Woman, Mila Ganeva's field-defining monograph, *Women in Weimar Fashion: Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918-1933* (2008), argues that women's fashion is an understudied and overlooked mode of self-expression for Weimar's women. Ganeva uses Keun's novel *Gilgi: One of Us* (1931), as well as women's magazines, fashion photographs, and film, to evidence this claim. Ganeva argues for understanding the New Woman's modernity as bound up with the discourse and practice of Weimar fashion. Concurring with and extending Ganeva's theory, I argue that not only was fashion a means of self-expression, it was a survival tool for women and a container for desires that had no other language for their communication. Fashion, this chapter argues, was a discourse for conveying female dissent against sexual and class oppressions. And although women's sexual desire and fashion in Keun's novels have been addressed by scholars like Ganeva and Kathie von Ankum, this essay posits that the *central concern* of Keun's novels is in fact mutinous female desire that seeks to elude patriarchal control. Furthermore, fashion is Keun's predominant metonym for this subversive female desire in *Gilgi: One of Us* and *The Artificial Silk Girl.*

The invention of a material semiotics of female desire in the Weimar Republic developed in tandem with women's growing role in fashion journalism. Not only were women wearers and buyers of fashion, but they also shaped and developed a critical discourse around fashion in their journalism. Ganeva notes that "Weimar fashion helped shape a public sphere within which female practitioners were transformed from objects of male voyeurism into active subjects of the complex, ambivalent, and constantly shifting experience of metropolitan modernity" (2). Women's continuing entrance into the labor force effected changes in fashion, so that attire would be more consonant with working life and rapid movement around the city. Ganeva argues

that such utilitarian trends for women spread all over Europe and into North America (3), which is important evidence of Weimar aesthetics' global circulation. Ganeva cites the striking statistic that twenty-five percent of the average income in Weimar Germany was spent on clothing (4) which does help to explain why fashion, for the first time, became a hotly debated topic in public forums.

Berlin also had a famous and booming ready-to-wear garment economy. Here was an environment of mass-produced fashion that employed over a third of the city's workforce (Ganeva 4). Ganeva emphasizes that women made the transition from the merely observed to the critical *observers* and that fashion, as an object of study, was their way into that role. Weimar Germany ushered in, therefore, an entirely new "surface culture," one that women had already been socialized to understand at an elemental level – because of their traditional role as surfaces at which men gazed and onto which men projected their values.

This important and generative claim – Weimar having a "surface culture" in which women had some modicum of newfound agency – is not original to Ganeva's argument on fashion. Janet Ward's *Weimar Surfaces: Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* makes the case that Weimar modernism actually created a cult of the surface. Ward analyzes Weimar Germany's obsession with visual culture and its various surfaces – architectural, cinematic, consumerist – and makes the argument that "Weimar design initiated our current state of saturation regarding the visual codes of consumerism" (3). For Ward, Weimar Germany is the historical moment in which "surface values first ascended to the determinants of taste, activity, and occupation," and in which the lines between high and low cultures began to blur. The surface was the "dominant 'social space' of the era" (Ward 2).

Not only was Weimar modernism a site in which surfaces dictated judgments of taste but, Ward argues, Weimar's relationship to surfaces informs so much of our own over a century later. It is worth noting that this category and concept of "Weimar modernism" is not one that I have seen used outside of Ward's book. [13] But it is a signifier and category immensely useful for my purposes here, as it reinforces my argument that the Weimar Republic created its *own kind* of modernism, one fixated on visible outsides, that should inform our understanding of interwar modernisms across the globe.

My reading of Keun's focus on fashion and the material world, paired with Ganeva's and Ward's arguments about Weimar modernism's cult of surfaces, troubles our everyday understanding of modernism. This everyday characterization of modernism revolves around an evident "inward turn," a focus on the interiority of characters. British modernism – which has dominated understandings of modernism – is associated with a distinct solipsism and with the priority of individual minds over the outward manifestations of the world. This common reading of literary modernism, for example, is that character consciousness, rather than physical description, is authors' preoccupation. But I argue that close attention to the cultural artifacts of the Weimar Republic points to the fact that the external world is equally important in

[13] Aside from Ward, I've been able to find only one other critic who uses the label "Weimar modernism." David Durst's 2004 book *Weimar Modernism: Philosophy, Politics, and Culture in Germany, 1918-1933* is the only one that uses this label explicitly in its title, which indicates that it is still a rather niche term. Happily, Durst does explicitly define this obscure category, which indicates to me that he's attempting to create this concept rather than merely use an existing one: "The modernism characteristic of the Weimar period is thus no longer to be grasped merely as a set of fixed attributes, such as differentiation, the loss of tradition, the breakdown of the metaphysical unity of meaning, the quest for the new, or anxiety. Instead, 'Weimar modernism' is to be understood as a dynamic process of unfolding possibilities for cultural expression in a phase of incomplete capitalist modernization; its rule of development is its measure of meaning" (xxix). I take Durst to mean that Weimar modernism is characterized by new possibilities of cultural expression unfurling in a fraught historical moment in which Old World Germany and modern Germany came violently face-to-face. Durst also makes a point of contrasting Weimar modernism with modernism generally, by complicating while also specifying the important contextual differences between the modernism unfolding in Weimar Germany and the modernism unfolding elsewhere: the contrast lies, precisely, in the unique historical and political positionality of the Weimar Republic, its being the threshold between monarchy and Germany's hopeful future as a functioning democracy.

modernism. In fact, interwar literature in particular can be characterized by a decidedly *outward* turn: an obsession with the material world and how it relates to and helps convey human experience.

Clothing is just one distinctly feminine technology used in this surface culture, but there are other, more traditionally masculine objects, that carried important meaning as well. Even in the contemporary German television series, *Babylon Berlin* (2017), the question of the relationship between the male body and the machine in the interwar years is a clear preoccupation with which the series grapples. Like the famous 1927 German Expressionist film *Metropolis*, which was released in Germany during the interwar years – during which *Babylon Berlin* is set – anxieties about what it means to be human in the age of rapid technological innovation are front and center, with the juxtaposition of the human body and the machine occurring in scene after scene.[14] In the years after The Great War, which featured never-before-seen methods of mechanized killing, prosthetics on human bodies were commonplace: cold, hard parts were frequently seen as extensions of the corporeal. These prosthetics literalize and make visible and tangible this question of how the external world relates to human experience and begs the question as to what it really means to be human if a part of the body is made of a foreign material: where does this plastic-making of the human end? At what point are we mere assemblages of prostheses?

[14] Throughout Season 3 of *Babylon Berlin,* the solution proposed for what was then known as "shell shock" and how horrifying it makes living daily life, is for the human to become more machine-like. The show does not, by the end of the third (and as of now, final) season, explain how this would "look," but the implication is that this process begins in the mind, wherein the human is rendered stoic, impervious to fear, mechanical, and free from the weakness that human emotion brings with it.

This modern mosaic of the human and the technological brings with it a certain chilled view of modern life and Helmut Lethen's 2002 *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany* uses such thermal diction to discuss the interwar years in Germany:

> The horizons of the Wilhelmian empire are gone. After the loss of the authoritative system, people experience the immediate confrontation with modernity as a freezing shock. In counterreaction, the ideal of a glowing community displaces the coldness of industrialized civil society" (ix).

However, this "glowing community," Lethen points out, provided the warm environment in which cultish ideologies cozily incubated. The fetish for imagining and aspiring toward a future in which the human is more machine-like is a familiar aesthetic to early proto-fascist, avant-garde movements such as Italian Futurism, which positioned the human body as weak and thus needing to align itself with the hardness of machinery in order to overcome the human tendency toward softness and mortality.[15] The feverish juxtaposition of the human and the machine found on the city streets, combined with Weimar's surface culture, in which society was learning to derive meaning from increasingly common forms of visual media, contributed to a new focus on images and appearances and the way identity plays out and materializes on the public stage.

1.1 Keun's New Woman Novels and New Objectivity

As with other female modernists such as Virginia Woolf, Keun did not become an object of scholarly excavation until the 1970s, at which point it became clear to feminist-leaning critics how relevant and important her work is for understanding Weimar Germany in terms of the New

[15] The consonant appeal of the athletic, hard, masculine body are well-known traits of strong-man aesthetics and were touted by F.T. Marinetti (the founder of Italian Futurism) and Adolf Hitler alike. Rendering the human body as more machine-like, then, is one iteration of this Weimar-era surface culture, which placed great importance and meaning on the surface of things, a phenomenon Lethen has identified as a characteristic coldness of post-World War 1 German culture, which became increasingly industrialized.

Woman. And although the modern woman was originally celebrated as a feminist figure of emancipation, research over the decades has concluded that the reality of the New Woman was, of course, much more nuanced. Both Keun's protagonists, for example, have no political affiliations and they even resent those they encounter who do. Neither woman thinks much about political parties or ideologies and both are remarkably ambivalent (and seem to be quite uninformed) about those forces that will soon unleash the chaos from which the Nazis will seize power.

However, this apparent void of political consciousness in Keun's protagonists actually leaves poignant space in the narrative for noticing the way in which their very lives, their very bodies as women, are politically fraught objects. In an economic and political context in which women are hard-pressed to find steady employment outside of sex-work and safe abortions are illegal, the political realm bleeds conspicuously into every corner of women's lives. This leaves little space, in the case of Keun's protagonists at least, for considering issues outside of what is immediately relevant to their own bodies and the material world they inhabit.

To be sure, one of the most striking, confounding, and formally salient elements of Keun's novels is the way the third-person narration (in *Gilgi*) and the first-person narrator (in *Artificial*) are hyper-focused on the material world (with some moments of interiority and deep contemplation). For the most part, these novels convey the external world that the characters navigate and their perceptions of what they encounter while navigating city life. Keun's narrative form is jarringly preoccupied with the material world, a striking contrast to our understanding of modernist literature as focusing only on the intellectually and spiritually resonant internal worlds of characters.

Keun shows the way female desire and the material world are inextricably intertwined: Keun's narratives focus almost entirely on inventorying what her characters sense around them. To be sure, the New Woman and her desires are put on display in Keun's *Gilgi: One of Us* and *The Artificial Silk Girl,* which I call her "New Woman" novels. These novels were immediate sensations: 30,000 copies of *Gilgi* sold within the first year, for example, in the Weimar Republic alone (Kosta 272). Arguably, their popularity can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact of their centering underrepresented aspects of Weimar life: working-class women's pursuit of what they want and the obstacles that non-monied, single women faced in navigating the harsh, dazzling Weimar-era metropolis.

This niche focus of Keun's novels functions in stark counterpoint to – while still operating within – the dominant ethos of the artistic movement of New Objectivity, with its male-centric, even overtly misogynistic and violent aesthetic principles.[16] Even though Keun's novels participated in New Objectivity's cynical realism, which criticized rotten power structures and the gross inequities of the Weimar Republic, they filled an important gap by explicitly focusing on women's experiences within a system that was made and then made rotten by the patriarchy. New Objectivity is predicated on close attention to the detailed representation of objects, something Keun's novels also do, as I will show below. Importantly, however, Keun provides a corrective to the male-dominated work of New Objectivity by bringing into focus the New Woman's unique relation to the object world. Relevantly, the idea of women's selfish pursuit of desires beyond the domestic sphere was what the collapse of the traditional German

[16] Marie Tatar's book *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (1995) provides a chilling and fascinating account of the prevalence of images of violated female corpses in interwar art. Tatar analyzes the way in which women in the Weimar Republic came to be viewed as a threat to be mastered and tamed and were therefore frequently depicted in art as bodies that had been doubly mutilated: raped and killed. What Tatar's assessment makes clear is that women's bodies were looked at in horror as objects that were beginning to become animate in the public sphere, a phenomenon that was feared like an invasion from an alien species. In all, it is interesting that the murdering of women—which has always been prevalent—became more *visible* in Weimar Germany.

family—and even the German State—was blamed on, a pervasive Weimar-era cliché that was re-troped by the Third Reich. The New Woman was feared in her multidimensionality: she was both hot and desirous and cold and machine-like—completely "unnatural" in her dogged pursuit of a life outside of the domestic space.[17]

Keun's New Woman novels provide just such a multidimensional view of this feared new type of woman. Three of the leading scholars on Keun's novels – Katherina von Ankum, Julia Feldhaus, and Barbara Kosta – agree that Doris and Gilgi try to "shape their lives . . . by taking their cues from the popular media" (Feldhaus 514). In other words, popular media, only recently heavily visual, informs the way that Doris and Gilgi understand themselves in the public space: as bodies on display. Kosta points out that Gilgi's life is run

> mechanistically, from her early morning cold showers (a reference to the popular *Köperkultur* movement) to her methodical office work, her evening language courses . . . and meetings with her friend Olga. Both Gilgi's tempo and time schedules, punctuated by Keun's rapid scene changes, fragmented writing, and abrupt sentences, replicate the pulse of the city" (272)

This reading of Gilgi as athletic and mechanical—and of Keun's form's mimicking this—points to the Weimar-era cultural obsession with physical beauty, health, and the simultaneous rejection and mimicking of mechanization.

According to Michael Hau's 2003 book *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890-1930*, the turn of the century saw a change in the way Germans related to their bodies and a shift toward this "Köperkultur" (body culture) that Kosta references:

---

[17] For a famous visual example of this dichotomy, see Fritz Lang's 1927 Expressionist film *Metropolis*. The main female character, Maria, turns into an automaton who is at once a seductive femme fatale and a hardened machine—a dangerous corrupting force to the men around her.

> Germans increasingly defined their personal problems in medical terms, described them in medical language, and understood them in a medical framework . . . they attempted to regain a sense of agency and assert control over their lives by means of bodily discipline and other health measures. . .[T]he contemporary explosion in people's attention to their health was an expression of the contradictions and tensions characteristic of the period of classical modernity.
>
> In a society that grew increasingly body-conscious, men's and women's concerns about their physical appearance were an important source of anxieties, as were concerns about the spread of venereal disease and changing gender relations. It would be a mistake, however, to explain the new body-consciousness solely in terms of anxieties, because this awareness also had a liberating effect. (3)

Men and women alike, from various classes, began to prioritize athletics and physical fitness. This new Köperkultur brought more attention and importance to the body and one's physical appearance as indicators of one's goals and values. This was a way in which people's lives during this time arguably became increasingly mechanical, since physical discipline increased in importance. This is perhaps what Hau means when he refers to this health and fitness trend as being an "expression of the contradictions and tensions characteristic of the period of classical modernity": that in the modern metropolis, in which the human and the machine were juxtaposed at every turn, human behavior changed in its attempt to grapple with and express these contradictions and tensions in what it meant to be human in increasingly mechanized, fast-paced, urban contexts.

Keun's New Woman novels are set in such a metropolitan scene: both begin in Cologne and end in Berlin or en route to Berlin. Each novel offers a different template for the New

Woman figure: Gilgi is well-educated, skilled, and petite-bourgeoise, whereas Doris is unskilled, uneducated, working-class, and precariously financially positioned. Both women, though, want a career and a solid footing in the depressed Weimar economy: they want to be independent and self-sufficient and they have no aspirations toward domesticity or even a solid romantic relationship. *Gilgi*'s plot focuses on the titular character's determination to have a secure job and to take language classes in order to increase her marketability in the workforce. Then, she meets a dandy, loses her motivation, gets pregnant, and moves to Berlin in search of opportunities for her and her child.

The plot of Doris's story begins with her attempting to become an actress, stealing a fur coat, and going on the run with it to Berlin where she envisions her life as a star. Out of financial necessity she winds up involved with one man after another and has brushes with near-homelessness. Despite these two novels' differences, their clear focus is the protagonists' hunger for autonomy and material independence. Importantly, romantic and sexual desire for men, although part of both narratives, leads to disappointment, which serves to critique typical romantic plot structures. The moral of both novels, one might say, is that men cannot be counted on to fulfill the New Woman's desires.

Gilgi and Doris are both working women who fashionably confront various obstacles on the volatile streets of the metropolis, as they engage in modern quests for careers and financial independence. The New Woman became, for better or for worse, an icon of modernity, the "surface upon which various ideologies played themselves out" (Kosta 271). Here, Kosta represents the modern German woman as a surface, a flat object onto which sundry anxieties and desires can be projected, like a cinema screen. To be sure, Keun's own protagonists are hyper-focused on reading and interpreting surfaces, and the figure of the New Woman, too, was a

surface for the unstable, newborn German democracy to analyze. In her, the fledgling state could see itself reflected, because the New Woman, like a segmented mirror, was so multidimensional. The New Woman, like the new democracy, was anything but a unified whole.

The Weimar Republic of the 1930s was increasingly politically chaotic and polarized, with Fascists at one pole and Communists at the other (and many parties between), both aggressively vying for control. As with queer people, Jews, Bolsheviks, and other so-called "degenerates" and "non-Germans," the New Woman became one of the scapegoats for the chaos and failure of Germany's first experiment with democracy. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, German women's reproductive capabilities became a national project around which German nationalism could coalesce. The place for women, for the good of the nation, was in the home producing and raising German children. Women's bodies, therefore, became the site of reproducing and rebuilding the German State – became metonymy for the new fascist vision of rebirth.

Even before the Third Reich, however, the New Woman's body was already an object around and against which German society had molded itself. Kosta points out that "these stylized young women, who took their cue from the flickering images of movie stars and glamour, performed in offices as secretaries, stenographers, typists, and salesgirls . . . this generation stood at the vortex of social change" (271-72). New Women like Gilgi and Doris subscribed to a very particular look and became highly visible reminders of the changing social winds. This meaning-imbued female body is part of what Keun attempts to render through Gilgi and Doris: their bodies are the political landscape of the novel.

Notably, Keun's characters (especially Doris from *Artificial)* come off as vapidly materialistic – as, say, 1930s German versions of the protagonist in the late-1990s American

television series *Sex and the City*: as women laughably obsessed with their appearance and romantic lives, almost to the point of absurdity. However, the joke of such assessments is on the audience, since both Keun's characters and Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City* are one step ahead of, and far more realistic than, judging spectators: these characters are hyperaware of how much their appearances matter in conveying their identities and in signaling their desire as single women. To be sure, all three metropolis-dwelling working women know that accomplishing their desired ends requires looking the part and often using men to get there. For an audience to assume that being merely "materialistic" (and meaning it pejoratively) is a cogent criticism of these characters is to make their own naivety the punchline. Doris, Gilgi, and Carrie are indeed materialistic, because they are wise to the unavoidably important role that clothing, appearance, and materiality more generally play in what women's prospects are.

1.2 Gilgi's "little life"

As yet, scholarship on Keun's two New Woman novels has not paid sufficient attention to how Keun keenly uses language to draw attention to her protagonists' bodies – that they themselves objectify for their own benefit – and the material world of the novel. Furthermore, although plenty of Keun criticism discusses her work in terms of the Weimar milieu of pervasive visual culture (advertisements, film, and photography, for example), not enough attention is paid to how much the material world and its objects matter to the meaning and form of Keun's New Woman novels. Julia Feldhaus, to take one example, makes the claim that Gilgi "does not define herself through objects in her own space," but rather by her skills that will get her a good job (522). However, this mutually exclusive binary between Gilgi's aims and objects renders Gilgi far too simplified and flattened. Indeed, although Gilgi certainly sees her identity as a woman bound up with her role as a worker with marketable skills, she is also painfully aware of how

crucial acquiring objects is, as they show the world who one is. A person with a woman's body does not have the luxury of simply being valued as a worker (how sad to even call this a luxury!) – on the contrary, her skills are judged only after the surface appearance of her body.

Although it is certainly true that Gilgi prizes her education and professional life above almost everything else, Gilgi *does* define herself through the objects around her. Part of what I see Keun's narrative showing is how much Doris and Gilgi are, whether they like it or not, defined by the objects (or the lack thereof) around them. Indeed, both Gilgi and Doris are very preoccupied with fashion and material goods in general. The very first lines of *Gilgi* make this material focus clear: "She's holding it firmly in her hands, her little life, the girl Gilgi. She calls herself Gilgi, her name is Gisela. The two 'i's are better suited to slim legs and narrow hips like a child's" (3). These opening sentences are arresting for two reasons: a concept (her life) and a signifier (her name) are described as object and body parts, respectively. Gilgi is holding her "life," which is highly abstract – since it is, of course, not her literal life (her aliveness) but the way in which she lives – in her hands, rendering it, metaphorically, a concrete possession in the external world, a thing that can be studied and regarded. Then, the word "Gilgi" is embodied, as it is compared to Gilgi's body and is thus also made into objects, slim legs and narrow hips, in the external world. The nickname that she calls herself is a word that looks more like her body, as the "i"s match her slender figure. Here, Keun acts as a poet, drawing the reader's attention, in the very first line, to the way that language looks on the page, the way that language becomes visually relevant to the meaning of the novel. The two "i"s in "Gilgi" reflect her boyish physique. Keun is showing language's limits and the way, ultimately, we must resort to the material world to explain what we mean.

That the material world matters deeply to Gilgi is further emphasized by the fact that she works as a steno-typist for a woman's clothing company. Gilgi is painfully aware of her female body, as her boss incessantly sexually harasses her, but Gilgi knows that this is behavior she must tolerate in order to stay employed. She knows that she must try to use the harassment to her advantage. In a passage of free indirect discourse we witness Gilgi's thoughts about how to negotiate the harassment: "Resisting too strongly might perhaps make her appear less harmless than she'd like" (13). Here, even in Gilgi's interiority, the focus is on how she wants to "appear" in order to navigate the perils of being a woman. Gilgi contemplates the fine line she must walk in response to her boss's advances: she has to resist him so as not to seem to consent, but not so strongly that he no longer perceives her as a sexual possibility, which is part of what keeps her employed.

For her part, Gilgi has desires and aspirations beyond office work. Gilgi is skilled at designing clothing:

> When the young lady Gilgi goes out in the evening, men's and women's heads turn; and if she said she bought her dresses from Damm or Gerstel, people might believe her, although she's made everything herself. She owns three evening gowns, and none of them cost more than twenty marks. Maybe she'll open a small fashion studio one day in Paris or Berlin, maybe—maybe—oh, she's still young, and she's open to all ways of providing for herself, except as a wife, a film actress, or a beauty queen. (*Gilgi* 17)

For Gilgi, fashion is a thing to be seriously contemplated – it is a means to make one's living and it gets a woman noticed in public. Clothing is not fatuous or extraneous; it is a means to an end and a tool of survival. Being poorly dressed is, for Gilgi, akin to not existing: Gilgi, by way of free indirect discourse, quips that "[s]he'd rather string herself up than go around sloppily

dressed" (127). For Gilgi, being sloppily dressed is a fate worse than hanging oneself. Although this is clear hyperbole on Gilgi's part, it still chillingly points to the near social-death it is for a single woman to go out in public not looking her best.

It is also important to pay attention in the above passage to the way that Gilgi rules out three particular modes of supporting herself: wife, film actress, beauty queen. Gilgi, as Feldhaus pointed out earlier, wants to be valued for her work and skills, for which she does not see wives, actresses, or beauty queens being recognized. She doesn't expand on why those particular jobs are unappealing to her, but it is interesting that even her dream of owning her own fashion studio is still very image-oriented. A fashion studio is still about creating fashions with which women costume themselves. Nevertheless, she still wants to make her own living – which is very important to her – rather than be a mere wife. She wants to participate in the working world and in fashion, but she doesn't want to be an actress or model. Gilgi knows, though, how important fashion is to her own identity and to the identities of women in general. Under patriarchy, a woman's appearance *is who she is* in the world. But Gilgi shows the way the New Woman shrewdly objectifies herself in service to her own ends, to make the system work for her in whatever small way possible.

Complexly, Keun's novels are psychologically rich while using narrative forms that render their perspectives largely outwardly oriented. For example, in her introduction to *The Artificial Silk Girl,* von Ankum cleverly points out that Doris is "a collector of images" (xi) and although the focus of the narration is often on the material world, Keun still manages to portray the interiority of characters. A passage in which Gilgi reluctantly has lunch with her boss exemplifies this well: "The shape of Gilgi's little breasts is clearly visible under her blue-gray velvet dress, convincing Herr Reuter that Gilgi is 'the' woman who understands him" (19). This

passage is clearly descriptive of Gilgi's body and clothing but also ironizes her boss's absurd male gaze and his perception of Gilgi's feelings toward him, such that we have access to Gilgi's own ironic view of her boss. Although we are provided with detailed descriptions of Gilgi's body, such descriptions also disclose Gilgi's sardonic perception of her boss's inferences.

Next, Gilgi and her bohemian friend Olga (who serves as yet another iteration of the heterogeneous New Woman) devise a scheme for Olga to take Herr Reuter off Gilgi's hands for the evening (and they also hope, beyond that one evening) without angering him. Olga arrives at the restaurant dressed in an "expensive Russian squirrel fur on which she has so far paid three installments . . . He notices that other men envy him when they see Olga sitting down at his table" (20-21). Olga and Gilgi are well aware of the kind of effect that a woman in a fur coat has: it is eye-catching and signifies that a great deal of money was spent on that one item—on that one woman.

It is worth lingering on Olga's choice of clothing – fur looks expensive, luxurious, and erotic. It also cannot be divorced from its dominant connotation of death and, therefore, brings with it a certain chill—a cold nonchalance about death, a prioritizing of fashion over the living creature. Wearing fur is the ultimate statement of materialism: one puts a dead animal's skin over oneself, cloaks one's own body in another's dead body as an act of luxury. Wearing fur puts one's body on display and makes one a spectacle. The callousness, the unapologetic materialism, the decadence, the singular sensation of fur on skin—this is what wearing fur signifies to onlookers. The woman wearing fur cares for sensation-seeking above all else. It is also worth emphasizing, as mentioned in the above quoted passage, that Olga went into debt to buy the fur ("she has so far paid three installments") and therefore sees it as a necessary investment, a tool for getting where she wants to go in the world.

Throughout the first part of the novel, Gilgi has a room of her own, a small, rented space in which she studies for the various language courses she takes in order to improve her chances of getting a good job. Arguably, Gilgi's downfall occurs when she stops prioritizing her own space (both physical and mental – which are linked) upon falling in love with Martin, a writer-dandy figure who stays at his rich friends' flats when they are out of town. Martin has highly decadent tastes but no real income, yet still imagines that "he'd be much more in love with the little one if he could give her nice clothes and diamonds and soft furs" (106). For Martin, putting luxury items onto Gilgi's body, ornamenting her, contributes to falling in love – makes Gilgi into a glamorous spectacle.

When Gilgi herself eventually slides into unemployed languor as a result of living hedonistically alongside Martin, she recalls Olga's sound financial advice: "'first some powder and perfume – then food,' Olga always says. This statement contains profound wisdom" (127). Olga's mantra, to which Gilgi subscribes, is important: a woman must prioritize being attractive and put together, even above food. A woman's appearance is an investment in her future security, whereas food merely keeps her alive in the moment. Bits of food may be bought with one's leftover change, but powder and perfume require real money. A skinny woman is beautiful as long as she is also powdered and perfumed.

True to his earlier expressed desire to shower Gilgi with luxurious items, Martin purchases, on credit (since they have no money), a fur coat for her. Gilgi is speechless and fearful, as she is well aware of their financial precariousness, but she allows him to give her the coat and she wears it out with him for an evening on the town. Indeed, speechlessness and language-failure increasingly plague Gilgi as the novel progresses. The longer she is around Martin the more her desire for a career dwindles, language and articulation escape her, and she

begins to speak and think in a fragmented fashion. This is particularly exemplified when Gilgi realizes she is pregnant and cannot get an abortion. She thinks, "I can't stand it anymore, I want to die – I don't want it anymore – I don't want – it disgusts me to be so powerless against my body" (156). Here the em dashes indicate a failure of expression, mental gasps for air, language lack. The vague pronoun "it" makes it unclear what, precisely, she doesn't want: Martin? The baby? Both? Gilgi is so distraught over the fact that she has no money and will be forced to give birth, but she has no real way of expressing how that feels. She thinks in negatives such as "I can't" and "I don't want" – the only desire she expresses in the positive is that she *wants* to die. Here she is able to articulate only what she does not want and the only alternative to that seems to be death, which was also the price of going out in public sloppily dressed.

Gilgi goes to a doctor to attempt to get an abortion because she knows that she and Martin in their current financial circumstance (which she knows, deep down, is Martin's permanent way of living) cannot care for a baby. The doctor refuses to give Gilgi an abortion (abortions were illegal but still very common – Gilgi *could* have gotten one, ultimately, if dirtily)[18] and Gilgi then mournfully lectures the doctor about the absolute immorality of abortions' being illegal:

> Listen, Doctor, there's nothing more immoral and unhygienic and absurd than making a woman give birth to a child which she can't feed. And there's absolutely nothing more immoral and absurd than making a woman have a child which she doesn't want. (141)

The message here is clear: not allowing women to have bodily autonomy is immoral. The frank discussion of abortion in this novel, which would have been rare at its time of publication, frames its moral dilemma around women's bodily autonomy and whether the future child will be

[18] For more on the widespread "dirty abortions" in the Weimar Republic, see Cornelie Usborne's 2007 book *Cultures of Abortion in Weimar Germany.*

fed (rather than around concern for the hypothetical personhood of the fetus). At issue here is concern for bodily reality rather than the more nebulous spiritual question of when "life" begins.

Ultimately for Gilgi, this new challenge of motherhood in poverty must be faced alone, without Martin, who she knows has no aptitude for parenthood. But her decision to leave Martin is not only about the child – it is also about shedding Martin's dead weight so that she can prioritize herself and her desires. Gilgi has learned that her aspirations die when she is with Martin and so she decides to leave Cologne for Berlin, where Olga has recently moved, to birth and raise her child and make a living. Berlin holds promise for her future that Cologne simply cannot provide, although Gilgi does not explain why this is. This lack of explanation about Berlin's significance to Gilgi is telling in itself, as it implies that Berlin signifies unspeakable opportunity for inventing herself as a working-class, single mother.

1.3 Doris's Fur Coat

Keun's novel *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1932) is, like *Gilgi*, a quest story about going to Berlin and is one of the final accounts of German life before the Nazis seized power. Like Gilgi, Doris is a "material girl," in that she focuses a great deal on the material world and her own appearance. This novel is narrated from Doris's first-person perspective and is done in the cinematic style (*kinostil)*, which is a mode of narration that attempts to mimic the camera lens. This seems to be a literary style common in Weimar and post-Weimar Germany, since Alfred Döblin and Christopher Isherwood also employed this technique in their own writing about the Weimar Republic.[19] This formal trend again points to the importance of the visual in Weimar and the way that visual culture had begun to influence the form of fiction.

[19] For example, see Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) and Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), both of which engage in this *kinostil* method of documenting and commenting on what is seen and heard in the external world of Weimar Berlin. Character interiority is certainly at stake, but it is achieved only by way of these descriptions.

Doris herself focuses on narrating and describing the surfaces, appearances, faces, and sounds of the city. In Patrizia McBride's article "Learning to See in Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*" she argues that Doris ultimately receives, over the course of the novel, an "education in vision," as do readers, and becomes extremely adept at clearly seeing, and eventually critically analyzing, the visuals around her for meaning. McBride writes that "Doris's cinematic vision offers a survey of life in the metropolis that clings to the surface of things, capturing the play of light and colors of everyday experience while refraining from assigning meaning to what it sees" (226). In other words, Doris offers an objective, uncritical gaze and inventory of what she sees, but nevertheless presents a striking collage of the inequities of life in Berlin to herself and to the reader: an "explosive caldron of abject poverty and ostentatious wealth" (McBride 227). These contrasts are facts that readers must decipher for themselves through Doris's uncritical gaze. This "collage" aesthetic is something that McBride extends to the way Doris relates to the visible world and appearances in general:

> montage also strikingly describes Doris's endeavor to manipulate appearances. For Doris the visible world has no essential form, but is rather a mosaic whose pieces can be reassembled at will by playing with their refracting through endlessly mirroring appearances. Doris's readiness to take control of her own image by accepting its objectification through the gaze of others is at bottom an attempt to exert agency by reshuffling the relations of the visible. (229)

For Doris, life in the metropolis is an ongoing performance for one's survival in which one must shape one's image to fit particular scenarios and contexts.

Within the first pages of the novel, which is written as though it is Doris's journal, she writes: "And I think it will be a good thing if I write everything down, because I'm an unusual

person. I don't mean a diary – that's ridiculous for a trendy girl like me. But I want to write like a movie, because my life is like that and it's going to become even more so" (3). Doris wants to write like a movie – to document the visuals of her life. Living during the time of world-famous German film stars like Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, Doris is so image-focused because she knows that glamor and beauty are essentially the only qualities that make a woman (especially an uneducated, working-class woman) visible and famous – and thus financially secure and self-sufficient. In fact, Doris's career goal is to be "a star"[20] as she puts it many times throughout the novel. As excerpted at the beginning of this chapter, Doris sees the crucial importance that a complete outfit plays in a woman's success.

Doris has an acute sense of fashion and cultivates her unique – but fashionable – look and image:

> I immediately bought a hat for myself with the 50 marks I had left, with a feather and in forest green—that's this season's fashion color, and it goes fabulously well with my rosy complexion. And wearing it off to the side is so chic, and I already had a forest green coat made for myself—tailored with a fox collar—a present from Käsemann" (5).

Doris takes fashion and its sundry details seriously and is even a fashion critic in her own right, as she knows what colors are in season and at what angle her hat ought to sit. She knows that meticulously cultivating the perfect outfit and general look will give her access to social rungs and opportunities that she normally would not be privy to. Indeed, Doris's obsessive accounting

---

[20] Patrizia McBride makes the interesting point that the English slang term, "star," was translated from its original German slang "Glanz," literally meaning "shine" or "gloss" and actually meaning "glamour(ous)" (223), but nevertheless is most closely translated to the English "star." This translation difference matters, though, since "Glanz" emphasizes the glamorous appearance that being a female star is predicated on. "Star," on the other hand, indicates fame first and foremost and doesn't necessarily emphasize glamor and is decidedly gender neutral. Doris's desire to become a "Glanz" is much more gender- and appearance-inflected than the English translation lets on. It is also quite neat that the word "Glanz" sounds exactly like the English "glance," which of course denotes looking.

of her outfit is not at all shallow, but rather demonstrates her shrewd understanding of the relationship between women, fashion, and economic security.

Doris's desire for her future career, as I have mentioned, is to become "a star," to be famous (at what, in particular, she does not say) and readily recognized for her appearance. Von Ankum claims that Keun fashions Doris after the American-type female protagonist who makes the "pursuit of wealthy men her exclusive professional goal [which] results from the realization that the patriarchally structured economy severely curtails women's upward mobility" (162). But even if the theme of gold digging and conspicuous consumption that is found in Keun's novels is an American conceit, centering female desire and making it visible is a distinctly Weimar-modernism aesthetic.[21] To be sure, Doris sees wealthy men as a necessary means to her desired

[21] Katherina von Ankum has pointed out that this obsession with production, materiality, and consumer culture in general in post-World War 1 Germany was in fact modeled after the United States and was one way in which Germany sought to Americanize its new government and economic models (159). Be this "Americanization" of Weimar Germany as it may, Keun's focus on centering female desire and rendering it visible in her novels by way of metonymy is, I argue, a distinctly German aesthetic, one that bled into the modernisms of, for one, England. Von Ankum also argues that the "American Girl" archetype was the model for the New Woman of Weimar Germany, in that she was cool, sporty, inaccessible, and financially independent. According to von Ankum the American Girl's unapologetic conspicuous consumption was desirable for the economically depressed New Woman of Germany (161). Von Ankum further notes that Keun's *The Artificial Silk Girl* was clearly, to critics of the time, influenced by this new American archetype. However, von Ankum contends that rather than imitating this American type, Keun instead provides a counterpoint:

> Keun's novel reflects the disillusionment with Americanism as an economic and emotional model, a disenchantment with modernization that characterized the final years of the Weimar Republic. [Keun's novel] not only problematizes an unrestrained rationalization, but challenges the notion of consumer culture as empowering for women. In its rewriting of its Hollywood-born model, the text critically reflects on the impact of (visual) mass culture on women's emancipatory identity formation in the modern metropolis. (161)

Von Ankum reads Keun's novel as perhaps having been influenced by American modernism, but also sees it offering a critique of these American ideals and tarrying with the question of how visual mass culture affects the New Woman's identity formation. Von Ankum reads Keun as rejecting the idea that this Americana consumer culture is in fact empowering to women. I want to complicate von Ankum's assessment of Keun's position on consumer culture and suggest that although Keun was certainly cleareyed about consumer culture's decidedly oppressive effects on women, she also understood the way fashion was a crucial tool for women to signal who they are and what they want. Von Ankum does point out (and I agree) that Keun also reframes the American story line of the woman's goal being to attain a male-funded life of luxury. Both of Keun's novels, as I have already said, point to men being disappointments that women cannot count on, but as also being necessary rungs in the ladder to financial security.

end of becoming a star, since she readily recognizes the patriarchally structured society in which she lives. But Doris's actual goal, of course, is to achieve stardom, or at least some degree of financial independence, visibility in the public sphere, and self-actualization, which is what "stardom" seems to represent for her. In no way is Doris's exclusive professional goal to catch a rich husband. On the contrary, the text shows that Doris wants much more than a marriage but wants a career of her own.

The pivotal moment of Doris's story is when she steals a fur coat, which precipitates her fleeing to Berlin – a place she feels she can find success even while on the run as a thief. This is the ultimate instance of Doris's acting on her desire, of putting what she wants above all else. Right away, it becomes clear that the coat means much more to Doris than its everyday significance:

> And there was this coat—such sweet, soft fur. So fine and gray and shy, I felt like kissing it, that's how much I loved it. It spoke comfort to me, a guardian angel, protection from heaven. It was genuine squirrel . . . something inside me knew I would never give it back . . . And the fur coat was attached to my skin like a magnet and they loved each other, and you don't give up what you love once you have it. (51)

From the moment Doris sees the coat, it takes on a meaning that is completely inflected with her many desires: she sees it as offering her protection as a guardian angel would and she feels erotically and tenderly toward it, wanting to kiss it. Indeed, it even feels fused to her skin, as a part of herself. The coat immediately stands in for a range of desires that Doris cannot articulate regarding protection, love, and eroticism: the fur coat carries these meanings for Doris.

Even the last pages of the novel present Doris's confused interior monologue, in which the dominant theme is her various longings—none of which she can put into words clearly. What

is evident, though, is that her desires lie beyond what men or a "regular" job can provide. Her "wants" are scattered across the novel's final page, and are rendered even more disjointed by disruptive em dashes:

> But I don't want anyone to kiss me. And I've had enough of the office—I don't want to go back to what I had before, because it was no good. I don't want to work, but I have buoys of cork in my stomach. They won't let me go down, will they?
>
> Dear Ernst. In my thoughts I'm giving you a blue sky, I love you. I want—I want—I don't know—I want to be with Karl. I want to do everything together with him. If he doesn't want to—I won't work, I'd rather go on the *Tauentzien* and become a star. (*Artificial* 192)

The word "want" heavily populates this short passage in which Doris attempts to articulate to herself what she desires in life. Mixed into all of the "wants" are past romantic interests, Ernst and Karl, but she has also just said that she doesn't want to be kissed. In order to articulate to herself her feelings for Ernst, she imagines giving him a "blue sky," a striking act, as it renders something as enormous and nebulous as the sky a thing, like Gilgi's "little life," that can be held in one's hands.

The novel ends with a frenzy of Doris's competing and ambiguous desires. The last sentence of the novel is arresting, since it demonstrates Doris's ongoing confusion about what matters and what she really seeks: "Perhaps glamour isn't all that important after all" (192). This final sentence indicates Doris's ongoing grappling with the value of glamour, the material world, and consumer culture in general. Rather than the novel's merely rejecting consumer culture as oppressive to women and something about which Doris learns not to care, we witness Doris again and again confronting it as irrevocably enmeshed in her existence as a modern woman. In

the final sentence, Doris's thought that "perhaps glamour isn't all that important after all" is tinged with Keun's signature irony, in that Doris has spent the entire novel being reminded how important nice material goods are to women's getting where they want to go in life. That Doris would have, in the novel's final sentence, an epiphany that shirking worldly goods is the answer to her problems is comical in its disingenuousness, especially since her economic precariousness threatens to leave her homeless more than once in the novel.

Importantly, by the end of the novel Doris has not returned her stolen fur coat to its owner, suggesting its absolute value to her. The fur coat, the epitome of luxury and glamor, is not something Doris can relinquish, as it gives her an advantageous sort of visibility. Throughout the novel, Keun uses the coat as metonymy for Doris's desires that she cannot quite articulate. Part of what makes it impossible for Doris to achieve stability is in fact her unapologetic pursuit and expression of her desire. She steals the fur coat, sleeps with married men, and so on. Both the fur coat and her various male conquests are metonymized in the novel as objects that stand in for Doris's even more expansive and complex desires. But ultimately, Doris explicitly privileges the coat over a man she is dating: "But my mouth was open to his kisses because he was sad. He admired me, which didn't make me feel good and didn't make me proud. I was surrounded by my coat, which had more feelings for me than Hubert" (52). Remarkably, Doris imbues the coat with more emotional availability, sensuality – indeed, more life! – than Hubert.

Doris makes this explicit comparison again, demoting men generally to useless objects that do not satisfy her, by contrast with the coat: "I look so elegant in that fur. It's like an unusual man who makes me beautiful through his love for me . . .The coat wants me and I want it. We have each other" (53-4). The coat is compared to an anomalous man who enhances Doris's beauty by loving her well, and then, rather than elaborating on this rare man's love, Doris goes

on to describe her erotic and loving attachment to the fur and, puzzlingly, the coat's requited feelings, and their mutual reliance on one another. The figment of the "unusual" man is eclipsed by the fur to a bewildering extent; it signifies beyond a mere item of clothing. It is her second skin and, enhancing and supporting her, it speaks to the financially secure future she wishes to create for herself.

Like Gilgi, Doris refuses to curb her desires and declines to compromise by seeking out a husband who would provide her with economic security and a home. Above all else, both protagonists want lives and identities of their own making. Importantly, both novels end with the protagonists in train stations about to board, still in hot pursuit of what they want—if far more soberly and warily. In the end, Keun's protagonists are on the move. That Keun's novels conclude with their protagonists chasing their futures aboard trains is chilling from our historical perch, since the Nazis came to power in 1933, the year after *The Artificial Silk Girl* was published. Any public space that women had carved out to allow for dynamism or movement in any sense of the word was revoked. Women were largely banished back to the domestic space to be used as cogs in the Nazi machine or imprisoned for refusing to conform – for rebelling against the metaphorical and literal uniform. The collapse of Germany's first experiment with democracy was also the end of – or a long pause in – the New Woman's invention of herself. In order to survive, women were compelled to blend in – to fulfill the greatest fear of Ypsi, Gilgi, and Doris: to be unoriginal, unmodern, and invisible.

CHAPTER 2

Desire for the Core Self in Virginia Woolf's Fiction

"Hail! Natural Desire!" –Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Virginia Woolf's modernist project is famously focused on conveying the landscape of character's minds. She explicitly theorizes this in her essays (e.g. "Modern Fiction") and practices as much in the form and content of her fiction. Memorably, she even criticizes realist novels that focus too much on description and not on character consciousness – on the stitching of a woman's bodice rather than on who the woman is – on what her thoughts and ideas are ("Mrs. Bennett…"). In this chapter, I read Woolf's modernist form as not only creating maximum space to convey character consciousness, but as also employing objects in the material world to articulate female character's desires for selves unmoored from their social contexts.

In reading any of Woolf's work, one is tempted to conclude that the material world matters little to her craft – in fact one would be forgiven for gathering that she wishes to exclude it as much as possible. Upon finishing reading *To the Lighthouse* (1927), for example, one has little idea as to Mrs. Ramsay's appearance or what the house looks like. And yet, somehow, our minds are etched with vivid images of the property on the sea in the Hebrides, Mrs. Ramsay's dinner table, Lily Briscoe's painting, the "eyeless" flowers in the garden. We've received these impressions filtered through the minds of characters. Woolf employs the external world in her fiction in direct service to conveying her characters' consciousnesses. We get to know the setting and landscape of the novel through impressions in characters' minds – through which we flow like blood in veins.

This chapter emphasizes that female desire, broadly conceived, is central to Woolf's oeuvre. This centrality of desire is often obscured in her texts, though, by a ceiling that language

hits when it attempts to render it. In Woolf's fiction that I discuss here, "The New Dress" (1924), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Between the Acts* (1939), I argue that Woolf employs metonyms to provide female characters with a material "language" to articulate desires for selves outside of their social conditions – for their secret selves that no one else knows. These metonymic objects – for example, a dress, a diamond, fish, mist on trees, a lighthouse – allow characters to see themselves as they wish to be, untethered from their social conditions. These objects express characters' real, inner selves that they desire to know, even if they cannot be those selves in the world in which they live.

As further evidence of Woolf's search for means of articulating more capacious desires, this chapter also close reads a selection of her letters, which I call her "Berlin letters." I argue that these letters show that during a trip to Berlin in 1929, the city came to be metonymy for Woolf's queer desire for Vita Sackville-West, but also for her more general longing to have experiences that would be considered improper and illicit in England, such as being visibly queer, ravenously desirous, overtly sexual, or dirty and unkempt. There is no direct evidence that indicates that while in Berlin Woolf herself had any of these risqué experiences, but what her Berlin letters do show is that the city came to stand in for Woolf's unspeakable desires for such novel encounters.

Language's limits are a major preoccupation of Woolf's fiction and nonfiction, both in terms of language's inadequacy and the realities of censorship laws, the details of which I discuss below. Even in Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), Terence (a novelist) tells the protagonist, Rachel, that he wants "'to write a novel about Silence . . . the things people don't say. But the difficulty is immense'" (216). Terence's hypothetical novel spells out Woolf's own novel project and even much of British high modernism more generally. Woolf's novels are

preoccupied with what goes unsaid and what cannot be said: the unspeakable. For example, the interiority of characters makes up the majority of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* and the contrast between what characters say (which is little) and what goes unsaid (which is immense) is stark, emphasizing that the majority of life, in Woolf's view, occurs internally – inside the mind.

Later on in Woolf's debut novel, Terence and Rachel become romantically involved and it is at this point that Rachel's desire for something beyond marriage to Terence is conveyed through free indirect discourse: "she wanted many more things than the love of one human being – the sea, the sky" (302). Here, Rachel begins to conceive of what she wants outside of Terence but the thought is interrupted: the em dash indicates a limit to Rachel's thought and is succeeded by two of the most vast items in the material world: the sea, the sky. It is difficult to imagine a limit to these substances: where does the sea, the sky, end? What Rachel knows, then, is that she wants infinitely more than the love of one person, but on the other side of that limit, all she can articulate is: "the sea, the sky." The comma that separates these two objects is important: rather than thinking "the sea *and* the sky," which would indicate two separate ideas, two separate objects of her desire, Rachel thinks "the sea, the sky," which is muddier in its syntactic and semantic roles. "The sea, the sky," although they seem to be examples of what Rachel wants besides marriage, also stand in for the unnamable and the unspeakable things that lie beyond the limit of a heterosexual romantic partnership and the linear life that progresses after that: engagement, marriage, a house, children. Rachel wants more than this, but has no adequate language to imagine or articulate what lies beyond it.

Woolf's modernist form, then, allows for unspeakable female desire to be articulated – if inadequately – by objects in the external world, by metonyms, and accompanying punctuation

such as commas and em dashes. In *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1999) Douglas Mao puts it well when he characterizes modernism's – and particularly Woolf's modernism's – relationship to the material world and metonymy thusly:

> To say that one of the passages from aestheticism to modernism is the shift from gemlike flame to the gem-hard writing that shelters our hearts' fire, from the evanescence with an air of solidity to the capturing of the evanescent in solid form, is not to imply that modernists somehow rejected experience, or that late nineteenth century showed a lack of interest in the enduring monument . . . There can be no doubt that Woolf was at least as interested in the moment as Pater, but for her this interest was scarcely separable from the question of how to make "of the moment something permanent." (37)

Here, Mao provides an argument for why modernism prefers metonymy to metaphor: in order to preserve the evanescent, modernism captures it into a gem-hard thing (metonymy) rather than as a gem-like flame (metaphor). Modernism seeks to render that which is slippery and fleeting – moments, desires, epiphanies – into gems, which are permanent, rather than into gem-like flames, which are ephemeral. Mao helpfully points out, too, that:

> it cannot be denied that a discomfort with explicit political engagement in imaginative writing was a distinguishing feature of most modernists' understandings of their roles as artists, or that this sense of the boundedness or . . . *autonomy* of the literary work depended in part upon a vision of the successful work as a monument resistant to time's depredations. (39)

For Mao, production as an end in itself is a moral imperative of Bloomsbury and among modernists more generally. I take Mao to mean that rather than "art for art's sake" the mantra of modernism is "art for the *work* of art's sake." The labor, the process, that the artist puts into

producing the piece of art is what modernism cares for most. Mao calls this the "modernist production imperative," which is what he considers to be a central tenet of the modern artist's ethos (43). Mao goes on to make the point that "in resuscitating the production ethic that aestheticism abandoned, modernism also gave life to new crises of purpose—and generated new reasons to turn for resolution to the object world" (43). This turning to the object world for meaning in modernism is what is at issue in this chapter.

2.1 Fashion: "Objects of perpetual invention"

Sartorial objects are a rare but potent form of metonymy in Woolf's fiction and in her private writings. Yet, Woolf seldom focuses on clothing in her fiction or her personal writings and subsequently there is little scholarship on Woolf and fashion – that which does exist has been published only within the last decade or so. Nevertheless, perhaps in commemoration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the fashion-forward 1920s, 2020 saw the conspicuous publication of popular articles about Woolf and fashion. *The New York Times*'s Fashion Director and Chief Fashion Critic Vanessa Friedman published a fashion review called "Virginia Woolf is Trending" (2020) in which she contends that Woolf's influence is all over the contemporary fashion scene. From the Metropolitan Museum of Art's October 2020 gala called "About Time: Fashion and Duration" to Givenchy's Spring 2020 couture show, Woolf's theories of time and gender-bending are informing (however superficially understood) the contemporary fashion world's zeitgeist. Friedman even attributes the fashion scene's complicating of gender performance to the renaissance of Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) in popular culture thanks to queer actors like Tilda Swinton's desire to do a cinematic rendition. Friedman's assessment shows the way Woolf's own literary discussions of time and gender have found their way into the new decade's couture.

Still, it is nevertheless true that to discuss Woolf as a fashion muse is counterintuitive, since she herself had an ambivalent relationship to clothing and wasn't known as a trendsetter or a particularly fashionable person in her time. If anything, she was and is known for her frequently plain and untidy attire and appearance. In Woolf's personal writing, according to Randi Koppen, she mentions "clothes-consciousness" and "clothes-drudgery," suggesting that clothing was a burdensome, anxiety-inducing, but intriguing topic for Woolf (qtd. in Koppen 9). Furthermore, Koppen notes that Woolf's style was plain and individual rather than fashionable, "out-of-synch with the times – [her clothes] seemed somehow part of her being, merged in her" (10). So, to discuss Woolf and fashion is not to discuss her as a fashion icon of her time – quite the opposite. Indeed, her style is described as being decidedly *not* with the times, but rather expressing her individuality as opposed to her affiliation with whatever was considered particularly fashionable. It is perhaps this very fact of her being out of sync with the fashion of the moment that points to her fashion doing particularly important selfhood work for her and as doing metonymic work in her fiction: fashion can signal one's nonconformist inner self.

Woolf herself wrote five articles for *Vogue* (between 1924 and 1926) and even sat for a photoshoot in 1925, in which she wore an old dress of her mother's. After sitting for that shoot, Woolf wrote in her diary – and this is frequently cited by those who write about Woolf and fashion – that

> people have any number of states of consciousness: & I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness & c. The fashion world . . . is certainly one; where people secrete an envelope which connects them & protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies. (*D 3*: 12-13, qtd in Koppen 29)

This idea of "frock consciousness" that Woolf wishes to investigate matters when thinking about Woolf's fiction, especially in terms of how Woolf uses it to express the interiority of characters. Koppen argues that, like Charles Baudelaire, "Woolf lets fashion – and significantly the fashionable woman – represent the modern: stylized and made-up, or cross-dressed and androgynous" (45). At the same time, Woolf herself, as Koppen notes, wasn't fashion-forward, which points to her uncertainty about what fashion accomplishes or represents. Being fashionable and being unfashionable both have cultural significance – both communicate important information about the wearer.

Because of Woolf's very ambivalent attitude toward fashion and the few references to it in her fiction, there has been little scholarship done on this subject as yet, but that which does exist emphasizes how muddled Woolf's feelings were about the sartorial: that clothing allows for selfhood invention but can also be the agent of one's uniformity and conformity. In Jane Garrity's 2010 article "Virginia Woolf and Fashion," she notes that "Woolf's diary and letters are replete with references to the pleasures of getting dressed" (195). According to Garrity, Woolf saw articles of clothing as "objects of perpetual invention; to the extent that clothing makes explicit the notion of personal identity as a malleable entity, it functions for Woolf as a sign, however ambivalent, of modernity" (ibid). Clothing, for Woolf, was one means of performing one's subjectivity, was a means of making one's inner self more visible, and was also loaded with cultural meaning.

Authors of popular magazines today find such contemplations of Woolf's – about how to represent the self – just as relevant, nearly a century later. In a 2020 article in *Vanity Fair,* "Virginia Woolf, Fashion Influencer? She Might Not Have Hated the Idea," author Lucy Mckeon asks:

> Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* came into the newly image-saturated world of single-lens reflex technology and ubiquitous magazine photography; who better to turn to as we find ourselves in this second "Roaring Twenties," rife with "portrait mode" and Instagram and our own questions of representation?

Mckeon's point about Woolf's contemplations of self-representation with fashion within the context of image-technology is worth considering: Woolf's awareness of fashion as a means of communicating who one is in public is subtly present in Woolf's fiction that was written during the increasingly ubiquitous visual culture of films, advertisements, and magazines. As new as this recent occasion of popular publications about Woolf and fashion is, it is timely, as it is the centennial of the decade during which Woolf solidified her place as a cutting-edge cultural critic, aesthete, and artist who challenged hegemonic ideas about feminism and gender binaries – a topic that is very much en vogue in the early 2020s.

However, just as Woolf appreciated the way in which fashion can be a tool for making the self visible, Woolf's relationship to clothes was fundamentally ambivalent because she recognized that fashion can at once signal conformity while also signifying one's uniqueness and resistance to uniformity. Garrity puts it this way:

> fashion and sartorial discourse, although at times saturated with the values of conformity, are ultimately a means of exploring the perpetual re-making of an invented subjectivity. While fashion is not a stable or monolithic category in Woolf, clothing and fashionability function by turns as signs of contemporaneity, vehicles for self-construction, signifiers of cultural resistance, and figures for the contemplation of the boundary between self and other. (195)

For Woolf, then, fashion is a "language" that can be used to make oneself visible, to articulate parts of one's inner self, while still forming a boundary between the self and the outer world.

This point lends some clarity to why Woolf had (as Garrity mentions) so much anxiety about her own clothing and fashion choices. The stakes for dressing are higher when the act becomes a question of, "how will I construct and invent myself today?" Garrity's essay reveals Woolf's understanding "that fashion is a social, situated practice; that one's relation to dress is class-inflected; that the public purchase of commodities produces a level of anxiety that private consumption does not; that the imaginative grasp of clothes can facilitate moments of aesthetic transcendence; and that fashion often functions as a *metonym for modernity*" (Garrity 196, emphasis mine). Garrity reads Woolf seeing fashion as a metonym of modernity – as a concrete and condensed encapsulation of the gist of modernity's political, economic, and aesthetic stakes. More specifically, fashion can be both a tool of fascist conformity and of "deviant" self-expression. Fashion is a metonym that registers modernity's conformist fantasies and, at times, the countercurrents that resist these conformist fantasies.

In Woolf's fiction, fashion reveals itself as a metonym that can stand in for a character's desire to make her secret, core self visible and the way that self is incompatible with the social world. Woolf's 1924 short story "The New Dress" – the text of Woolf's most frequently referenced in relation to Woolf and fashion – shows fashion operating as metonymy for the protagonist's desire to make her true self visible. Indeed, this seems to be the single text in which Woolf makes fashion the absolute focus and point of the story. This story is about Mabel Waring, who gets a new dress made for Mrs. Dalloway's party. Mabel is anxious about whether the dress is fashionable enough, whether it is the right choice for such an event. The way Mabel interacts with her new yellow dress is full of emotional intensity and it becomes clear that the

garment stands in for something more important than a mere dress, while also pointing to the stakes that a "mere dress" can have for a social outing:

> she looked at herself with the dress on, finished, an extraordinary bliss shot through her. Suffused with light, she sprang into existence. Rid of cares and wrinkles, what she had dreamed of herself was there – a beautiful woman. Just for a second (she had not dared look longer, Miss Milan wanted to know about the length of the skirt), there looked at her, framed in the scrolloping mahogany, a grey-white, mysteriously smiling, charming girl, the core of herself, the soul of herself; and it was not vanity only, not only self love that made her think it good, tender, and true. (50)

Mabel's new dress, when she looks at herself in it in the mirror, transforms the way she sees herself momentarily – in fact she sees "the core of herself, the soul of herself." With the dress on she appears to herself as finished, as whole – her real self stands before her. This core self is revealed to her when she wears her new dress: the yellow dress expresses the "soul of herself." Mabel recognizes, too, that her love of the way the dress looks on her has nothing to do with vanity – it simply is good, tender, and true. The dress helps Mabel articulate her core self in this moment – she can see it for the first time.

But when Mabel gets to the party, she is consumed with the paranoia that her dress is all wrong, that everyone notices and that they are laughing at her:

> She faced herself straight in the glass; she pecked at her left shoulder; she issued out into the room, as if spears were thrown at her yellow dress from all sides. But instead of looking fierce or tragic, as Rose Shaw would have done – Rose would have looked like Boadicea – she looked foolish and self-conscious, and simpered like a schoolgirl and slouched across the room, positively slinking, as if she were a beaten mongrel, and

looked at a picture, an engraving. As if one went to a party to look at a picture!

Everything knew why she did it – it was from shame, from humiliation. (51)

Woolf's ambivalent attitude about fashion is made extremely apparent in the passage, since the yellow dress is at once an item that causes Mabel bliss when she is in private and then arouses in her pure misery in public when she fears that it is not quite in-style. The fact that the dress is not described at all – we are just told that it is yellow – is telling: the dress merely stands in for a secret self that Mabel longs to see. Once at the party, Mabel feels that she has revealed too much of her real self, such that she feels embarrassed and alienated. Her core self is not compatible with the social context in which she lives.

Mabel's experience points to the fact of fashion being both a means of group identification and alienation. As Vike Plock emphasizes in *Modernism, Fashion and Interwar Women Writers* (2017), "Because group identity is often maintained by a certain degree of uniformity in dress, sartorial conspicuousness can lead to isolation from communities with which the individual seeks affiliation" (1). For Mabel, her new dress emphasizes her core self in private and then ostracizes her in public when she suspects that it is too conspicuous in the wrong sort of way. Clothing can be one's ticket into a community or the cause of one's rejection from that community. Fashion allows one to distinguish oneself from others, while always existing within the shadow of anxiety about standing out to the point of being rejected as too unfamiliar, as too unique. One's clothing is like a prosthetic, an object that can stand in for one's core self, but can also be used to shelter oneself – to blend in.

In contrast to Woolf and other female modernists, male modernists could freely emphasize discussions of fashion in their work without risk of seeming silly to their readership. Women writers who wished to be taken seriously were afforded no such intellectual position to

fashion, since women have historically been mere consumers of fashion, whereas men have held the cool, distant position of the fashion critic. Plock sums up the issue this way:

> Women's long-standing, negative association with commodity culture made it much harder for female writers to employ fashion as a means to signal non-conformity, originality and difference as the trademarks of a mode of writing that hoped to challenge rather than confirm existing views about gender hierarchies. (15)

No wonder, then, that British modernists such as Woolf, Mansfield, and Sinclair, all of whom wanted to be taken seriously as artists and intellectuals, have few *direct* references to fashion in their writing. Such topics could run the risk of seeming fatuous, predictable, and certainly not modern. It is important to remember, then, that fashion being seldom referenced in a writer's work does not equal a lack of interest in fashion and the way it relates to desire and identity. Rather, it signals a cognizance of the topics "serious" women writers could feasibly discuss.

Fashion has long been a social discourse in which women have trafficked among themselves, a means of building a "feminine" identity and language. Importantly, for women and female modernist writers, "identity formation and community building were complex processes thoroughly tied up with sartorial practices" (Plock 20). Paying mind to the way fashion is used to convey female characters' interiority in Woolf's fiction is therefore also historically cogent. For Plock, modernist fashion should be read first and foremost as sartorial practice that renders visible a person's social affiliations (21). Usefully, Plock also draws a comparison between the novel and fashion: "Like fashion, its conceptually related double, the novel was seen as the flimsy by-product of commodity culture developing in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution" (24). This cliché and pejorative understanding of both the novel and fashion is something that Woolf actively refutes in her modernist project. For Woolf, both the novel and

fashion are mechanisms for making the inner self visible. Rather than viewing the novel and fashion as vain feminine pastimes, Woolf sought to make them serious methods of understanding the self. In other words, Woolf saw both cultural products having the potential to be serious art.

In addition to its artistic and personal uses, Woolf was keenly interested in the political use to which fashion is frequently put. In Woolf's mind, according to Plock,

> clothes always had immense political significance – in such obvious contexts as fascist rallies but also in the more complexly structured lived experiences of women who became – through their compliance with, or resistance to, accepted sartorial practices of the 1930s – firmly enmeshed in the socio-political structures of this politically unstable decade. (183)

As Plock emphasizes, clothing and its potential political and social implications were crucial to Woolf's interwar political thinking and composing. Woolf closely analyzed and wrote about her own and others' clothing choices in her diary (as Koppen noted) because, for her, they were always heavy with complicated political meanings. And in the 1930s, Woolf began to notice the way uniformity in clothing was being harnessed by increasingly totalitarian governments across Europe. Fascism's insistence on uniformity in clothing was intentionally set against all deviances – something that Woolf saw being applied to all aesthetic and cultural realms: visual art, literature, media, race, nationality, and so on (Plock 187).

Fashion, therefore, has the potential to do powerful political and cultural work. It can help to make visible that which would otherwise be largely kept out of sight, such as political affiliations, class, gender identity, and so on. Judith Butler's idea of gender being a "stylized repetition of acts" that one performs daily comes to mind here, since that statement's double-meaning emphasizes fashion as one of the main – if not the primary – mechanisms for both

performing and policing gender conformity (901). And, what Plock points out is that Woolf was keenly aware of the fact that "Sartorial idiosyncrasies and overindulgences are frowned upon in cases in which women hope to mark their individuality through the use of distinctive clothing" (189). In other words, women's standing out too much is condemned by patriarchal and especially fascist power structures, two systems that Woolf saw as logical extensions of each other.[22] For Plock, Woolf ponders this question: "Can the resolute choice of peculiar or extraordinary dress assist in safeguarding individuality" (191)? Committing such an act, dressing in a peculiar way, as a woman, during a time of growing nationalistic ideologies, holds particular political poignancy: to be a visibly unique woman is a political act – even an act of protest, a defiance of the conformity that nationalism demands.

2.2 Dearest Creature, Ugly Berlin

In the late 1920s, during which time nationalisms were rising across the globe, the Woolfs took a trip to Berlin. In Woolf's Berlin letters, the city serves as metonymy for her desire for Vita Sackville-West, whom she had gone there to visit, and for a more general and unnamable desire for exposure to that which is shocking and new. In Berlin, Woolf experienced – although she was vague about the particulars – a context in which people were living their taboo selves in a more public way than would have been possible in England. In this German city Woolf observed this visibility of people's more private selves, a fact that both intrigued and disgusted her. What is clear from Woolf's letters is that she remained permanently impressed by her short time in Berlin; her letters show equivocation about whether the experience was positive or negative, but it is evident Berlin serves as a placeholder for Woolf, as metonymy for as yet

[22] In Woolf's feminist economic manifesto, *Three Guineas* (1938), she makes the argument that the British patriarchal ideology is the foundation of an inevitable progression toward a fascist future.

unspeakable desires and a feeling of abjectness: Woolf at once hates Berlin and is also captivated by it.

On January 16, 1929, the Woolfs began a week's trip to Berlin. Their aim was to visit Vita and her husband Harold Nicolson, the then-First Secretary to the Embassy in Berlin. Woolf's experience of, and feelings toward, Berlin and Germany in general reveal an impressive disgust for the country, its capital city, and its people—which, when plumbed, reveals an ambivalent fascination with them. Strangely, on the Woolfs' return trip from Berlin, Virginia became very ill with what was thought to be a flu of some kind and fell into what she later characterized in a letter (discussed below) as a coma-like state. She was subsequently bedridden for a great deal of time upon her return to England. This post-Germany illness renders visible and physical Woolf's tumultuous feelings about Berlin and its significance to her. My analysis of Woolf's personal letters leading up to her trip and those that she wrote after she returned home suggests that Berlin during the Weimar Republic, for Woolf, was the abject: it was *visibly* queer, chaotic, and unclean—qualities that would understandably conflict with Woolf's educated, upper-class English sensibilities regarding what should be kept out of sight.[23]

Interestingly, Woolf isn't specific about what she did while in Berlin – she speaks mostly about its effect on her. There is also scant scholarship on Woolf and Berlin. Colin Storer's "Weimar Republic as Seen by an English Woman: British Women Writers and the Weimar Republic" from the *German Studies Review* briefly references Woolf's and other modern British women writers' reactions to Berlin. Unfortunately, Storer's reading of Woolf's relationship to Berlin falls short, in my view, in one major way: he posits that the reason Woolf doesn't write about Berlin's shocking nightlife scene is that she likely didn't think it important or intriguing:

[23] To my knowledge there has been no published in-depth analysis of Woolf's relationship to Berlin in particular, and certainly nothing that claims that Berlin was the abject for Woolf.

> It may be that these women felt it was not seemly to write about the wickedness of Berlin in their published works . . . But by far the most convincing explanation is that they simply regarded such things as unimportant or uninteresting. Whatever the reasons for this difference in the treatment of Berlin's nightlife, it demonstrates that Berlin's decadence was perhaps not as common or extreme as some British writers would have us believe (141).

This analysis of Storer's is unconvincing in that it relies on the tired trope of monied and intellectual English women being uninterested in sexual discourses and spaces. Contrary to Storer, I find it more probable that Woolf, well aware of her necessarily precarious reputation as a woman writer and of real censorship risks, knew better than to write about her potential nightlife excursions (such as those that the doctor and Leonard imply contributed to her illness). Her "rackety" forays into Berlin's nightlife, regardless of how scandalous, were surely unsuited for her published writings, since Woolf was committed to being taken seriously as an artist and intellectual.

Woolf was highly cognizant of the censorship laws of the interwar years and the fact that women artists were more stringently censored. In her fiction, Woolf continuously attempts to manipulate language (or as Julia Kristeva puts it: to pulverize language (*Revolution…* 88) in order to express what there is no adequate language for and perhaps to get across that which cannot be said because of social mores or censorship laws. According to Celia Marshik's *British Modernism and Censorship* (2006), even as early as 1908 Woolf was acutely aware of what women could and could not write but was really interested in writing about "sexually and thus morally marginal figures," particularly prostitutes (88). At that time, Woolf hadn't yet published any fiction but was already contributing reviews and essays to the *Cornhill Magazine* and was

anxious about whether the editor would censor her work for using words like “mistress” or “prostitute” (Marshik 88).

The 1857 Obscene Publications (Campbell) Act and the 1883 Society for the Suppression of Blasphemous Literature were two entities that policed publications and even tried to suppress one of Woolf’s father’s works (Marshik 89). Woolf herself published an anti-censorship article in 1920 and was staunchly against public morality crusaders (90). However, Marshik emphasizes that Woolf existed, as all people do, on a spectrum in her beliefs on censorship. Woolf was uncomfortable with “explicit representations of sexuality and the breaking of some taboos. Woolf . . . felt that some work merited censorship” (91), which James Heffernan has also argued in his discussion of Woolf’s dislike of James Joyce’s lewdness. Marshik contends that Woolf engaged in consistent self-censorship throughout her fiction writing career and that *Orlando: A Biography* (1938) was the most she pushed the morality envelope.

When Woolf and Leonard established the Hogarth Press in 1917, she said in her diary that she might be “the only woman in England free to write what I like” (*Diary 3*, 43). Still, as per the Campbell Act, Woolf’s position as a publisher actually made her personally liable for any obscenity convictions against any Hogarth publications, which, if anything, added to her incentive to self-censor. This self-censorship was part of what allowed Woolf’s fiction to remain in the public’s – and the law’s – good graces, unlike writers like Jean Rhys who became marginalized for her “sordid” fiction about prostitutes (Marshik 94). Marshik points out the double standard that the female author faced in the public eye: if she wrote about a prostitute, she was considered to be a prostitute herself, whereas if a man did the same, he was seen as nothing worse than a john (94). Woolf had to find a way to interrogate power and prejudices while keeping herself uncensored and while also navigating her own real squeamishness about explicit

sexuality. An important part of Woolf's modernist project, then, became expressing subjects that are beyond the reach of *available* language, that are unspeakable due to censorship or otherwise inadequate language. Ironically, Woolf's pervasive self-censorship must perhaps be credited with helping to shape Woolf's innovative formal decisions such as the metonymy she uses for new modes of articulating female desire.

In all, we simply cannot know what Woolf experienced of Berlin's nightlife because she does not write as much, even in her personal writings. Nevertheless, in what follows, I provide a reading of Woolf's discussion of Berlin, Germany, and Germanness in her letters with several individuals and its confusing allure for her. Fittingly, most of her correspondence about this topic is with Vita.[24] When Vita told Woolf that she is moving to Berlin to join her husband Harold, Woolf was disappointed both in the fact of Vita moving and in the city that would be her home.

In a short 1927 letter to Vita (whom she often addresses as "My Dearest Creature"), Woolf writes: "Oh how damned! I'd been hoping for London, unreasonably" (431). In a footnote, editors Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann explain: "Harold had just heard of his appointment as First Secretary to the Embassy in Berlin." Woolf goes on to express her sadness about Vita moving, but also to suggest that Vita might hate it there: "I am so unhappy. Will the people there be an awful bore? Shall you hate it? Does Harold? You won't go for long will you?" (431). Then, in 1928, in a letter to Woolf's friend Hugh Walpole, she anticipates her own trip to Berlin:

> Vita has promised to show us night life in Berlin; my sister and Duncan Grant have it on their conscience that German galleries should be visited. Leonard wants to hear every

[24] Vita and Woolf, both married to men (out of the two, Woolf seemed to be the one who actually had a loving relationship with her husband and a more traditional marriage in that way), were lovers, friends, companions, and intellectual partners.

> opera ever written. I shall go to a thing called the Planetarium (or some such name) where you see the stars as they are – so imagine us at our different occupations, meeting to drink at intervals, coffee, beer, all wrapped in rugs and bearskins for it is said you can't shock the Germans by uncouthness – and then we all come home again and start afresh in February. (567)

For Woolf, Berlin was, at least prior to her trip, a place where art, nightlife, and science are major attractions. Most interestingly, though, Berlin clearly represents, for Woolf, a place of uncouthness – where it is nearly impossible to shock by wearing "bearskins," for example. That the object of Woolf's trip was visiting Vita, her lover, makes her characterization of Berlin as a place full of shock and awe particularly interesting. That Woolf imagines – even in jest – wearing such a strange, uncouth garment – a bearskin – in Berlin points again to Woolf's fascination with Berlin's audacious relationship to being visibly unconventional and wild. At the same time, it also demonstrates Woolf's prejudice against the "uncivilized" Germans, a common conceit among the British, especially after World War One.

Interestingly, in the final clause of the above letter, Woolf implies that she foresees coming home from Berlin refreshed – ironic in light of the illness she contracted on her trip home. In any case, she perhaps still presciently foresaw that she would be permanently affected by her trip to Berlin, a city which Windham Lewis's *Hitler* (1931) "devoted an entire chapter to the condemn[ing] . . . as 'the Haupstadt of Vice,' and 'the *quartier-général* of dogmatic Perversity—the Perverts' Paradise, the Mecca of both Lesb and So'" (qtd. in Storer 141). Here, Woolf's male counterpart paints an entirely licentious image of Berlin, which is one that Woolf does not corroborate – but certainly doesn't refute – in her letters. This divergence between these two English modernists' accounts of Berlin could have multiple explanations, one being that

Lewis might have sought out particularly tawdry locales – something that seems to be confirmed by the surely hyperbolic descriptions he gives. But again, as I have already suggested, Woolf was also acutely aware of what she could and could not put into words as a woman, not to mention what sites she could visit, especially while on a trip with her husband. It is therefore difficult to say what her true view of Berlin's "vice" and "perversity" was, especially since, as Marshik points out, Woolf was uncomfortable with lascivious writing. It is furthermore hard to say what the extent of Woolf's self-censorship was in her diary and letters. Even so, both Lewis and Woolf were undeniably shocked and imprinted by Germany's extraordinary capital.

To be sure, in Woolf's letters that follow her trip to Berlin (*Volume 4)*, during which time she is recovering from being ill, she seems to be unable to stop talking about the city. In her letters from January and February 1929, Woolf mentions Berlin in almost every one. Even in the next letter series of March-May, which is around the time Vita returned from Berlin, Woolf still mentions the city and her trip in several of her letters.[25] In short, it is clear that the experience of visiting Berlin and the illness she caught there haunted her, but not in a way that could be articulated eloquently—there seems to be no language available for this articulation. Woolf noted in her letters to Vita how unhappy Vita's letters from Berlin were, though it is unclear whether it was the city itself or her distance from Woolf that was the cause of her unhappiness.

---

[25] At the beginning of this letter series the editors give contextual and historical information that the reader may find useful, since some of it is not included in the letters I reference in this chapter:

> On 16 January Virginia and Leonard went for a week's holiday to Berlin, where they were joined by Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell and her younger son Quentin (now aged 18). Virginia's main purpose was to visit Vita Sackville-West, who was staying in Berlin for two months with her husband Harold Nicolson, then Counsellor at the British Embassy. The visit was not wholly a success. The Woolfs disliked the Germans, the city and its social obligations. During the journey back to England on 25 January Virginia was taken ill. The cause was partly the "rackety" life they had led in Berlin, and partly a seasick sedative which she took on board the ship from Holland to Harwich, where she fell into a temporary coma. For a month she was more or less permanently bed-ridden, while London endured one of the worst frosts on record. Although she was able to write some journalism, she found it impossible to start her new novel *The Waves*. She saw few visitors, and her main correspondent was Vita, who did not return from Berlin until the end of February. (1)

After Woolf's return to England, she wrote on January 27, 1929, from her sickbed, a letter to Vita explaining her state: "Quite drugged. But I'm better. Only of course the dr. makes me stay in bed and do nothing. I wish it had happened in Berlin. I wish I could see you. Do write. I'm much better today. Berlin was quite worth it anyhow" (7-8). This same ambivalence about Berlin and its association for Woolf with Vita continues in another letter, written the day after:

> I see you with extreme distinction – Well anyhow it was worth the week with you. I think of the tower and the lights and the waves and the shell room at Sans Souci and you, and you – Next week is Feb. 1st so there's really not long to wait. But Lord! What a horror Berlin and diplomacy are! I'd no idea till I'd seen it" (8-9).

This equivocation about Berlin, its being both the cause of illness, a "horror," but also a place wherein she and Vita spent meaningful time together, is pervasive throughout Woolf's letters. Woolf can't, it seems, neatly categorize its meaning to her. In the second letter quoted above, Woolf twice lacks the words to complete her thought and she instead uses an em dash (as she did in the line from *The Voyage Out*, quoted earlier) indicating a lack of adequate language. It is worth paying attention to the way the em dash looks on the page and the way it appears as a line that denotes an "above" and a "below" – it denotes both a surface and subcutaneous meaning. It suggests a fractional quantity: a part of a whole. It points to a lack or an omission. The em dash, in Woolf's writing (as well as in Keun's, Mansfield's, and Sinclair's) renders visible a lack of language for a particular idea, meaning, or feeling. The em dash also has a prosthetic quality and stands in for something more real that is absent.

Woolf is undeniably haunted, in her recovery period, by Berlin and its ugliness, Berlin and its allure. In another footnote, the editors give an excerpt from a letter written by Leonard to Vita regarding the cause of Woolf's illness: "My own theory is that she did too much in Berlin

and that the late nights reduced her to the last gasp; she was on the point of breakdown when she took the Somnifène [motion sickness sedative] which for some reason or other affected her wrongly" (8). Woolf herself wrote to Vita of this hypothesis in a January 30th letter: "Leonard and the dr. says its [*sic*] my rackety life in Berlin. But why this change in 10 seconds? I'm really better, only rather cross that it takes so long. And that I cant [*sic*] see you" (10). This speculation about her Berlin lifestyle's role in the illness goes on in a letter written the very next day, again to Vita: "Everything is put down to Berlin. I am never to walk round a gallery or sit up drinking again. All my adventures are to be lying down—which will suit, in some ways. Really I am rather better, and make up a book to be called The Moths [*The Waves*] hour after hour . . . .Lord! how the ugliness of Berlin remains with me" (11). The obvious meaning of "everything," here, is her illness. But her use of this open signifier is compelling, since she goes on to speak of her creative mulling-over of her new novel, which irrefutably represents a new phase in her novel project, the one that broke all the genre rules. Her phrasing here suggests, then, that more than just her illness can be "put down" to Berlin—that it served, perhaps, as a creative catalyst for her novel *The Waves* (1931).

Woolf's declaration: "Lord! how the ugliness of Berlin remains with me," shows how Berlin's "ugliness" is imprinted on Woolf, and how Woolf seems to protest too much: that Woolf, a woman of many words, would repeat the word "ugly" again and again suggests that Berlin has provoked her aesthetically, has piqued her interest. Woolf again returns to this topic that haunts her, Berlin's "ugliness," in a February 1st letter to Vita:

> The sight of you on [the] street at Berlin is my last record of humanity. There were two Germans in the carriage—fat, greasy, the woman with broken nails. The man peeled an orange for her. She squeezed his hand. It was repulsive. Perhaps in time one might come

> to think this complete unadornment beautiful—morally—after many many years . . . What I can't understand is why if theyre [*sic*] right about Berlin, I felt quite well there, only shivery that day at Sans Souci. However—I'm much better. (12)

This uncharitable and rather grotesque description of Berlin's streets and its people – who she seems to count as separate from Vita's humanity – is something to pay attention to: why is Woolf's last memory before her illness of Vita amidst a wash of Berlin's ugliness? More confounding still is that she muses for a moment that one might come to find this ugliness morally beautiful, that with time and immersion one's eye might be trained. This waffling about the aesthetics of Berlin continues in a letter a few days later to her nephew, Julian Bell, in which Woolf playfully recalls: "the trapesing in Berlin was terrific. Nessa poisoned me with a seasick draught. I sank into coma and am still in bed" (13). With her characteristic equivocation, Woolf gives an account of Berlin that is decidedly positive and does not denote horror: it is "terrific" and not the cause of her illness – rather, the seasick draught "poisoned" her. Furthermore, as Woolf states in her previous letter to Vita, she felt "quite well" in Berlin.

Woolf continues her recollections of Berlin and her frustrated speculations on whether it caused her illness in a February 4th letter to Vita:

> But of course the dr and Leonard say its [sic] all the Berlin racketing (I dare say it was) on the top of the others . . . I like to think of you all lit up among Nuncios and footmen. Its [*sic*] a weakness of mine. Part of your glamour, I suppose. On the other hand, Berlin glamour seems only that of Woolworths and Lyons Corner House—its immeasurable mediocrity still affects me . . . . When shall I begin The Moths? That's what I want to know. (13)

Here Woolf again refers to the diagnosis of Berlin "racketing" – which presumably is a reference to her exciting outings of all sorts in Berlin. But what's most interesting here is the way in which Woolf again (as she did in her February 1st letter to Vita) compares Vita to Berlin: Berlin is the unglamorous, mediocre backdrop to Vita's glamour. Yet the immeasurable mediocrity of Berlin's glamor still affects Woolf; again, Woolf protests a little too much as to Berlin's shortcomings. Furthermore, Woolf discusses her coming novel directly after discussing her illness, as if creative ferment is entwined with her illness.[26] Woolf goes on to reference an unusual interaction that Vita had with a female photographer in Berlin, in which the photographer showed Vita images "of an indecency which I won't describe" (14). For both Vita and Woolf, Berlin seems to be aligned with the indecent – a place that shocks. For better or for worse (a judgment that Woolf never actually makes) Berlin and its aftermath left her sense of aesthetics altered.

In a letter to her sister Vanessa from February 7th, Woolf writes "It has been rather desperate being in bed a fortnight with this cursed disease, but Berlin was great fun in many ways – humans and pictures. Never again though. Even what I see of London from the window has an incredible distinction" (15). Berlin is at once great fun while also a place Woolf declares she will never visit again (although she does end up visiting Germany again in 1935 with Leonard)[27] and a place that cannot compare to London (just as the Berliners and their streets could not compare to Vita's glamor). Most compelling of all in this sentence is when Woolf pairs

---

[26] In Woolf's essay "On Being Ill" (1930) she discusses the way in which illness serves as an artistic opportunity, in that it provides one with a different perspective on life.

[27] In her letters about this trip, Woolf expresses dismay at the state of Germany's political scene but seems noticeably optimistic, especially in terms of the danger faced by the Jews. In a letter to Ethyl Smyth, for example, she says that she and Leonard are in no real danger as Jews traveling through Germany. Such sentiments by Woolf are chilling, in that they are a reminder of how the destruction Hitler wrought was not really foreseen by the English, even in 1935. For more on this, see *Volume Five* of her letters.

the "humans and pictures" together on the other side of the em dash. The humans and the cinema – subjects and object – of Berlin are blended together in Woolf's memory of "great fun."

In a letter from the same day to Vita, Woolf writes:

> No, I didn't feel tired in Berlin—I'd had three weeks rest before and felt very well. That's the odd thing—but anyhow, if it was Berlin, you and your motor car made it infinitely less tiring than it would have been. I believe its [sic] partly that awful airlessness. But now lets [*sic*] talk of something else. Lord, I'm glad to address this to Rapallo. The thought of you in Berlin makes me irritable. (16)

In Berlin, Woolf felt fine, but in leaving it she became ill. Then, Woolf proposes a change of subject, but immediately returns to thinking of Vita in Berlin, a thought she says makes her irritable. She calls the city "very exhausting; very large; very cold; lots of music" in a letter to Hugh Walpole from February 10th (19). And in one of Woolf's more vague and titillating letters to Vita from February 12th, she writes: "I'm telling the doctor that its, as you say, due to suppressed randiness. Thats true. But also, its suppressed imagination" (20-21). In a footnote, the editors explain what Woolf means by referring to "suppressed randiness":

> Vita had written soon after Virginia left Berlin: 'You won't get this till after you have been to Long Barn, which I hope will have reminded you of me a little, and perhaps revived in you something of those feelings to which you gave such startling and disturbing expression in the Funkturm [a tower in Berlin in which they dined].' In a later letter from Berlin, Vita accused Virginia of 'suppressed randiness . . . . You remember your admissions as the searchlight went round and round.' (20)

Here we learn that Woolf admitted something lecherous and shocking to Vita while they dined in a tower in Berlin, something that Vita hopes her letter will rekindle in Woolf. Although notably,

Vita does *not* repeat Woolf's "admission." This is particularly interesting in that it points to the way Berlin was a place in which Woolf felt shocking things might be readily expressed. Furthermore, although Woolf's racy comment seems to be said in jest, it is worth considering this: Woolf's indecent comment to Vita led Vita to suggest that Woolf had suppressed lust, to which Woolf suggested that she also suffered from suppressed imagination. For Woolf, suppressed lust – suppressed desire! – stultifies the imagination.

But just as Woolf sees Berlin as a place in which shocking things might be said, she also refers to it as a cage for Vita (23, 26) – again, it is a place that Woolf has a hard time categorizing. In a January 24, 1929 postcard, Woolf writes to Mary Hutchinson from – and of – Berlin: "It is incredibly ugly – Berlin I mean – very cold; but extremely gay. I dined on the top of the Eiffel tower [Funkturm] last night with Vita, who sends her love" (*Volume Six*…525). Here, where I end my discussion of Woolf's letters about Berlin, it's worth emphasizing Woolf's nuanced and conflicting description of Berlin as ugly, cold, but extremely gay – and ultimately, a place that she deeply associates with Vita. Although "gay" likely wasn't used to denote "homosexual" in England in the 1920s, it is worth noting, however, that according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it began to be used that way in the U.S. as early as 1922 – Gertrude Stein is referenced as using "gay" as a colloquialism for homosexuality.[28] In any case, "gay" as a descriptor of Berlin is still a tellingly capacious word choice for the mark that Berlin left on Woolf: as a place that stands in for unspeakable desires for versions of Woolf's self that she cannot, or will not, articulate.

Contrary to Storer's earlier speculation that Woolf was not interested in profane subjects or locales, there is further evidence to suggest otherwise. That the profane and the indecent

[28] See the *OED* on the etymology of "gay" and its use as early as 1922 in the U.S. by Gertrude Stein: https://www-oed-com.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/view/Entry/77207?rskey=QwcPrL&result=1#eid

greatly intrigued Woolf has recently become an object of scholarly study. James Heffernan and Erin Penner are just two critics interested in Woolf's ambivalence toward the indecent. In "Tracking a Reader: What Did Virginia Woolf Really Think of *Ulysses*?" Heffernan argues that Woolf's ambivalent fascination with James Joyce's work stemmed from the frequent indecencies that populated Joyce's texts, since in her personal writing she complains of these, though the complaints are always couched within an annoyed captivation.

Furthermore, Woolf understood profanity being able to do important cultural and political work in language, a case made in Penner's essay, "'Curse This War': Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Profanity." Penner argues that "Though profanity does little to move conventional meaning through a sentence, it does precisely what Woolf wants it to do: draw attention to the cultural contexts that undermine individual freedom even as they appear to offer it" (851). Penner goes on to argue that "Woolf doesn't reach for profanity in order to shock. Instead, she does draw attention to how it has become a general-use receptacle for regret and apathy" (858). According to Penner, Woolf saw profanity only providing an appearance of candor – more of a performance of candor than any real indication of authenticity on the part of the speaker.

Penner also points out that Woolf recognized the way profanity is often inclined toward misogyny either in its implication or in at whom it is directed (861). Ultimately, Penner suggests that Woolf cautions her readers about the use of profanity, since its legacy shows its proximity to insulting women and promoting violence. But Woolf does, according to Penner, see the potential for liberating profanity from such uses, since profanity can be used as a protest against conventions established by those in power. So, for Woolf, the profane is intriguing because its use and meaning are contingent on context. Woolf's project, whether she includes profanity or not (which she rarely does and Penner notes that her go-to swear is "Damn"), is always

concerned with attempting to free herself from, or at least sidestep, the patriarchal forces that seek to control her language. Woolf's use of metonymy in her fiction was one such method of sidestepping the limits the patriarchy set on language and by extension, female desire.

2.3 Unspeakable Desire in Woolf's Novels

Scholarship that discusses female desire in Woolf's work does so mostly in terms of sexuality. This has the unintentional effect of fusing desire and sexuality into nearly one idea that must be addressed together. This does a disservice to both concepts and I wish to begin to remedy this dearth of criticism about desire in its own right. Female desire, broadly conceived, is a major focus of Woolf's works – both fiction and nonfiction. For my own part, I consider desire capaciously rather than keeping it necessarily yoked to sexual desire. To be sure, sexual desire is an undeniable and important element of Woolf's fiction, but desire in its own right – such as for a life and identity outside of the domestic space or for an emotional and spiritual connection with another woman – is just as significant.

Furthermore, theories of sexuality about Woolf's fiction often prescribe a particular sort of sexuality that we ought to attribute to particular characters, to Woolf herself, or even to Woolf's entire oeuvre. Whole collections of essays such as *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings* edited be Eileen Barret and Patricia Cramer, as merely one example, read moments of rejection of heteronormative and gender role expectations as necessarily lesbian. Such essays in the collection, like those titled "The Things People Don't Say: Lesbian Panic in *The Voyage Out,"* and "Unmasking Lesbian Passion: the Inverted World of Mrs. Dalloway," for example, read characters' ambivalence about or outright eschewing of heteronormativity as being entirely about sexuality, rather than about a more capacious desire for all that lies beyond that limit.

Moments of desire for that which lies beyond a husband or home, or even moments where a woman longs for another woman are almost always read by Woolf scholars as indicating a queer sexuality. These readings are valuable queer and feminist scholarship, but I want to suggest that we can lose opportunities for understanding the nuances of Woolf's work if we read desire as necessarily yoked to sexuality and if we read sexuality in Woolf as part of a discrete sexual category. There is no doubt that Woolf's modernist project troubles heteronormativity—about that we can be certain, but I want to caution against taking that to mean that Woolf herself belonged to a particular sexual identity or that her work should be always read through a particular sexuality's lens. Woolf was highly skeptical of sexual categories and nomenclatures and did not claim allegiance to one; the language available for discussing sexuality did not seem to satisfy Woolf. Keeping this roomier conception of desire in mind, then, we can now turn to the way I see desire being expressed in a selection of Woolf's interwar novels.

Mrs. Dalloway (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Between the Acts* (1939) contain moments that attempt to render the interiority of female characters by way of objects in the external world of the novel. Even in *Mrs. Dalloway*'s famous first line, "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself," there's already the whisper of the external world articulating things that go unsaid – things that, perhaps, have no other means of articulation. We immediately get the idea that these flowers, which Mrs. Dalloway has at some point declared she would buy herself, represent something larger, more profound, but something that, nevertheless, is reduced to "flowers" instead. And, of course, in the plot of the story, Clarissa Dalloway is, indeed, buying flowers and other provisions for her party that evening. The flowers themselves do hold aesthetic importance for Clarissa's artistic vision as well as Woolf's. Still, it is such moments in Woolf's fiction that I will focus on here. My concern is with such instances in which female characters

relate to the external world in a way that helps to fill in gaps in language and to articulate their desire to know their inner, private selves.

Within the first few pages of the novel, the way that Clarissa conceives of herself in relation to the external world unfurls in her mind as she goes about London preparing for the party she will have that evening:

> Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended so absolutely? But that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, her self. (8-9)

In Clarissa's existential contemplations she conceives of herself as being part of all that she comes into "contact" with—even the ugly house she sees as she makes her way up the street. She then articulates this by conceiving of herself as a mist laid out between the people who she knows best, like the mist that clings between the trees and spreads far beyond them. The only way to articulate her inner self is by conceiving of it as a mist among trees. For Clarissa, the misty trees stand in for something much more elusive and ephemeral: "her life, her self" that she hopes will live on after her body is gone. When Clarissa returns home from shopping there is another attempt at this articulation:

> The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and, bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought (as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only); not for a moment did she believe in God. (29)

Here Clarissa has a moment in which she feels a reverence for her life and for its most banal particulars: the cook whistling, the click of the typewriter. Clarissa conceives of her life as a compilation of moments that become buds on the tree of her life. These moments of being, "moments like this," that have no real significance to anyone other than her, are nevertheless buds on Clarissa's tree. Again, as in the opening lines of the novel, Clarissa's moment of awareness of her own life, of feeling "blessed," is conveyed with floral imagery. Her private moment and intimate feeling about a banal instant of her life are "buds on a tree of life;" they are rendered into physical objects. These buds on the tree of life, these "flowers of darkness," express something spiritual for her – they take the place of a belief in God. These buds express her life, her self.

The climactic and epiphanic scene in which Clarissa recalls Sally Seton kissing her when they were young women is another such instance in which there is no language for Clarissa's feelings. Therefore, she employs objects to help her articulate them:

> Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower, kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—a

> diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling! (35-36)

This passage contains striking syntactical ambivalence regarding who or what is the object of a particular action: pronouns are used in place of "Clarissa" and sometimes "Sally." The shockingly direct line "kissed her on the lips" is immediately contrasted with what follows, which is the kiss being presented as an object, a present wrapped up, a diamond – reminiscent of Mao's earlier referenced gem-hard moment that modernists strive to create.

There is, at first, no description of how Clarissa feels while being kissed, or afterward, in terms of her emotions or bodily sensations, rather "she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up." Clarissa's reaction to being kissed on the mouth by Sally is conveyed by way of turning it into a solid object – a thing that can be readily articulated and described. The precious object then burns through the wrap and turns back into a feeling: "the revelation, the religious feeling!" First, Clarissa's feeling about being kissed by Sally is described as a solid object, rendering it more real – or at least more articulable, and it is then described as something far more vague, subjective, abstract, even cliché: the revelation, the religious feeling. It is important, too, that the definite article "the" is used rather than the indefinite article "a," as there is a definitiveness, an attribution of feeling to something exact: Clarissa experiences *the* revelation, *the* religious feeling, about her kiss from Sally. The "the" brings those feelings closer to something identifiable, something articulable. And yet, the diamond somehow comes closest to describing her feelings for Sally: a precious object that must be kept enwrapped.

Even in Peter Walsh's memory of Clarissa, she describes her relationship to the world in a similar way:

> But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her skepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death . . . perhaps—perhaps. (153)

Clarissa uses the external world, in Peter's memory of their conversation, to explain her spiritual transcendental theory. Her theory has everything to do with the world and its objects such as "some woman in the street, some man behind a counter – even trees, or barns," that one could know her by, objects with which she has an odd affinity that can't really be articulated. These objects express the unseen part of her. As she said while waving her hands: "she was all that." The "that," of course, is the world outside of her.

Toward the end of the passage, it becomes clear that Clarissa sees the "unseen part of us" as the part of us that might be seen or recovered (after the seen part of us, our bodies, decompose), in its proximity to things in the external world, such as other people or objects. She perceives the unseen part of us as "perhaps" haunting the world after the seen part of us is gone.

This spiritual theory of Clarissa's also articulates Woolf's own theory of her novel form, which seeks to render the unseen, rhizomic selves of people. The inner self can be seen in all the people, places, and things we encounter over the course of our lives.

In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Mrs. Ramsay's suspended moment with the Lighthouse (this word is capitalized throughout the novel as if it were a proper noun) is epiphanic, spiritual, and transcendental. This moment occurs halfway through the first section of the novel, "The Window," in which Mrs. Ramsay is sitting with her youngest son James, while she knits and he works on a craft project. In this long passage, Mrs. Ramsay's free-indirect discourse is enchanting – we bear witness to her consciousness as it meditatively contemplates her "core" self:

> This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles) but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at—that light, for example . . . It will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord.

> But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. (62-63)

Here we witness Mrs. Ramsay, in her mind, turn into a "dark wedge" (which is the way in which Lily Briscoe represents Mrs. Ramsay in her painting, as an object, that Mrs. Ramsay has not actually seen—suggesting some level of mental confluence between the two women). This core, this wedge of darkness, is a private refuge for Mrs. Ramsay, a private self within which she finds rest and freedom because she is no longer her public self. These private moments in which Mrs. Ramsay becomes her core self allow her to connect to "eternity" and to attach herself to objects she looks at in the external world, such as the Lighthouse, and its strokes become "her strokes." Suddenly, though, her thought is invaded by a religious cliché: "We are in the hands of the Lord," to which she responds in annoyance that she felt trapped into thinking such an expression, that it wasn't of her own making.

From this contamination of her thoughts by someone else's words, though, Mrs. Ramsay recovers and refocuses her gaze on the external object, the Lighthouse:

> She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie. She praised herself in praising the light, without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light. It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at the long steady light) as for oneself. (63-64)

The Lighthouse's strokes of light become, for Mrs. Ramsay, her own eyes, searching her thoughts and purging them of "any lie" such as "We are in the hands of the Lord." As with Clarissa Dalloway, moments like this also trigger a rejection of God, the Lord, suggesting that these moments hold great spiritual weight for these characters. In moments alone in her mind Mrs. Ramsay becomes the inanimate objects in the external world at which she looks – and thus expresses herself through objects in the outside world. Her subjectivity is anchored, rendered real, solid, and pure in these moments in which she is left to herself and her chosen objects that become and express her.

Mrs. Ramsay's moment with her inner self continues and ends in orgasmic transcendence:

> [S]he looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across her bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in the waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough, It is enough! (64-65)

Certainly, this passage builds up to an ecstatic state in Mrs. Ramsay's mind in which she experiences exquisite happiness that is triggered or at least affected by the outer world that she searches with her eyes. The feeling, we gather, is the most private and pleasurable there is. This

sort of erotic and imaginative relationship with the material world provides Mrs. Ramsay with the access and articulation of her core self that she desires most.

In *Between the Acts* (1939) there is a particularly important scene in which this desire vis-à-vis metonymy occurs. Lucy, a late-middle-aged widow who is intellectually tyrannized by her brother, becomes that which she looks at in the external world – not unlike Mrs. Ramsay becoming the Lighthouse:

> Lucy gazed at the lily pool. "All gone," she murmured, "under the leaves." Scared by shadows passing, the fish had withdrawn. She gazed at the water. Perfunctorily she caressed her cross. But her eyes went water searching, looking for fish. The lilies were shutting; the red lily, the white lily, each on its plate of leaf. Above, the air rushed; beneath was water. She stood between two fluidities, caressing her cross. (204)

The lilies exist between the air and the water, suspended and pushed upon, with equal force, by both substances. Lucy then becomes the lilies, "stood between two fluidities," suspended, but still caressing the solid object of Christian and patriarchal iconography, the cross, that she wears around her neck. Not only is this concept of being "stood between two fluidities" the most apt description I can imagine of Woolf's conception of subjective time in her novels, but here Lucy becomes the lily on the surface of the water, "stood" between the rushing air above her and the flowing water below her.

As Ann Banfield has theorized, this sort of time in Woolf's novels can be understood as moments of being – moments that stand out to us as distinct, memorable, and permanent – that are solid and static, suspended; objective and mathematical. Clock time passes between those

suspended moments.[29] Not only does Lucy herself turn into the lilies, she also is searching for something that is depicted as fish that are hiding in the shadows of the pond. Lucy is full of unspoken desire for freedom from her social condition throughout the novel and this scene uses the fish and the lilies as metonymic placeholders for that which she cannot articulate: a self that exists between fluidities rather than the bounded self she experiences in her daily life.

[29] In other words, moments of being exist like a lily on a pond with the air rushing above it and the water rushing below it: like being stood between two fluidities. Although Woolf's conception of time in her fiction is outside the scope of this chapter, it is yet another way in which Woolf attempts to render the amorphous solid.

CHAPTER 3

Katherine Mansfield's Desperate Housewives and Metonymic Desire

"[M]ake me your mistress." – Katherine Mansfield[30]

Despite her parents' early efforts to shape her into a respectable Edwardian lady, Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) had a multiplicity of unconventional desires, many of which she unapologetically pursued throughout her short, secretive, and provocative life.[31] Still, in a 1906 teenage letter to her favorite cousin, Sylvia Payne, we see that Mansfield's desire to determine her own destiny – and the futility of that desire – is potent:

> I am so keen upon all women having a *definite* future – are not you? The idea of sitting and waiting for a husband is absolutely revolting – and it really is the attitude of a great many girls [. . .] It rather made me smile to read of your wishing you could create your fate – O how many times I have [. . .] felt just the same. I just long for power over circumstances. (*Letters* 1, 18)

Clearly, Mansfield saw traditional marriage and gender roles as obstacles to women creating their own fates and defining their futures. What is also evident in this letter is that Mansfield does not see an avenue for such "power over circumstances" available to women, but she longs for it all the same.

Indeed, Mansfield's constant condition in life was one of longing for more than the social expectations that were impressed upon women – such as heteronormative marriage and its

---

[30] Quoted in Claire Tomalin, *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life,* p. 104. This bold request was an invitation Mansfield made to John Middleton Murry, which he initially rejected but ultimately acquiesced to.

[31] According to Tomalin's biography, Mansfield "transformed into multiple alternative versions to suit different moods, different friends, different facets of her personality: Kass, Katie, K.M., Mansfield, Katherine, Julian Mark, Katherine Schönfeld, Matilda Berry, Katharina, Katiushka, Kissienka, Elizabeth Stanley, Tig" (5). This etymology of her name is worth noting and contemplating here, as it speaks to Mansfield's personal interest in language's simultaneous mutability and insufficiency. For Mansfield, even her own name did not always seem to adequately describe her.

generic domestic trappings. Her fervently desirous self is further evidenced in a 1915 letter that Mansfield wrote to her then-lover John Middleton Murry, whom she married in 1918 (Tomalin 40):

> I *want* things. Shall I ever have them? To write all the morning and then to get lunch over quickly and to write again in the afternoon & have supper and *one* cigarette together and then to be alone again until bed-time – and all this love and joy that fights for outlet – and all this life drying up, like milk, in an old breast. Oh, I want life – I want friends and people and a house. I want to give and to spend. (*Letters* 1, 177)

The first sentence is direct and audacious. Mansfield's own emphasis on the word "want" makes it the focus of her letter, forcefully proclaiming that what follows in her note will be more about what she desires and, indeed, she does go on to list several items: to write, to have friends, to have a house. How to accurately convey that desire became a dominant preoccupation in both Mansfield's personal writing and her fiction.

Mansfield was unrivalled in her capacity to sharply perceive – and then to convey in her fiction – impressions of daily life. So claims Virginia Woolf in her essay "A Terribly Sensitive Mind" (1927), in which she analyzes passages of Mansfield's diary.[32] We witness, writes Woolf, "the spectacle of a mind [. . .] receiving one after another the haphazard impressions of eight

[32] Those who have read Woolf's many essays in which she gives her analyses of various writers know that she was not in the habit of casually and unequivocally praising writers' abilities. On the contrary, she is remembered for her rather cutting, but measured and well-reasoned, reviews (for some examples, see such essays as: "Phases of Fiction," "George Eliot," "Mrs. Bennett and Mr. Brown," and "An Essay in Criticism"). The rare essay of hers that praises without reservation is, therefore, quite anomalous. The only other author who Woolf seemed to admire unconditionally was Jane Austen. Her essay, titled "Jane Austen" (1925), from *The Common Reader* suggests that Austen, like Mansfield (and Woolf herself), creates moments of being in her fiction. According to Mitchell Leaska in his edited collection of Woolf's works, *The Virginia Woolf Reader,* Mansfield actually compared Woolf to Austen—although she did not specify in what way, exactly, their writings were similar. It is safe to assume, though, that the similarities Mansfield saw between Woolf's and Austen's writings were consonant with the qualities Woolf saw in Mansfield's works. All three writers, it seems, were up to something that involved tracing fleeting moments and rendering them permanent.

years of life" (73). Woolf saw Mansfield precisely capturing "the moment itself" which "suddenly puts on significance, and she traces the outline as if to preserve it" (74). This attempt to solidify and present the moment itself is, of course, reminiscent of Woolf's aim in her own writing to create "moments of being," in which scenes are rendered into still, solid objects, crystalized in order to clearly see and conserve them. What is evident from Woolf's essay is that Mansfield's writing had, for Woolf, an almost mystical quality, the ability to articulate that which lies behind the "cotton wool" of the quotidian visible realm, that which flickers just out of sight, just out of reach ("A Sketch…" 72).

Mansfield's fiction attempts to make these "flickers" visible, particularly in regard to her female characters' unspeakable desires. Mansfield's female characters consistently grapple with the irksome impression that they not only want something else for their lives, but that they also do not have the language to articulate that desire to themselves. I argue that Mansfield's fiction creates a literary ecosystem in which such desire is articulated through physical objects. Mansfield relies on metonyms to make this designation, which allow her maximum flexibility in creating a new vocabulary of female aspiration and longing. Here metonymy is able to signify something entirely new, without depending on any existing resemblances or associations like successful metaphors and symbols must. Mansfield's metonyms allow for the elaboration of novel, unexpected associations between an object and an abstract or unwieldy idea, which then results in the creation of a new language of objects with the new meanings that they accrue.

In Mansfield's short stories "Prelude" (1917),[33] "Bliss" (1918), "Miss Brill" (1920), and "At the Bay" (1921), the protagonists are women with desires they cannot articulate with the

[33] "Prelude" was fashioned out of Mansfield's longer work, *The Aloe,* which was written between 1915-1916 and is the closest Mansfield came to writing a novel. This is more evidence for my reading of the aloe plants in "Prelude" as crucial to the larger meaning of the story. My own analysis will be on "Prelude," rather than its original iteration *The Aloe,* however, since I am more interested in what her final rendering of the story was. This final iteration of

language at hand, so they rely on metonymy to create new ways of describing what they want which do not fit within a traditional middle-class home and class structure. The stories take place, predominantly, within the confines of the bourgeois homes these women inhabit with their families (with the exception of Miss Brill, who lives alone in very modest, even shabby, conditions). For example, Linda Burnell in "Prelude" and its sequel "At the Bay," desires to escape her roles of wife and mother, and Bertha Young of "Bliss" wants to escape the marital bed she shares with a husband in whom she isn't sexually interested; Bertha also, at once manically and vaguely, wants some sort of union – whether spiritual, sexual, emotional, or otherwise – with her new friend, Pearl. But Linda's and Bertha's interiorities find refuge and "anchor" in natural objects in the external world and outside the home space: their consciousnesses use these objects as earthly manifestations, as distillations, of their desires for other realities – as metonymy for desires that cannot be put into language.

"Distilling" is a productive way to think about this type of metonymy in that it likens the representational system to a substance that is transformed into its purest form, free from other matter or meaning, untainted by existing symbolism. This distillation of language in Mansfield's fiction creates an aesthetic of the enchanted, unnamable, utopic space that exists for women exterior and anterior to the patriarchal home, in an imaginary state where women were not chained to domestic and therefore heteronormative positionalities and relationalities. These moments of enchantment by way of metonymy in Mansfield's short stories occur within the minds of her female characters, but they are lent a level of permanence by the fact that the objects through which the desires are metonymized – an aloe plant, flowers, a fur coat – exist

---

The Aloe is, as William Kupinse claims in his essay "What plants in 'Prelude'? Colonialism, gender and speculative botany," the "modernist masterwork" to its "realist predecessor" (77). Formally, then, "Prelude" is more representative of Mansfield's modernist project and her innovative literary experiment.

and can actually be seen in the world, rendering the taboo desires tangible (albeit encoded) rather than merely imagined. The desire gets to be real to the women without having to be directly named.

The stories on which I focus here are populated with women of the early twentieth century who are precariously "teetering between domination by their menfolk and the first tentative steps towards independence," as Linda Grant notes in her 2003 Foreword to Mansfield's first collection of stories *In a German Pension* (1911) (viii).[34] Mansfield's female characters, to be sure, seem to teeter between patriarchal domination and future possibilities for what it means to be a woman. Mansfield's fiction is representative of its New Woman milieu,[35] as it is full of modern women tiptoeing toward – but decidedly not achieving – enfranchisement in any sense of the word.[36] The ambience of Mansfield's stories, though often exploratory and imaginative, feels ultimately tragic – the female characters remain trapped within their domestic contexts. This tension between these disparate aesthetics of exploration and confinement is consonant with the stories' content, which often portray female characters who are suspended between the effervescent escape of their own minds and the cemented tether of their social condition(ing).

---

[34] This early collection of stories was based on Mansfield's time spent in Worishofen, Bavaria, Germany, for most of 1909. In a footnote of one of her "German Stories" Vincent O'Sullivan (editor of *The Selected Stories of Katherine Mansfield)* discusses Mansfield's embarrassment about this early collection of stories that draw upon her time in Germany. She would not, under any circumstances, allow these stories to be reprinted and said that they were "not good enough," and were a "lie" (*The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield,* vol. 3, 1993, p. 206.) (8).

[35] This was a late nineteenth-century nomenclature that was used to describe women whose lives became more public and economically independent in contrast to the previous domestic ideal of Victorianism. The New Woman became especially conspicuous at the beginning of World War One when women entered the workforce in droves in order to replace deployed men. Mansfield's female characters discussed here, although not necessarily working women, are nevertheless restless regarding their social positionalities in a way that is consonant with the way gender roles were being troubled and challenged during this period.

[36] Not until 1928, five years after Mansfield's death, did all women in the UK over the age of twenty-one get the right to vote. Women over the age of thirty (who met a certain property qualification) had, in 1918, been given the right to vote. However, only about two-thirds of UK women met these qualifications (www.parliament.uk).

3.1 Miss Brill's Fur

In his 1922 review of Mansfield's story "Bliss," Conrad Aiken said of her writing: "It is the song of a sensibility ecstatically aware of the surfaces of life" (341). These "surfaces" on which Aiken sees Mansfield focusing are evident in her use of metonymy. Rather predictable of a male writer reviewing a female contemporary, Aiken claims that Mansfield "has little skill at characterization – substituting for 'character' a combination of vivid externalities and vivid mood – one must even observe that even in 'mood' her range is very small" (342).[37] Aiken's observation of what he deems a weakness, that Mansfield substitutes "vivid externalities" for character, is ironic, as she *does* create a vivid external world, but does so in service to articulating characters' interiorities more effectively.

Clothing serves precisely such a function in "Miss Brill." The titular character is a woman who, we glean, is no longer young and who is also unmarried, as indicated by "Miss." In fact, her first name is never used, emphasizing how contingent her position in society is on her marital status. The short story begins in a way that is common – almost characteristic – of Mansfield's later stories, many of which open with the word "Although," which casts a quiet pall over the scene: "Although it was so brilliantly fine – the blue sky powdered with gold and great spots of light like white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques – Miss Brill was glad she had decided on her fur."[38] The immediate grammatical function of "although" is to suggest that Miss Brill's fur is an unnecessary choice for such fine weather. Beyond this, however, "although" sets the mood for the entire story: it is a warning. Whatever momentary loveliness is about to be

---

[37] Interestingly, this criticism—the inability to create good or believable characters—was also levelled at Woolf's work by Arnold Bennett, to which she wrote a rebuttal essay in the form of "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924). Both Aiken and Bennett use the word "clever" as a pejorative description of what gets in the way of Mansfield's and Woolf's writing being better than it is. Their writing, to these two critics, is too clever to be realistic and their attempts at creating believable characters fails because of it.

[38] O' Sullivan, p. 204. All references to Mansfield's stories are to this edition; subsequent references will be placed parenthetically in the text.

given, it is coupled with a precarity, an obstacle, a loneliness, a limitation. Beginning the story with this particular subordinating conjunction has the unsettling effect of establishing a conflict before explaining what the trouble is.

Miss Brill's fur is the controlling object, the controlling metonym, of the story and is something important to her; yet its full significance is unnamable:

> Miss Brill was glad that she had decided on her fur [. . .]. Miss Brill put up her hand and touched her fur. Dear little thing! It was nice to feel it again. She had taken it out of its box that afternoon, shaken out the moth-powder, given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the dim little eyes. 'What has been happening to me?' said the sad little eyes. Oh how sweet it was to see them snap at her again from the red eiderdown! . . . But the nose, which was of some black composition, wasn't at all firm. It must have had a knock, somehow. Never mind – a little dab of black sealing-wax when the time came – when it was absolutely necessary. . . . Little rogue! Yes, she really felt like that about it. Little rogue biting its tail just by her left ear. She could have taken it off and laid it on her lap and stroked it. She felt a tingling in her hands and arms, but that came from walking, she supposed. And when she breathed, something light and sad – no, not sad, exactly – something gentle seemed to move in her bosom. (204)

Miss Brill has an intense tenderness for her fur that is peculiarly directed toward mere clothing.[39] This tender bond is amplified by Miss Brill's particular fur – evidently a fox-head stole – which has a face that Miss Brill fusses over, as one would a pet's or child's. Miss Brill has an oddly

[39] Readers will notice the eerie similarities between the way in which Miss Brill relates to her fur and the way in which Doris does the same in Keun's *The Artificial Silk Girl*, discussed in Chapter 1. Both Doris and Miss Brill have an intense tenderness for their furs that is peculiar when relating to clothing. I make this note of comparison between these two texts because Doris's and Miss Brill's relationships with their furs are transnational examples of the way I see fashion, and the fur coat in particular, playing an important metonymic function in interwar fiction written by women.

affectionate relationship with her fur that is at once sensual ("She felt a tingling in her hands and arms") and playful ("Little rogue!"). It is plain to see that the fur, for Miss Brill, is something more than a mere garment and signifies something beyond itself. The fur functions as a metonymic placeholder, as an object that holds space for something crucial for which Miss Brill has no sufficient language – her desire to gain social acceptance as an independent woman. That she hopes to circulate freely and without public censure, as an unmarried woman of little means, is evident in her self-conscious and tender relationship to the fur. That the stole is her sole companion on her outing, a fact that renders her "glad," emphasizes her contentment with her single state. Her decision to wear the fur signals her intention to be read as upwardly mobile and aesthetically pleasing, all on her own, in this public setting.

After she recasts such desire to the fur, we witness Miss Brill grasping at the words "light and sad" in an attempt to match language to her feelings. These two words are such a curious pairing, however. They are not opposites, and yet they are disparate. The coupling of these two words renders each less certain and unsettles the meaning of each. "Lightness" is associated with happiness, with ease, with freedom, with warmth, with health, with the dawn of a new day. "Sadness" conjures images of darkness, heaviness, wetness, death, cold, loneliness. The idea of a feeling at once light and sad forces one to consider how these sentiments commingle. Such a strange pairing suggests a word not thought of, a word that does not, perhaps, exist.

Mansfield's harnessing of disparate words in an attempt to find an ideal description for a feeling is a common preoccupation of modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot. Take, for example, his 1921 essay "The Metaphysical Poets," in which he argues that modern poetry pays homage to the metaphysical poets of the Elizabethan era. Eliot sees both as "engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling. And this means both that they are more

mature, and that they wear better, than later poets of certainly not less literary ability" (289). Eliot goes on to diagnose what modern poets grapple with and what their poetry must comprehend:

> We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult.* Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (280)

Eliot mentions that Samuel Johnson criticized the metaphysical poets' work because within it "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" (283). However, Eliot emphasizes that such violent yoking is sometimes needed. Modern poets, too, must have recourse to the violent yoking of disparate concepts in order to adequately convey the verbal equivalent of a feeling.

I bring Eliot's critical essay on poetry – published the year after "Miss Brill" – to bear on Mansfield's prose, because I see her engaging in a poetic project similar to what Eliot articulates about modernist poetry.[40] Eliot's language in his essay is useful for discussing Mansfield's process and in positioning her among the modernist poetic traditions of Eliot and Ezra Pound, who both subscribed to this creed of yoking disparate terms in order to attempt to find the adequate language for conveying states of mind and feeling.[41] This conjoining of terms is

---

[40] Comparing Mansfield to a poet is hardly new, as even as early as 1922 this was being said of her work. Rebecca West, for example, wrote an essay on Mansfield called "The Garden Party" in the *New Statesmen* in which she directly calls Mansfield a poet. She argues that this is what makes Mansfield's writing better than other prose of the time (338).

[41] Pound inadvertently gives an extremely useful example of what it looks like for a poem to have heterogeneous ideas yoked together in his 1918 essay "A Retrospect." For Pound, the poet ought to strive for presenting, rather than describing (which he says should be left to painters). Pound writes, "When Shakespeare talks of the 'Dawn in

Mansfield's tack also, but hers is more delicately dexterous than violent. And even more than verbal conjunctions, Mansfield appoints objects to house and index women's contumacious feelings. Although there is nothing new about discussing modernist poets and their fiction-writer counterparts, such as James Joyce, in terms of their making highly unusual comparisons and word combinations in their writing, such discussions about female modernists, such as Mansfield, are far less common. I would argue, in fact, that noticing the way in which Mansfield yokes disparate concepts is crucial to following the quiet formal gymnastics of her prose.

It is precisely this modernist poetic problem with which we witness Mansfield engaging in the above passage about Miss Brill and her fur. Em dashes indicate that Miss Brill is grasping at language, attempting to better articulate what she feels: " – no, not sad, exactly – " intimates that she is in search of language more exact than merely "sad;" that she feels "light" is accurate enough, but needs another word paired with it to round out her articulation of her feeling. She continues after the second em dash to try to explain: "something gentle seemed to move in her bosom." Something light and gentle seemed to move in her bosom. Lightness and gentleness are consonant feelings and are an imaginable pairing – together, they help one imagine such a feeling. Still, "gentleness" feels grasping – still connotes an inexactness of signifier, since its meaning is close to "soft," "mild," or "quiet," which help explain a feeling in one's bosom

---

russet mantle clad' he presents something which the painter does not present. There is in this line of his nothing that one can call description; he presents" (6). In Pound's example of how to present rather than describe, he provides, in my view, a helpful instance of the way yoking disparate concepts helps accomplish such "presenting" in one's poetry. In the Shakespeare line, the dawn is personified as a woman (or at least a feminine being) clad in a russet mantel—the reader imagines a russet-colored mantel and can therefore imagine the wavey, cloth-like texture of the russet sky, a rather peculiar color for a sky, but a common color for an article of clothing. Imagining the dawn clad in a russet mantel allows the reader access to texture, color, and a gender-inflected look of the sky that they would not consider if the line read: "the dawn of a russet hue," or even "the dawn looked like a russet mantel," as both are descriptions (telling the reader what to picture) rather than presentations (using words to convey a feeling of something).

well.[42] We are left wondering what it actually means for "something gentle" to seem "to move in her bosom." This fleetingness of meaning in "gentle" lies at the heart of its effectiveness, in that the attempt to name the feeling demands the use of such an unexpected word. Mansfield's characteristic "seemed" directly follows "gentle," indicating an uncertainty, a slipperiness to the joining of the word with the feeling. A gentleness moving in one's bosom feels like what, exactly? Like a fur laid on the lap that one's hand gently strokes? The fur is indeed the metonym that Mansfield uses as a placeholder for the language that cannot be found.

Next, Miss Brill attaches more disparate and multiple meanings to items of clothing, this time to other people's whom she observes from her perch on a park bench: "And now an ermine toque and a gentleman in grey met just in front of her" (205). Here Miss Brill is so focused on the fur toque[43] that the woman wearing it all but disappears for her. The hat serves as a metonym for the entire woman, since the item of clothing *is* the expression of the woman's character. Thus, Miss Brill *objectifies* the woman in order to conceive of her.

Miss Brill interprets the ermine toque and its accompanying scene, close reading it for information about who the woman is:

> And now an ermine toque and a gentleman in grey met just in front of her. He was tall, stiff, and dignified, and she was wearing the ermine toque she'd bought when her hair was yellow. Now everything, her hair, her face, even her eyes, was the same colour as the

[42] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the etymology of "gentle" has diverse meanings that have developed over time. A common understanding of the history of the term is the way it has related to the monied or noble classes (such as, "gentleman") or women (such as, the "gentler sex"). But most surprising and interesting to me is the textual evidence that shows that throughout the 1820s and into the 1910s "gentle" was sometimes used (by W.B. Yeats in his *Celtic Twilight* (1893), for one) to denote the condition of being enchanted or haunted by fairies. I would argue that this meaning of "gentle" comes the closest to helping one read this line of Mansfield's. A way to read the line could be: "something in her bosom seemed to move, as if enchanted by fairies." This provides an image, a way to understand the mystical feeling in her bosom. But, Mansfield did not use these words, but used "gentle," which we can perhaps take to mean that the feeling felt something akin to, but still not quite like, having one's bosom be enchanted by fairies.

[43] A small brimless hat.

> shabby ermine, and her hand, in its glove, lifted to dab her lips, was a tiny yellowish paw. Oh, she was pleased to see him – delighted! She rather thought they were going to meet that afternoon. She described where she'd been – everywhere, here, there, along by the sea. The day was so charming – didn't he agree? And wouldn't he, perhaps? . . . But he shook his head, lighted a cigarette, slowly breathed a great deep puff into her face, and, even while she was still talking and laughing, flicked the match away and walked on. The ermine toque was alone; she smiled more brightly than ever. But even the band seemed to know what she was feeling and played more softly, played more tenderly. (205–6)

Here, the shabby toque is metonymy for the woman's grey, aged, and smoke-shrouded invisibility, for her thwarted desire to be seen, valued, and loved. Her gloved hand is, in Miss Brill's eyes, a small yellowish, faded paw. The shabby hat and glove signify this woman's dehumanization. Indeed, the man impatiently blows smoke, grey as his attire, into her face, before leaving her standing alone. This poor single woman's timeworn clothes reflect who she is as far as he – and Miss Brill – is concerned. Her clothing denotes her disposability, her disappointment, her deterioration.

When an elderly couple sharing Miss Brill's bench leave, replaced by a young and well-to-do pair – who Miss Brill notices are "beautifully dressed" (207) – it is now Miss Brill who experiences a very painful sense of discrimination and objectification, solely on the basis her appearance. She hears the couple whispering:

> "No, not now," said the girl. "Not here, I can't."
>
> "But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?" asked the boy. "Why does she come here at all – who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?"
>
> "It's her fu-fur which is so funny," giggled the girl. "It's exactly like a fried whiting."

> "Ah, be off with you!" said the boy in an angry whisper. (207)

This humiliation to which Miss Brill is subject operates under a logic of appearance as giveaway of class. The "beautifully dressed" young couple feel entitled to sneer at shabby Miss Brill – indeed, to angrily shoo her away from a public bench like a ragged stray dog that is ruining the romantic aesthetic. Not unlike the ratty ermine toque, Miss Brill's "funny" fur is what attracts the girl's disgusted giggles. The girl compares Miss Brill's beloved, prized garment to a fried fish, conjuring images of greasy, stiff, dead flesh. Miss Brill, dressed in her Sunday best, is nothing but a "stupid old thing," with a "silly old mug," who should never go out in public, whom no one "wants." In the boy's eyes, Miss Brill's run-down attire renders her a stupid, old, silly thing that no one could possibly desire, even as the fur manifested, for Miss Brill, her pride and aspiration toward social mobility, desirability, and respectability.

After the couple's merciless ridicule, there is a large break in the text on the page and then a jump in the narrative that finds Miss Brill hurrying home. This blank space on the page, with no reaction from Miss Brill, is poignant, as it suggests that she cannot process, emotionally or intellectually, such mortification – her mind is blank and she flees for the shelter of home. The narrative then explains that Miss Brill skipped her usual Sunday bakery treat of honey-cake and

> climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room – her room like a cupboard – and sat down on the red eiderdown. She sat there for a long time. The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying. (208)

The derision Miss Brill faced regarding her poor appearance, regarding, specifically, her treasured fur, has done damage to her. Once back inside her dark cupboard of a room she places her fur, *herself*, her desire for more from life back in its box, replaces its lid and is so traumatized

that she does not know that it is she who is the "something" that she hears weeping. She has been disciplined, reminded of her place, which is out of the public's view, preferably in a box with a lid.

In the end, rather than attempting to articulate the depth of Miss Brill's unspeakable mortification and grief, the story leaves us with a metonym for her shattered hopes and ensuing shame: a tattered and tired fur being once again stowed away until it is wanted. Putting Miss Brill's feelings or thoughts into words is either too painful or too difficult. The fur, which began the story as Miss Brill's prized garment that articulated the kind of special day she wished to have – indeed, the kind of desiring self she wished to be! – ends the story being stowed away and out of sight.

3.2 Linda Burnell's Aloe

The publication dates of Mansfield's two short stories about the Burnell family, "Prelude" (1917)[44] and its sequel, "At the Bay" (1921), bookend "Bliss" (1918), a story about Bertha Young. Like "Miss Brill," these three stories also utilize metonymy to articulate that which has no adequate language. But, unlike "Miss Brill," the dominant metonyms are objects in the natural world, rather than clothing. In these stories, Linda Burnell and Bertha Young use such natural objects as metonymy for desires that cannot be spoken within the cage of their domestic circumstances, in their roles as wives and mothers. The trio of stories all take place at Linda's and Bertha's homes. However, it is what lies outside of the homes, in the natural world of the yards and surrounding land, that represents something important for the women. The homes themselves feel stifling and preordained. Outside of the homes, the natural world isn't fraught with social and gender expectations – rather, it just *is,* it merely exists.

[44] Notably, this story was first published by Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press in 1918, emphasizing the way in which Woolf patronized Mansfield's work, in addition to deeply admiring it.

The portrait we receive of Linda, beginning in "Prelude" and ending in "At the Bay," is of a married woman who sees her husband and children as the proverbial ball and chain. In the first story, Linda has three little girls. In the very first lines of the text, the children, their maternal grandmother, and Linda are all preparing to move their belongings to the new house in the country that Linda's husband, Stanly, has purchased. This scene immediately sets up the chilly dynamic between Linda and her children, in that Mansfield's form helps frame the girls – Lottie, Kezia, and Isabel – as belongings that are less important to Linda than her material possessions:

> There was not an inch of room for Lottie and Kezia in the buggy. When Pat swung them on top of the luggage they wobbled; the grandmother's lap was full and Linda Burnell could not possibly have held a lump of a child on her for any distance. Isabel, very superior, was perched beside the new handy-man on the driver's seat. Hold-alls, bags and boxes were piled upon the floor. "These are absolute necessities that I will not let out of my sight for one instant," said Linda Burnell, her voice trembling with fatigue and excitement. (79)

As we meet Lottie and Kezia they are being "swung" onto a precarious pile of luggage as if they themselves are baggage. The laps of the adults, where a child would normally be securely held, are not available. Linda, we find out, cannot suffer a "lump of a child" in her lap. The word "lump" intimates the way Linda sees her children: as unwieldy masses. This is further confirmed in the last lines of the passage, in which Linda directly states that her various items are "absolute necessities" that she won't let out of her sight. This statement by Linda is ironic, in that it is the sort of language one would expect from a mother about her children. Yet Linda is insistent that her belongings, rather than her children, must have a spot in the buggy under her watchful eye.

The implication is that she is not worried about Kezia and Lottie being left behind at the empty house alone, to be picked up later in the evening. That the story begins by stating that there isn't an inch of room for the two girls is telling, as it provides readers with a lens through which to know Linda's begrudging attitude toward her family: she doesn't have an inch of room for them.

This is a troubling way for a mother to relate to her children, even by today's standards, as we are acculturated to understand ideal mothers as selfless, doting, and adoring figures in relation to their children. The reader's inclination is to, therefore, wonder at how Linda could possibly feel so coldly toward her own children. This seems to be one of Mansfield's major aims in her stories: to unsettle the expectations that we hold about women and how they ought to relate to the world. The women in her stories regularly end up surprising us: their actual feelings about life are never what we think they will be, or perhaps, are never what we think they *should* be. From its opening line, then, "Prelude" sets us teetering atop the pile of belongings alongside Lottie and Kezia, feeling their precarity in relation to their own mother.

We know from the story's start, therefore, to be on the lookout for how Linda will interact with her children as the narrative progresses. Next, we receive the perspective of Lottie and Kezia after they hear their mother imply that they themselves are not necessities: "Hand in hand, they stared with round solemn eyes first at the absolute necessities and then at their mother" (79). The use of Linda's own words, "absolute necessities," filtered through the girls' perspective shows the way their mother's language inflects their view of the world. The luggage is no longer mere belongings, but is absolutely necessary, something that Lottie and Kezia, by default, are not. Linda goes on to say of the small girls that "'We shall simply have to leave them. That is all. We shall simply have to cast them off' . . . A strange little laugh flew from her lips; she leaned back against the buttoned leather cushions and shut her eyes, her lips trembling

with laughter" (79). Here, our view of Linda becomes more sinister, as it is more evident how callous and perhaps even unhinged (due to the "strange little laugh") Linda is. She blithely suggests that Lottie and Kezia must be "cast off" as one would do with heavy cargo in order to slow the sinking of a ship. The children must be cast off, whereas the luggage must go with Linda.

Our initial view of Linda, then, would have us condemn her as an unfeeling villain, as we've been provided with no view of her own experience outside of this interaction with her children. This is the kind of bait-and-switch that I see as characteristic of Mansfield's female protagonists: we get tricked into conceiving of them as a particular type of woman, only to find that the categories that we use to make judgments about the world limit our ability to perceive experiences and others clearly. These tricks that Mansfield plays on readers seems to have the telos of teaching us to read better in two ways: to be closer readers of the literal text in front of us and to read the world around us with clearer eyes, rather than through the cloud of socialization. In fact, as "Prelude" goes on, Linda interacts very little, if at all, with her children. Instead, we are privy to what goes on inside Linda's mind and the way in which she interacts with the object world and on occasion, her emotionally needy husband.

Quite separately, the narrative presence also gives us access to what the children experience in their own minds and in interaction with one another. In both this story and its sequel, "At the Bay," there is a stark yet somehow seamless divide between the adult world and the child world. This is accomplished by way of the children's world being more mystical, charmed, and inflected with wonder than the adult world, and yet the narrative presence dips in and out of each as if they are divided by mere membrane: each world is so distinct, yet the adult world flows with more pressure into that of the children. I see this as one of Mansfield's stylistic

triumphs: her ability to show the way children and adults are locked out of each other's experiences of life, while also emphasizing that children's tender impressionability feels the weight of each action and word of the adults around them. Even more arresting than this divide Mansfield shows between the adult and child worlds, is the way she conveys the inability of individuals to understand each other's experiences of life. She accomplishes this most poignantly through her use of objects in the natural world that become privately laden with meaning for an individual character. This meaning-laden object comes to stand in for something that the character, and perhaps even Mansfield herself, cannot articulate.

In "Prelude" we witness this metonymic association between Linda's yearnings and an aloe plant, evident in a scene in which Linda and her mother are out in the yard. Up until this point, our experience of Linda has been of her apathy toward her children and husband and what seems to be her depressive state of mind. When Linda wakes up the morning after the move to the new house, she wishes that she could escape from her family: "Looking at them she wished that she was going away from this house, too. And she saw herself driving away from them all in a little buggy, driving away from everybody and not even waving" (89). This desire to escape to somewhere beyond her home is Linda's consistent wish that she does not speak, but thinks, although what exactly lies beyond such an exodus is never articulated.

Linda's unmarried (and likely, younger) sister, Beryl, who lives with them, also thinks about that which she cannot articulate: "but there was something at the back of Beryl's mind, something she did not even put into words for herself" (94). Language allows their thoughts to go only so far. A few lines later, when Beryl is alone in the dining room, she mutters to herself: ''One may as well rot here as anywhere else'' (94). Beryl is able to articulate to herself in the harshest terms that she hates her circumstances, just as Linda is able to register that she despises

her family. But what lies beyond their situations? This is where their words and minds aren't quite able to go, and the prose becomes mystical.

Take, for example, the scene in which Linda regards the aloe plant, which has a distinct air of an enchanted otherworld. Here, Linda gazes at the yard alongside her mother:

> As they stood on the steps, the high grassy bank on which the aloe rested rose up like a wave, and the aloe seemed to ride upon it like a ship with the oars lifted. Bright moonlight hung upon the lifted oars like water, and on the green wave glittered the dew. "Do you feel it, too," said Linda, and she spoke to her mother with the special voice that women use at night to each other as though they spoke in their sleep or from some hollow cave – "Don't you feel that it is coming towards us?"
>
> She dreamed that she was caught up out of the cold water into the ship with the lifted oars and the budding mast. Now the oars fell striking quickly, quickly. They rowed far away over the top of the garden trees, the paddocks and the dark bush beyond. Ah, she heard herself cry: "Faster! Faster!" to those who were rowing. (110–11)

This is the most important scene in the story for Mansfield's use of metonymy as a tool to sidestep a lack of language for inchoate female desires. Linda never goes so far as to say that she will escape – it will only ever be fantasy. She only gets as far as the "bush beyond," which one imagines is dark, shapeless, and unknown. Nonetheless, Linda contrasts her thoughts of escaping on a ship with her actual life and determines the former to be the more "real" of the two:

> How much more real this dream was than that they should go back to the house where the sleeping children lay and where Stanley and Beryl played cribbage.

> "I believe those are buds," said she. "Let us go down into the garden, mother. I like that aloe. I like it more than anything here. And I am sure I shall remember it long after I've forgotten all the other things."
>
> Looking at it from below she could see the long sharp thorns that edged the aloe leaves, and at the sight of them her heart grew hard. . . . She particularly liked the long sharp thorns. . . . Nobody would dare come near the ship and follow after. (110–11)

Linda will, she suggests, forget her family before she will forget this aloe. Unlike her family and its domestic context, the aloe provides her with the means to imagine her own escape – to imagine a life outside of the confines of her social roles as mother and wife. It is fitting that Linda affixes her desire to escape to this thorny, intimidating plant, that would seem to thwart manhandling. Yet, Linda's thoughts become darker:

> She hugged her folded arms and began to laugh silently. How absurd life was – it was laughable, simply laughable. And why this mania of hers to keep alive at all? For it really was a mania, she thought, mocking and laughing.
>
> "What am I guarding myself for so preciously? I shall go on having children and Stanley will go on making money and the children and the gardens will grow bigger and bigger with whole fleets of aloes in them for me to choose from." (112)

Her reflections suggest some level of suicidal ideation ("And why this mania of her to keep alive at all?") and helplessness in the face of her foretold future as a body that produces without agency ("I shall go on having children"). Even still, she notes that the aloe will remain for her to use as a vehicle for imagining new articulations for her desire to escape.

It is important to note that the aloe plants in "Prelude" are the focus of other feminist criticism, too, though not from the perspective of their functioning as metonymy for unspeakable

desires. Still relevant to my own reading here, though, the aloe have been generatively discussed from the perspective of the intersection of ecocriticism, feminist theory, and postcolonial criticism. William Kupinse makes the argument that what Linda Burnell calls an "aloe" in the story could actually be "*Agave americana*" and this confusion of species was, Kupinse explains, a very common error in New Zealand at the time. White settlers attributed Native American "mystique" to these plants (79). Kupinse does, as I do, see the aloe/agave functioning metonymically in his reading "to register the simultaneous exoticization and erasure of the indigenous cultures of the United States, a settler nation like New Zealand" (80). But Linda fears having children, an act that furthers colonialism's logic of unrelenting colonizer repopulation, not unlike an aggressive weed.

Indeed, Kupinse sees the agave insinuating "maternal mortality" as well in the story, as it "reproduces once in its lifetime, then dies" (80). Linda, too, associates reproduction with her own death, in the above passage. Kupinse further explains that aloe has a long history as a "birth control agent and abortifacient" (83). In this way, then, the aloe does indeed represent a means of escape from unwanted pregnancy and helps to articulate for Linda a reality beyond her lack of reproductive agency. What is clear from Kupinse's reading is that the aloe operates as a multivalent metonym that distils and concretizes Linda's desires. What Linda uses to attempt to imagine life outside of her Victorian colonizer womanhood is a relationship with the natural world, one in which nature is consulted for new ways of knowing, a practice in which native peoples have always already been engaging. In Kupinse's view, this homage to Indigenous ways of knowing, which colonizers have attempted to snuff out, is latent in Mansfield's fiction.

Linda's vital relationship to objects in the natural world continues in "At the Bay" (1921), although whatever magic she had attributed to them has waned. Linda's dismayed and

passive prediction in “Prelude” that her family would continue to grow, as if totally without her consent, comes to pass. She has a baby boy toward whom she feels nothing. In this story, Linda’s previous imaginative plunges with the aloe plant seem almost entirely of the past, and she is even more depressed and apathetic. However, during a scene in which Linda is alone in the yard with her baby lying next to her, we do glimpse Linda once again attempting to articulate something beyond her current life, by way of the natural world:

> Dazzling white the picotees shone; the golden-eyed marigolds glittered; the nasturtiums wreathed the veranda poles in green and gold flame. If only one had time to look at these flowers long enough, time to get over the sense of novelty and strangeness, time to know them! But as soon as one paused to part the petals, to discover the underside of the leaf, along came Life and one was swept away. And lying in her cane chair, Linda felt so light; she felt like a leaf. Along came Life like a wind and she was seized and shaken; she had to go. Oh dear, would it always be so? Was there no escape? (262)

Again, Linda fantasizes about escaping and again, a natural object is her vehicle for this explorative thinking. Here, a flower that she examines and attempts to know begins to blur into a metonym for herself, the self that “Life” does not afford her the time or space to examine. Next, “Linda felt so light; she felt like a leaf.” Here, the leaf is a simile, is a thing that Linda feels similar to. Then, “Along came Life like a wind and she was seized and shaken; she had to go.” Finally, Linda becomes a leaf that gets lifted and moved by the wind and she realizes that she has to “go.” This metonymic experience of being a leaf seized and shaken actually leads Linda to think that she has to flee. Her mind then returns to her concerns about whether there is actually any way to escape. Her fleeting experience of being a leaf that could decamp ends as quickly as

it began. She cannot imagine anything beyond the need to escape – what lies beyond such a departure is, again, barred to her.

3.3 Bertha Young's Pear Tree

Like "Miss Brill," "Bliss" (1918) begins with an "Although," which I've suggested throws a shadow, a precarity, over the story from its beginning. From the first word, then, Mansfield prepares us for an impending conflict – an uncertainly. These are the story's first lines:

> Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or to stand still and laugh at—nothing—at nothing, simply. (145)

Right away, we learn of Bertha's age, and her musings reveal the way she has internalized the social expectations for what women of thirty years old are permitted to want and do. It is important that what Bertha wants is discussed in the first sentence of the story. This swiftly brings the theme of Bertha's taboo desires into focus: even though wanting to run, dance along the pavement's edge, play a child's game, or laugh aloud at nothing are not necessarily taboo desires, it is clear that Bertha understands them as not entirely socially acceptable for her to do.

Bertha is a housewife, a mother to one infant, and she lives in a nice home with hired help and expensive belongings. She seems to live a life of planning dinner parties for her educated, artistic, and interesting friends. The story takes place on just such a day during which Bertha is unspeakably excited about the dinner party she is hosting for that evening.[45] In the

[45] "Bliss" may in fact be an early predecessor of or inspiration for Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), which also centers around a woman anticipating and preparing for a party she is hosting that evening. *Mrs. Dalloway* also, of course, contains a memory of a romance between Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton, a scene that I discuss in

pages leading up to the party, Bertha is elated and manic but cannot identify or articulate the source of her excitement. It is unclear to both Bertha and the reader why she so fervently anticipates the party. We, at first, suspect that she is enamored with her husband, whom she anxiously awaits to return from work in time for the party. The mania she is experiencing, the unnamable feeling, is something akin to the eponymous "bliss," but still Bertha cannot understand why she is feeling it. In the pages leading up to the dinner party, Bertha attempts to decipher what the blissful feeling is, how to articulate it, and why she is feeling this way:

> What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss – absolute bliss! – as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe? (145)

Having given the feeling a name, "bliss," she goes on to attempt to further describe it, as though the word is not adequate. She attempts to articulate the feeling as a physical sensation, as akin to swallowing a piece of the sun. This, she owns, would burn one's chest and would then send pangs throughout one's body. The feeling, then, has pain associated with it. It is absolute bliss, but it is so bright and warm that it makes one's heart feel aflame – it feels as though sparks are being shot throughout the body. Bertha tries another articulation:

> But in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place—that shower of little sparks coming from it. It was almost unbearable. She hardly dared breathe for fear of fanning it higher, and yet she breathed deeply, deeply. She hardly dared to look into the cold mirror—but she did look, and it gave her back a woman, radiant with smiling, trembling

---

Chapter Two. This scene, in which Sally kisses Clarissa, also employs metonymy to allow Clarissa to attempt to articulate her indescribable feelings in that moment in which she is kissed by a woman for the first time.

> lips, with big, dark eyes and an air of listening, waiting, for something . . . divine to happen . . . that she knew must happen . . . infallibly. (145)

This passage is charged with Bertha's desire for something that has not, of course, been named. She gets closer to identifying it when she says that she is waiting for "something . . . divine to happen." Her elation is, then, related to something she is anticipating, something that she expects to be divine. Still, she cannot say what this "something" is and it is apparent that she does not have the language for it.

We get a hint as to what might be exciting Bertha when she contemplates the guests coming to dinner. One of them, Pearl Fulton, is a "find" (147) of Bertha's that she met at a club. Upon first reading this, "find" seems to indicate that Pearl is the most recent addition to Bertha's interesting and artistic collection of friends. Due to her name, "Pearl," Miss Fulton is immediately associated with an object, is already, in this way, metonymized into a valuable and beautiful gem that grows in nature. By her very name, then, Pearl is already metonymized and already denotes and connotes something beyond just herself. Since Bertha is married to a man, our initial interpretation of Bertha's feelings toward Pearl is inclined to be heteronormative – we assume that Bertha is merely intrigued by her as a potential friend, as an aesthetic addition to her party's ambiance. The language used to describe how the two women met and how Bertha feels about her is suspect, however:

> What Miss Fulton did, Bertha didn't know. They had met at the club and Bertha had fallen in love with her, as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them.
>
> The provoking thing was that, though they had been about together and met a number of times and really talked, Bertha couldn't yet make her out. Up to a certain point Miss

> Fulton was rarely, wonderfully frank, but the certain point was there, and beyond that she would not go. (147)

From Bertha's descriptions of her other friends attending the party, it is easy to assume that this is what her feelings toward Pearl amount to: that Bertha is attempting to decipher whether Pearl is aesthetic, interesting, and entertaining enough to be part of her favorite group for dinner parties. Surely, "Bertha had fallen in love with her" is just another instance of Bertha's hyperbole and mania. It is plausible for women to say that they "fall in love with all beautiful women who had something strange about them" and still mean it merely aesthetically.

Bertha is, after all, very attuned to the appearance and composition of her home. In an earlier scene she contemplates the way she intentionally purchased grapes for the fruit bowl that match the purple carpeting in the dining room. To think that Bertha appreciates Pearl as an aesthetic object, rather than a romantic one, is not wholly misguided. This is further substantiated when Bertha recalls a conversation about Pearl that she had with her husband, leading us to believe that her feelings for Pearl are friendly rather than romantic. Bertha had wondered "Was there anything beyond it? Harry said 'No.' Voted her dullish, and 'cold like all blond women, with a touch, perhaps, of anæmia of the brain.' But Bertha wouldn't agree with him; not yet, at any rate" (148). Here, then, since Bertha is discussing Pearl with her husband, we have more potential evidence that her feelings toward Pearl are not romantic. However, once the story progresses it becomes increasingly apparent that Bertha's feelings for Pearl go beyond mere aesthetics, friendly curiosity, or sisterly affection. Bertha desires Pearl in a way that goes unspoken, in a way that she cannot find words for.

Although there's been critical attention paid to sexual desire in "Bliss" and Mansfield's fiction more generally, desire more capaciously understood has been neglected by Mansfield

scholarship. To be sure, sexual desire is an obliquely rendered, but important fixture, of Mansfield's fiction. For example, in her widely cited critical biography *Katherine Mansfield* (1986), Kate Fullbrook argues that "Bliss," shows the way Mansfield regarded sexual desire "as diffuse and unpredictable, and . . . shows her awareness of the fine mesh of social definition that is supposed to contain, express and control the desires of an advanced, western woman" (381). "Bliss" can certainly be said to be largely about a woman coming up against her social condition as a married woman of thirty years old that seeks to contain and dictate her desires. Fullbrook further elaborates that

> The story makes it clear that Bertha is caught between two "civilised" conventions of female desire—the convention that outlaws women's physicality as taboo and unnatural, and, on the other hand, the alternative "modern" convention that speaks endlessly of desire, defining it and channelling it into patterns that may not accord with individual experience . . . . Katherine Mansfield deploys various emblems of female sexuality through the story and shows Bertha responding to them. Arranging bowls of fruit becomes such a sensuous activity that Bertha can hardly control herself. (382)

Bertha cannot directly discuss her sexual desire, but must instead relate to it through the material world around her. As Fullbrook points out, women's physicality is taboo and unnatural, so Bertha's sexuality must be considered in terms that have nothing to do with her body and by way of "emblems." For Fullbrook, Bertha's yard with the pear tree is a "metaphorical garden of the unawakened woman" and is rife with Romance poetry's use of nature as metaphor for sexuality (383).

Although Fullbrook reads the pear tree and the fruit bowl as symbols of Bertha's sexuality, confining such objects to mere symbolism is too stultifying and limiting, in my view,

as symbolism – as I discussed earlier – relies on existing meanings and associations. Interestingly, Fullbrook herself seems to wonder about the limitations of symbolism in "Bliss" when she says that the "symbols are selected and placed with great tact and evocativeness, suggesting their multiple meanings without ever insisting on them" (385). In other words, Mansfield's slippery "symbols" are something altogether less stable and less prescriptive than symbolism – perhaps something more capacious and dynamic, like metonymy.

In her "Introduction" to the 2002 edition of *Katherine Mansfield Selected Stories*, Angela Smith also attempts to articulate the nature of these slippery symbols and says that objects like the aloe plant in "Prelude" gain "symbolic significance" in moments in which a character feels "insecurity and terror," which gets caught in "sharply defined clarity" in those objects (419). Again, it seems to me that identifying these objects simply as symbols is too static, too prefabricated, as symbolism requires a recognized allusion to a tradition of knowledge and preexisting cultural meanings. Instead, I see such moments attempting to create new associations and new language for articulation.

To be sure, the nature of Bertha's feelings toward Pearl are further complicated by what we learn of Bertha's feelings for her husband and their life together:

> Harry and she were as much in love as ever, and they got on together splendidly and were really good pals. She had an adorable baby. They didn't have to worry about money. They had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden. And friends—modern, thrilling friends, writers and painters and poets or people keen on social questions—just the kind of friends they wanted. (148)

Again, as Bertha did when considering her feelings for Pearl, she uses the expression of being "in love" when describing how she feels about Harry. She then, within the same sentence, says

that she and Harry are "really good pals." "Pal," even in the 1910s, is a jarringly platonic term to use to describe one's husband.[46] This strange term that Bertha uses to describe her relationship with Harry is the first clue about their relationship being different than what we expect of a marriage. What is further suspect is the way Bertha immediately begins listing the reasons why her life is good, as if attempting to rationalize it.

When Pearl arrives at the party a little later than the others, Bertha meets her at the door and takes her by the arm to walk her into the dining room. Bertha thinks, "What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan—start blazing—blazing the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with" (151)? Here, Bertha has a reaction to touching Pearl, one that she describes as fanning and igniting the "fire of bliss" that she doesn't know "what to do with." Bertha is again able to associate her feelings for Pearl with an intense heat and then uses the term "bliss" again – the closest to naming the feeling that she can come. As Bertha watches her friends converse over dinner, Bertha thinks of the pear tree in her yard that she had looked out at while anticipating the arrival of her guests. Then, thoughts of the tree dissolve into thoughts of Pearl:

> And still, in the back of her mind, there was the pear tree. It would be silver now, in the light of poor dear Eddie's moon, silver as Miss Fulton, who sat there turning a tangerine in her slender fingers that were so pale a light seemed to come from them.
>
> What she simply couldn't make out—what was miraculous—was how she should have guessed Miss Fulton's mood so exactly and so instantly. For she never doubted for a moment that she was right and yet what had she to go on? Less than nothing.

[46] The *OED* shows the term "pal" being used in a strictly platonic fashion throughout the Victorian Period and beyond it to today. A relevant age bracket from Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) to Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* (1920) shows the word being used to describe friendship or mere association.

> "I believe this does happen very, very rarely between women. Never between men," thought Bertha. "But while I am making the coffee in the drawing-room perhaps she will 'give a sign.'"
>
> What she meant by that she did not know, and what would happen after that she could not imagine. (152)

Beyond being a merely overwrought symbol of female sexual desire, the pear tree stands in for something that Bertha cannot quite articulate. For Bertha it signifies something related to Pearl, as it is "silver as Miss Fulton." Furthermore, the slippage between the words "pear" and "pearl" suggests a closeness between the two, as if they linguistically overlap one another, in addition to having consonant colors. The layered function of the pear tree in this story is even further emphasized by the fact that the free indirect discourse that is used in the lines that discuss it help to place it, as the narrative presence says, "in the back of her mind." The first six lines of the above passage are free indirect discourse, as are the last two. The three in-between lines are reported thought, placed in quotes. These three lines of reported thought seem to be closer to the front of Bertha's mind than the lines of free indirect discourse. Their very nature of being bracketed in quotes makes them more evident, as if indicating that these are thoughts Bertha is aware she is having.

Bertha wonders at her ability to guess what Pearl is thinking and she contemplates the way in which this sort of mind-meeting is rare between women and nonexistent between men. She then thinks that perhaps Pearl will give her a "sign," the meaning of which, we are told through free indirect discourse, Bertha isn't certain. She is further uncertain as to what such a "sign" would capitulate. Bertha does not have the language to name what she feels for Pearl and what she wants from her. This uncertainty and grasping at language matters very much to the

meaning of the story. It is important that Bertha's feelings for Pearl remain liminal, as pinning them down and categorizing them as "sexual desire," for example, would reduce the complexity of Bertha's sentiments. All we can tell for sure from the last few passages is that Bertha feels something unnamable for Pearl, something exciting that she hopes Pearl will reciprocate with a signal. This unnamable quality is precisely what Mansfield wishes to convey by way of the pear tree in her story.

When Pearl asks whether Bertha has a garden, Bertha takes this as the sign she has been waiting for, although she has yet to articulate what such a sign would mean. Bertha opens the curtains to show Pearl the pear tree:

> "There!" she breathed.
>
> And the two women stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree. Although it was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed—almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon.
>
> How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands? (153)

In Bertha's view, the flowering pear tree, silver in the moonlight like Pearl in her silver dress, changes shape and quality as they look at it together: it elongates like a flame and quivers and seems to touch the moon. Then, as Bertha loses track of time, she fancies that they are like creatures of another world – perhaps a mystical state of nature, an alternate garden of Eden, where gender roles and social structures do not exist – who do not know what to do with this

unnamable feeling that burns within them. Interestingly, Bertha then imagines that this feeling that burns in their bosoms "dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands." This line is particularly fraught with mixed meaning, as their blissful feeling actually turns into silver flowers from the pear tree and drops from their hair and hands. The unnamed feeling, in an attempt at articulation, in Bertha's mind becomes the pear tree's silver flowers that are in their hair and held in their hands. She can see her feeling, encapsulated in that image of the flowers, but there is no language for it. The pear tree, with its flowers, is all there is.

Even more complicated still, the last few pages of the story reveal that Bertha dreads sleeping in a bed with her husband and doesn't desire him sexually. The thought of the guests leaving and of Harry and she "alone together in the dark room—the warm bed" fills her with dread. She again thinks that, despite this, they are "such good pals," which is "the best of being modern" (154). This vague logic of Bertha's points to the way in which she and her husband have a "modern" marriage, one that doesn't necessitate enjoying each other sexually or even erotically, as being good pals is sufficient for cohabitation. For Bertha, being "modern" is entwined with one's sexual identity and the way one regards sexuality and marriage models beyond their conventional categories.

Then, in a further disruption to Bertha's understanding of herself, her marriage, and her feelings for Pearl, she catches sight, from across the room, of her husband telling Pearl that he adores her and that he will meet her the next day. Pearl and Harry, Bertha realizes, have been having an affair all along. As Pearl is leaving the party she says to Bertha: "'Your lovely pear tree!'" Bertha then runs to the windows that overlook the garden and the last lines of the story read: "But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still" (155). The

flowering pear tree, the metonym for Bertha's unspeakable desire, is the only language she has to communicate this unnamable feeling for Pearl, a woman whom her husband has already claimed.

Mansfield herself made proximate objects repositories of keenly felt desires that she could not bring to fruition. She herself was an amalgam of disparate terms: Mansfield "was pale and dark, innocent and decadent, first too fat and then too thin" (Tomalin 5-6).[47] She was sexually ambiguous, with a husband and a "wife," and lovers of both sexes (Tomalin 6). Her sexuality did not fit into a definable category and could not, therefore, be precisely labelled with the language available to her. Mansfield's interest in the multiplicity of desire and how to adequately name it is evident in her diary, too. In one of the final entries, which was written a few months before she died of tuberculosis at the young age of thirty-four,[48] Mansfield wrote a striking list of desires that begins with her wishing for the return of her good health:

> By health I mean the power to lead a full, adult, living, breathing, life in close contact [with] what I love – the earth and the wonders thereof, the sea, the sun. [. . .] Then I want to work. At what? I want so to live that I work with my hands and my feeling and my brain. I want a garden, a small house, grass, animals, books, pictures, music. And out of this – the expression of this – I want to be writing. (qtd. by Woolf in "A Terribly…" 75)

It matters to understanding Mansfield's relationship to language to notice that rather than discussing what her emotions *feel* like, she instead names objects in the external world such as

---

[47] Mansfield's mother had a habit of cruelly criticizing her about her weight, and Tomalin recounts a moment when, returning from a long trip abroad, the first words Mansfield's mother spoke to her were: 'I see that you are as fat as ever' (13). Then, when Mansfield became pregnant out of wedlock in 1909 – yet another visible manifestation of her fulfilled desire – her mother swiftly cut her out of her will. Mansfield certainly experienced punishments for making her desire visible.

[48] According to Tomalin, although Mansfield did, indeed, die of tuberculosis, what is less discussed is the fact that her system was weakened and made hospitable to the illness when she was infected with gonorrhea in 1909 while in Germany. At the time, a gonorrheal infection in women was essentially impossible to cure and would sometimes become systemic; this is what occurred in Mansfield's case. Due to this, Mansfield's body was plagued with arthritis, heart issues, and lung problems. She suffered from these symptoms until her death (77–8). Mansfield's early death was thus connected to her licentious behavior: her untimely death can be readily traced to her desire.

"the sea – the sun," an attempt to articulate her feelings via namable external objects. The em dash between the two words matters, too, since she is not providing a list, but rather is trying to find the right metonym to accurately present what she most loves about the earth.

In the above excerpt, Mansfield repeats the word "want" four times in six sentences, emphasizing that her desire is the focus. Her initial attempt at articulating her desires begins fairly abstractedly and questioningly. She states that she wants to work and then asks herself what she wants to work "at." Then, she attempts to answer her question: her language, although by no means nonsensical, is still far from pellucid. She wants "so to live that [she] work[s] with [her] hands and [her] feeling and [her] brain." What does it mean to work with one's "feeling"? Abruptly, as if knowing her language has become too untethered, Mansfield names her desires in concrete and material terms: garden, small house, grass, animals, books, pictures, music. After the first few sentences in which baggy language is used to describe what she desires, the list of banal objects is extremely concrete by comparison, emphasizing the way one's pursuit of health brings one down to earth – narrows the scope of one's needs and aspirations. And out of this narrowed scope Mansfield proclaims that she wants "to be writing." Mansfield's final distilled desire is to write: to continue to create new articulations for the desperate and desirous women in her fiction and in the world beyond.

CHAPTER 4

"Afraid of wanting": Disciplined Desire and Abstract Metonyms in Sinclair's *Mary Olivier*

"Restlessness. That was desire. It must be." May Sinclair[49]

"Shy, defiant, awkward, determined," writes Suzanne Raitt, "Sinclair embodied and articulated the contradictions of her age" (267). Indeed, May Sinclair (1863-1946) was a writer suspended between two British eras: Victorian and Modernist, a condition that was evident throughout her unusually private personal life and her remarkably inventive oeuvre.[50] She was a mediator between the older and newer generations of the literary world and was an impressively prolific writer. In addition to remaining unmarried, being a suffragist, and joining an ambulance corps in Belgium in early 1914, Sinclair penned scores of short stories, works of translation from German to English, essays, book-length philosophical texts, poems, and over twenty novels.

Notably, Sinclair also introduced the term "stream of consciousness" into the modern vernacular of literary criticism when she used it in her 1918 review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915), "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson."[51] This review of Richardson's fiction also doubles as merely one example of Sinclair's own theory of the modern novel's particular formal experiments. Sinclair was both a critic and innovator of the modern novel's form and her robust production of both literary criticism and innovative fiction, from the turn of the century

---

[49] *Mary Olivier: A Life,* p. 263.

[50] May Sinclair was actually born "Mary" and then changed her name to May (which seems to have been a family nickname for her) at the age of twenty-eight.

[51] The coinage of this term is often mistakenly attributed to Sinclair, the understandable confusion stemming from the fact of her actually introducing it into the discourse of literary criticism. The term "stream-of-consciousness" was actually coined by William James (1842-1910) in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). See chapter IX ("The Stream of Thought"). However, as Suzanne Raitt points out, James was using it within the context of the "processes of selfhood, rather than the texture of perception," the latter of which is the way in which Sinclair uses it (218). So, although James has to be credited with inventing the term itself, Sinclair must be acknowledged as inventing the *concept* of stream of consciousness as it is used in literary vernacular, as conveying the "texture of perception," as Raitt puts it. Furthermore, according to Raitt, there is also no evidence that Sinclair had gotten the idea for the term from James's text, but rather that it was already being widely used in philosophical texts of the early 20th century, which were using it in discussions of the self and the limits of individuality—rather than in terms of perception (219).

through the interwar years, positioned her as something of a Godmother of literary modernism; this was in no small part due to her generous and enthusiastic patronage of the movement's rising stars like Ezra Pound, H.D., and T.S. Eliot.[52]

Sinclair's own modernist project can be seen, as one example, in her highly experimental novel *Mary Olivier: a Life* (1919), which critics consider her "best" novel (Raitt 213). Designated as her "most radical attempt at innovative narrative" (Raitt 177), *Mary Olivier* has a uniquely inconsistent narrative point of view reminiscent of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) – these novels were serialized alongside one another in *The Little Review* – and even Alfred Döblin's avant-garde, montage novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929). Sinclair's female *Bildungsroman*, which was published when she was fifty-six years old, shows a very peculiar and precocious form of free indirect discourse that primarily employs the second-person pronoun, "you." Within the first few pages of the novel's first section, it reads, for example: "When you had run a thousand hundred times round the table you came to the blue house" (10). Here and throughout the novel it is apparent that this second-person pronoun is multiuse, in that the "you" has the potential to 1) beckon to the reader 2) provide access to the character's thoughts and 3) speak to the author's younger self, since it is a semiautobiographical novel.

Throughout the novel, the point of view sporadically switches back and forth between the "you" and the standard third-person narration typical of free indirect discourse. Then, jarringly, in the last several pages of the novel, the first-person "I" is used. Evidently, this novel—"the book of which she was most proud" (Raitt 213)—seeks to present a multidimensional, and even

[52] Sinclair was known to provide financial support to promising writers in her circles and would also provide them with lucrative connections in the literary scene. Although Sinclair didn't have many close friends, she did offer a great deal of support to her writing community. See Raitt's biography for more about Sinclair's relationship to the major figures of British literary modernism. Sinclair's personal letters show that she corresponded with core modernists like Virginia Woolf, as well, according to the 2002 Introduction to *Mary Olivier: a Life* by Katha Pollitt (ix).

fractured view, of Mary's consciousness. This formal aspect alone makes *Mary Olivier* a model of literary modernism of the interwar period, albeit an early bloomer when considered in terms of its anticipation of the forms of later, more well-known texts published in modernism's golden year of 1922.

Despite the overtly modernist form and content of *Mary Olivier*, Sinclair humorously, in 1924, made the provocative claim that she did not think that British "literature was at all affected by the war" (qtd. in Raitt 181) and yet *Mary Olivier's* form – a novel she wrote and completed as the war was grinding to an end – departs drastically from the novels Sinclair had written before the war: the protagonist's subjectivity is deeply fractured and always at risk of being absorbed by her family, which specter of such self-dissolution is mirrored by the frequently changing use of narrative point of view and pronouns. From our historical perch, it seems difficult to explain this change in Sinclair's form without at least considering the war's seismic disruption to daily life—not to mention gender roles, especially in light of the fact that she herself spent two weeks in an ambulance unit in Belgium, where she did see and help to care for the brutalized bodies of soldiers. Despite this traumatic experience, during the war Sinclair remained staunchly for the cause and wrote fairly blatant pro-war propaganda novels. Her relationship to war and its effect on her and her writing remained, therefore, troubled and perhaps even willfully naïve. After all, romanticizing a war that is already in motion is far less painful, and requires a great deal less thought, than criticizing its ongoing devastation.[53]

Whether or not Sinclair saw her writing as squarely part of the new literary era that the war helped materialize, *Mary Olivier* nevertheless ends, like the dyed in the wool modernist novel it is, with Mary having an epiphany: she need only give up having desire in order to be

[53] For more about Sinclair's rather strange and very short tenure on the Western Front and the writing she did during that time, see chapter 5, "War," of Raitt's biography (pp. 147-181).

happy. While Raitt claims that the novel is about a woman who "defies the cramped conditions of a mid-Victorian daughter's life to evolve her own sceptical modernist consciousness" (213), I view the novel's outcome more cynically: while it may be argued that by the end of the novel Mary develops her own skeptical modernist consciousness to some degree, I am not convinced that it is so thoroughly of her own making, as her relinquishing of desire in the end precisely parrots her mother's demand of her all her life: to stop wanting. So, although Mary certainly can be characterized as very skeptical, even from childhood (she does, indeed, reject religion as-is while being raised by a very religious mother—an impressive feat), I cannot find evidence that her final epiphany attests to a consciousness that isn't still steeped in her mother's early conditioning and shaming regarding desire.

In fact, the novel ends with Mary's tragic understanding that the only way for her to be happy and free is to access "Reality" and the "Absolute" by sublimating her desire for earthly objects. In the end, Mary realizes that she can be happy only if she lives by a principle of renunciation and sublimation of her unfulfilled terrestrial desires into a pursuit of the philosophical Absolute, which means an unearthly end to desire. Mary effectively gives up on the material world and looks elsewhere for happiness—an ending that is both deeply cynical (she has no hope for happiness in the material world) and mystically optimistic (she has hope that she can achieve happiness in her spiritual-philosophical life).

In this way, although I read the novel's end as incredibly tragic because Mary renounces something so fundamental to selfhood as desire, what I focus on in this chapter is the nature of Mary's desire and how it is conveyed by the text's language. Ultimately, Mary wants to know as much as possible about life. The painful irony of her situation, however, is that she lives with a mother who keeps as much as possible from her. For Mary's mother, the adage "ignorance is

bliss" is profoundly true when it comes to how women ought to live. In fact, I argue that the central concern of the novel is Mary's stigmatized multiplicity of desires, desires of which she is mostly barred from fully conceiving. Desires for books that belong to her brother, or for a bit of knowledge about childbirth, or to learn Greek, are but a scant few of the items Mary is denied for no clear reason other than on this principle: that Mary should not have wants.

Feminist criticism of Sinclair since at least the 1990s agrees that a prominent preoccupation of much of her fiction is women's unfulfilled desires. Concurring with this, I emphasize that Sinclair's interwar novel *Mary Olivier* is a showcase of the consequences of the domestic tradition of disciplining women's desire.[54] In fact, a crucial takeaway from this novel is that female desire in a patriarchal world is never—and can never be—true female desire because the framework for desire is always already mediated through patriarchy. Furthermore, Sinclair, a transcendental idealist, employs abstract metonyms (e.g., "white light," "Absolute," "Reality," and "spirit" to stand for "quelled female desire"), rather than more familiar concrete metonyms (e.g. "the crown" for "the monarchy"), to demonstrate the way in which "true" female desire is incompatible with the material world and can only be shed in the Real world that lies beyond the world of appearances. The Real world is a place in which desire is a nonissue, since there is no lack. I argue that Sinclair's use of abstract metonyms also emphasizes the way in which language itself buckles under the weight of a female desire that has no adequate lexicon: it is left to grasp at abstractions that themselves seek to imagine another, more real world that we can fleetingly glimpse but cannot permanently access.

Turning to recent feminist psychoanalytic criticism is helpful in parsing the issue of Mary Olivier's—and Sinclair's—renounced desire. Faye Pickrem's 2017 article claims that Sinclair's

[54] I am using this word in two ways: that women's desire is suppressed by those around them and that they are socialized to police their own desires, too.

fiction aims to show protagonists who achieve ontological transcendence—who overcome their condition as fragmented subjects and thus fulfill desire and overcome lack (120). But for Pickrem, Sinclair's own personal desire for ontological wholeness and her hope that the fictional form will help her show such a wholeness, is a fantasy, a chimera. (121). The foundational conceit of Sinclair's work, for Pickrem, is "the need to sanitise and expunge the materiality of desire in order to escape its anguish, rising above it to the mystical utopia of the Absolute. Unless desire is disembodied, libidinal appetite is almost always impossible to endure" (122). In order to escape libidinal desire, Pickrem argues, Sinclair sublimates the libido into the Hegelian wholeness, the disembodied Absolute. For Sinclair, escaping the body is the way to escape desire.

As Sinclair has it, achieving Reality, wholeness, the Absolute, is a more worthy goal than libidinal desire—and she therefore sublimates the latter by way of the former. Her protagonists, like Mary Olivier, engage, then, in a performance of transcendence that allows them to ignore their earthly desires in pursuit of a more noble (less risky, perhaps) aim. This Sinclarian approach to sublimating desire is what Pickrem terms the "erotics of renunciation. With its sometimes purple prose and lurid language, Sinclair's theory of sublimation is not the apotheosis of transfiguration but a visceral response to an anxiety regarding desire" (124). This "disciplining of desire," as Pickrem astutely puts it, this transcending of the "obscene" desires of the body, is a dominant preoccupation of Sinclair's fiction.[55] Pickrem explains that "carnal desire is eliminated from the body and re-cathected into an abstract metonym of desire: nature, immanence, the Absolute" (129). This idea of an "abstract metonym" at first seems to be a contradiction in terms,

[55] This propensity in Sinclair's fiction could be considered one of the Victorian holdovers that her contemporary critics and those of today identify as being unique to her particularly blurry breed of modernism.

but engaging with it is very useful for my reading of Sinclair, as it helps explain the crucial rhetorical and linguistic functions that her frequently used abstract philosophical concepts play.

The most pedestrian understanding of a metonym is a concrete object that comes to stand in for a larger, more abstract, less tidy thing. For example, "The White House" is regularly used to denote the Presidency of the United States, the presidential cabinet, and all of the country's "business" that occurs there. The image of "The White House" is a much neater, more digestible, concrete object that is used to present the larger, messier, more abstract whole. Given this, Pickrem's idea of an "abstract metonym" seems almost oxymoronic. If a metonym is abstract, can it rightly be called a metonym?[56] If the Absolute is used as a metonym for desire, how useful is that? Because there is nothing concrete on either side of the semantic equation to balance it, the abstract metonym seemingly cannot add much to the articulation at hand. The "Absolute" cannot tell the author, character, or reader anything new about desire because it seems to provide no new way of looking at it or grasping it.

What the abstract metonym accomplishes, in my view, is an avoidance of a generative and inventive discussion of desire. Pickrem agrees with my critique when she asserts that she "mistrust[s Sinclair's] disembodied abstraction of desire" (134). Pickrem sees Sinclair thinking she is creating a whole subjectivity, when really she is unconsciously sublimating desire by way of abstract metonyms. Indeed, Sinclair, finding no earthly way for women's desires to be satisfied or articulated, resorts to a world beyond, of which her idealist philosophy helps her to conceive.

---

[56]Actually, what counts as metonymy and what it accomplishes is still contested territory among scholars, a fact that *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* showcases by way of a long entry that is made up of many definitions, some of which point in contrasting directions. What this encyclopedia does confirm, however, is that metonyms can indeed be abstract, even though I have not seen these discussed in literary criticism beyond Peckrem's. For more on the specifics of metonyms, see pp. 783-785 of *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.

Mary Olivier spends its entirety cataloguing instances of disciplined desire. And Sinclair's solution for desire—to do away with it—does not yield a unified subjectivity in Mary, as she does not have a will or agency truly free from the clutches of her upbringing, even after her parents are dead. To be sure, Pickrem puts it well when she says that "the defining enunciation of the Sinclairian subject remains 'I want'" (136). I agree with Pickrem's reading of Sinclair's fiction as consumed with the mission of controlling libidinal desire, of attempting to transcend it to achieve the purity of a whole subjectivity, of an Absolute. That is indeed the way I read the ending of *Mary Olivier*, in which there *seems* to be an epiphanic relinquishing of desire in order to achieve happiness and a complete subjectivity. Still, I am suspicious of whether Mary actually achieves this, as it resembles the Joycean performative epiphany that Margot Norris delineates in *Suspicious Readings of Joyce's* Dubliners (2003). Does Sinclair, as Norris argues of Joyce, compose a moment of performative affectation in which Mary merely convinces herself that she has reached a heightened level of understanding? Pickrem, for one, mistrusts the authenticity of the novel's ending and takes it as a mirage of wholeness.

I want to take Pickrem's theory further by adding that desire *in general*, not merely libidinal desire, is disciplined in *Mary Olivier.* This can be seen writ large in the novel, in which Mary's will is actively squelched by her parents and in which she is punished for wanting anything beyond what her parents see fit for her to want. Furthermore, I argue that Sinclair's use of abstract metonyms, to which Pickrem passingly calls our attention, is crucial to the way Mary's desire is treated in the text and that they point to the centrality of transcendental idealism to Sinclair's own feminism. Her life as an idealist philosopher was integral to her larger feminist theory, which concludes: women's desire cannot be truly conceived of or fulfilled in the material world and such a quest is actually futile.

However, for Sinclair, women's desire can be perhaps, at best, laid to rest in the Real world of the beyond, which we have, if lucky, only fleeting access to, access that is captured in *Mary Olivier* in abstract metonyms. I will also briefly discuss, in closing, Sinclair's 1922 female *Bildungsroman, Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, in which such snuffing out of Harriett's desire by her parents ends in loneliness, in a life not lived, and in death. *Harriett Frean* seems to be Sinclair's own tiebreaker to any debate about whether *Mary Olivier* ends happily, as it offers a ghostly alternate ending about the cost of women's policed desire: no matter how the story ends—whether in epiphany or death—the cost is a life wasted in pursuit of insoluble desires, or one that is fully devoid of aspiration. Finally, I discuss Sinclair's book-length poem, *The Dark Night* (1924), a text on which there is scarcely any existing scholarship. Here, Sinclair's ongoing attempt to articulate the connection between women's thwarted desire and the Real world continues, this time in verse form. In her poem, Sinclair conceives of stifled desire as simultaneously "stilled," while also hungering and thirsting indefinitely.

4.1 *Mary Olivier: A Life*

"Like Mary," writes Katha Pollitt of Sinclair, "she spent years buried alive in a country village, writing and reading and caring for her aged mother" (ix). This suffocating subsistence is the life story on which *Mary Olivier: A Life* is based. The novel is divided into five books that each cover a different phase of Mary's life: Book One: Infancy (1865-1869), Book Two: Childhood (1869-1875), Book Three: Adolescence (1876-1879), Book Four: Maturity (1879-1900), and Book Five: Middle Age (1900-1910). This structure emphasizes that the nature and passage of time matter a great deal to the novel's narrative and to Mary's oppressive experience of domestic life. To be sure, the way in which time passes in *Mary Olivier* is profoundly distressing. For example, within a single sentence two years will have passed and Mary is

suddenly 32 years old, still living with her aging mother, Caroline Olivier, as their family members die one by one from alcoholism, suicide, and a genetic heart condition (a condition Mary eventually comes to find she has inherited). Part of what makes the novel's temporality particularly eerie is the fact that Mary has always lived at home with her family, with two exceptions: a short stint at a girls' school in adolescence and then in her middle age with a love interest, Richard Nicholson, whom she leaves to return home to care for her dying mother. In this way, the passage of time in the novel is structured around the uneventful days and years that transpire without much aberration in a cloistered home, rather than around a variety of events, experiences, and changes of locale.

The life we witness Mary living from infancy is an insular, confined, sepulcher-like existence in which she desperately strives for knowledge and selfhood by reading, writing, and attempting to get to know the few people who live near the Oliviers or who come to visit. Meanwhile, her mother monomaniacally strives to keep almost everything Mary wants from her, be it material (such as books) or merely informational (such as how babies are made). This push and pull between them, of Mary wanting and her mother withholding, is the central conflict of the novel. Mrs. Olivier, as a rule, does not like who Mary is and is interminably wanting her to be different, more in the image of her own self, a model Victorian housewife.[57] Mrs. Olivier strives to tame desire of all kinds out of her daughter, as she evidently sees this as the right way for a woman to be: without desire for that which lies outside of the conventional and narrow sphere of womanhood. When Mary sews, reads the Bible, or sits quietly at a domestic task, her mother is happy with her. But when Mary studies Greek, reads Kant, or has an opinion or a desire for an object or a bit of knowledge, her mother is deeply troubled and angry with her. In

[57] Mary's middle name is actually "Victoria," emphasizing how entrenched the monarch's long reign and its values are in Mary's domestic life.

short, Mary's wanting anything unexpected of a white, bourgeois Victorian woman is actively disallowed and discouraged.

Not unlike Linda Burnell of Katherine Mansfield's "Prelude" and "At the Bay," Sinclair's Mary Olivier too has a mother who seems not quite to love her daughter. In fact, Mary's experience of her relationship with her very religious mother shows a pattern of unreciprocated affection and consistent shaming. Mary's desire for anything, if she expresses it, is condemned by her mother. This is immediately evident in the first book when little Mary is scolded by her mother for coveting her brother's cat, Sarah:

> "Mamma gave Sarah to Mark. Mary mustn't want what isn't given to her. Mark doesn't say, 'I want Mary's dollies.' Papa doesn't say, 'I want Mamma's workbox.'"
>
> "But *I* want Sarah."
>
> "And that's selfish and self-willed."
>
> Mamma sat down on the low chair at the foot of the bed.
>
> "God," she said, "hates selfishness and self-will. God is grieved every time Mary is self-willed and selfish. He wants her to give up her will." (18)

From her earliest years Mary is told that God doesn't want her to have a will and doesn't want her to desire anything. The Anglican spirituality into which Mary is acculturated is bound up with shame around having desire. After her mother puts Mary into her cot for a nap, Mary prays: "Please God keep me from wanting Sarah" (18). For Mary, her earliest association of desire is with sin. Sarah the cat is an object, among many others in the novel, that represents Mary's forbidden and unfulfilled desires.

When Mary's fifth birthday is over, she is sad and tells her mother and nanny, Jenny, that

she wishes it could be her birthday again the next day, rather than having to wait a whole year. Again, her mother admonishes her for wanting something:

> Mamma shook her head at her. "You want to be spoiled and petted every day."
>
> "No. No. I want—I want—"
>
> "She doesn't know what she wants," said Jenny.
>
> "Yes. I do. I *do*." (23)

Little Mary's willful and desirous disposition—quite normal for any child—is again suppressed by the adults in her life. Even when Mary attempts to defend herself and explain to her mother why she wants it to be her birthday again: "I want—I want—" she gets interrupted by Jenny, who scoffs at Mary for thinking that she knows what she wants. Articulating her desires is not something Mary is allowed to do without scolding or interruption. What Mary wants has no place in the discourse of the household and she learns this at a young age. In Book Two, Mary starts learning to keep what she wants to herself. Upon realizing that, unlike Anglicans, Roman Catholics get to enjoy fun activities on Sundays after twelve o'clock, Mary thinks: "She wished she had been born in a Roman Catholic country" (50). Here, her desire only has a place in her thoughts, but it nevertheless remains.

Mary comes to find that muzzling women's desire is a veritable tradition in her family, something she sees not only in her mother, but in her aunts Lavvy and Charlotte as well. In the "Maturity" section of the novel, Mary is left alone in a room with Aunt Lavvy and they have a formative exchange:

> "Thirty-three years ago I was miserable, because I couldn't have my own way. I couldn't marry the man I cared for."
>
> "Oh—*that.* Why didn't you?"

> "My mother and your father and your Uncle Victor wouldn't let me."
>
> "I suppose he was a Unitarian?"
>
> "Yes. He was a Unitarian. But whatever he'd been I couldn't have married him. I couldn't do anything I liked. I couldn't go where I liked or stay where I liked. I wanted to be a teacher, but I had to give it up." (256)

Here, Aunt Lavvy provides Mary with an important and tragic family history. The fabric of the family is dependent on women's desires being thwarted. Women's desires are sacrificed on the altar of the family's best interest. Aunt Lavvy goes on: "I've got all I want. I've got all there is. When everything's taken away, then God's there . . . Until everything's taken away there isn't room to *see* that he's there" (257). After Aunt Lavvy leaves the room, Mary processes what she has just heard about glimpsing God being a satisfying consolation prize for being deprived: "Aunt Lavvy—to live like that for thirty-three years and to be happy at the end. She wondered what happiness there could be in that dull surrender and acquiescence, that cold, meek love of God" (257). For Mary, God's love isn't compensatory for surrendering desire—but she is intrigued by the gist of Aunt Lavvy's method of being happy despite it all. Mary wonders—prescient of the end of the novel—what happiness there could be in renouncing desire.

The novel plays out conflicts between Victorian-era female archetypes and those of the emerging new age. Mary can productively be read, Cheryl Wilson argues, as the New Woman figure in *Mary Olivier*, albeit a confined one. Her mother, Caroline, is the figure of the Victorian matriarch with aggressively puritanical values. Mary's Aunt Charlotte, who is sent away to a

mental hospital for being obsessively desirous of men's affection, is an evident Bertha Mason figure.[58] Wilson explains that

> [p]revalent fears about the New Woman's unbridled sexuality, pursuit of personal desires, and refusal to accept existing gender hierarchies are heaped onto the character of Mary's Aunt Charlotte, whose supposed "madness" is, in many ways, a mid-Victorian interpretation of what would become the philosophy of the New Woman. (222)

Through these three female characters, Sinclair engages with the battling female archetypes of the Victorian Woman, the "mad woman in the attic," and the New Woman, complicating our understanding of the multiple dimensions of each. Furthermore, Mary comes to understand, in discovering that she has a secret, hidden, real self, that her mother, as a model Victorian woman, has learned to kill off her own real self in order to fit in to the world in which she lives.

Women's real selves, those not curated by the white imperialist patriarchy, began—at the end of the Victorian period—to show through the cracks forming in the old ways of performing femininity. As Wilson puts it, "The New Woman's desire for freedom strongly underpins *Mary Olivier,* since Mary pursues both physical and intellectual liberation" (228). Indeed, Mary's Aunt Charlotte goes mad because, unlike Mary or Caroline, she devises no way of dealing with her thwarted desires. Caroline suffocates her desires and Mary sublimates hers into her creative life. Charlotte simply goes insane, which perhaps makes her the most feminist and most tragic figure in the novel, since she refuses to do anything with her desire but feel and express it.

The policing of Mary's desire extends to her father, too. For example, "Minx" is one of the many affectionate nicknames that her favorite brother Mark calls her. In one scene, Mary's

[58] See Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). Sinclair was an admirer of the Brontë sisters and Mary Olivier can be easily read as a detective figure in her home—always in search of information while being gaslighted—like Jane Eyre. That Mary's Aunt Charlotte bears the same name as Charlotte Brontë is not a coincidence.

father, dictionary authoritatively in hand, reads the definition of "Minx" to his wife, but within earshot of the children: "'Minx: A pert, wanton girl. A she-puppy.'" Do you hear that, Caroline? He calls his sister a wanton she-puppy" (68). Here, Mary's father adulterates Mark's innocent pet-name for Mary by giving it a sexual, unruly connotation. He at once sexualizes Mary and then shames her for that sexuality that isn't even her own.

This is important context for how willfulness was perceived in Victorian-era girls and women: it was viewed as inherently licentious and indecent. A woman having any sort of desire, even nonsexual desire, was considered to have sexual undertones and was therefore considered at once unfeminine, masculine, and hyper-feminine. When it comes to female desire within the context of patriarchy, logic and language collapse. Female desire is a contradiction in terms. Later, at the dinner table, Mary's father offers her some chocolates, which Mary declines. Her father says, teasingly, "Is that your contrariness, or just your Mariness?" (73). His joke, which is an obvious play on the children's rhyme, implies that part of Mary's annoying individuality, from her father's perspective, is her having a will of her own. Her "contrariness" and her "Mariness" are one and the same: her way of being is contrary and willful.

One of the most tragic moments of the novel is when Mary, still a child, begs her mother to say "I love you" back to her when Mary tells Caroline she loves her. Their interaction in this scene is acutely indicative of their unbalanced dynamic but also shows the way Mary's mother, a Victorian-era housewife with an emotionally needy husband, has no more love to give. She's entirely sucked dry of the ability to do emotional labor. Mary wants her mother's love so desperately but cannot access it. In the exchange between them that follows, one gets the impression that part of what makes Mary's mother loath to say she loves Mary is that Mary

wants her to. Mary's expression of desire for her mother to say "I love you" disgusts her and evidently contributes to her mother's unwillingness to say it back:

> But she wouldn't say it. You couldn't make her.
>
> "Say it, Mamma. Say it like you used to."
>
> Mamma shook her head.
>
> "I want to hear you say it."
>
> "Well, I'm not going to."
>
> "I love you. I ache with loving you. I love you so much that it hurts me to say it."
>
> "Why do you do it, then?"
>
> "Because it hurts me more not to. Just once. 'I love you.' Just a weeny once."
>
> "You're going to be like your father, tease, tease, tease, all day long, till I'm worn out."
>
> (80)

This painful exchange between a small child and her mother, in which the child begs for an expression of love and even models how to do so, is almost unbearable. The more Mary begs, the more intransigent her mother becomes. The last line that Caroline speaks, above, is telling, however. Mary's mother's experience of being constantly pestered by her husband for emotional labor, affection, and attention has worn her out. She no longer feels able to give more love (this has clear resonances with Mansfield's Linda Burnell and her husband, Stanly). Even so, it does appear as though Mary's *wanting* love is what repulses her mother most. In fact, Caroline associates such wanting with her husband, suggesting that she sees it as a masculine trait: men desire, women endure it.

On a walk with Mark, in which he tells Mary he wishes he were a soldier, Mary responds that he might be killed. Mark retorts, "Nothing matters, Minky, as long as you get what you

want" (70). This lesson Mark imparts to his sister, that fulfilled desire is more important than life itself, is important to understanding Mary's developing outlook on life. On the one hand, Mary's mother and father shame her for discussing what she wants or for even having desire for anything. Mark, on the other hand, explains to her that what matters most in life is getting what you want. Then, much later on in the novel, Mark tells Mary that Aunt Charlotte is the sanest of anyone in the family and explains that this is because "she knew what she wanted" (288). Mary and Mark agree that the family call Aunt Charlotte "mad" precisely because she will not give up wanting. A few sentences later, however, Mark calls Mary a "little beast" for saying she wants to travel, write poetry, and escape her mother (289). Even for Mark, Mary's most kindred ally, there is a limit to what his sister can morally want; independence from her family, for example, is unequivocally selfish, in Mark's view, even when he himself seeks to enlist in the army – and eventually does so.

4.2 Mary's Philosophy

Throughout the novel Mary comes to understand that her habit of having desires and expressing them is untenable within the domestic context to which she is chained through her duty to her mother. To cope with this reality, Mary, an avid reader of German philosophy, develops a philosophy of her own in the tradition of metaphysical Idealism, one that Sinclair herself penned: two years before Sinclair published *Mary Olivier,* she published her first of two books of philosophy in which she articulates her philosophical persuasion that is so prevalent in her semiautobiographical novel. The first two sentences of *A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions & Conclusions* (1917) provide important context for Sinclair's philosophical milieu: "There is a certain embarrassment," admits Sinclair, "in coming forward with an Apology for Idealistic Monism at the present moment. You cannot be quite sure whether you are putting in an

appearance too late or much too early" (vii). Sinclair understood that her particular philosophical commitments were already out of fashion, replaced by philosophies like those of the New Realists.[59] Perhaps some tenets of Idealism were still acceptable in their appealing, even nostalgic vintage, but the New Realists' critique of Idealism was that its spiritual Monism (which considers the spiritual realm to be more real than the material realm) amounts to an old-fashioned pseudoscience of the nineteenth century. The New Realists saw their own belief in Pluralism (which accords equal weight to material and ideal realms) as the more accurate ontology and the one more consonant with the future. But Sinclair staunchly believed that even if Idealism appeared dated to modernist philosophers, it would be reborn again and again, whereas New Realism would die and remain dead. Idealism, for Sinclair, was an immortal and timeless intellectual invention that takes seriously the spiritual realm's more real existence.

For Sinclair, "the only things that stand firm in the universe are Ideas" (xiii). And furthermore, what lies at the foundation of Sinclair's Idealism is her "Belief in the Beyond and of the Hope of a Hereafter" (xv). I want to suggest that this mystical and spiritual quality to Sinclair's philosophy informs her feminism in an important way: she holds that the material world in which she lives, the one that is tainted by patriarchy in every way, is not the only reality, is indeed *not* reality. Sinclair does admit that it may be too late to rebuild all that New Realism and materialism have destroyed, but she nevertheless wrote her version of Idealism, what she calls the "New Idealism," expanding on the work of F. H. Bradley (xvii). She even riskily owns that part of her philosophy includes a discussion of "Mysticism," which she concedes will give fodder to her critics. She is careful to say that "mystical metaphysics is an

[59] These were philosophers such as Samuel Butler, Henri Bergson, William James, and Bertrand Russell, all of whom Sinclair read and deeply admired. She admits that it is painful for her to disagree with them. In some cases Sinclair owns that the philosopher's "vision" is correct but that the "structure" he uses is wrong (xiv).

abomination," yet "metaphysical mysticism is another matter" (xviii). By "metaphysical mysticism," I take Sinclair to mean that her mysticism is grounded in her theory of metaphysics and is therefore tethered to a logically reasoned view of reality. However, mystical metaphysics would be a metaphysics not primarily grounded in reason, but rather in conclusions drawn from magical thinking. For Sinclair, mysticism is an important facet of her view of life, one that allows her to imagine a better world—pure pragmatism allows one to go only so far. In this way, Sinclair sees New Realism as a philosophy impossible to swallow, as a woman who has seen the disappointing variety that the material world has on offer for women.

But Sinclair doesn't merely adopt the legacy of Idealism wholesale. A crucial distinction between Sinclair's brand of Idealism and her predecessors', is that in both Kant's and Hegel's versions of Idealism, for example, we cannot actually know the noumenal world that lies beyond the world of appearances. The world beyond is more real but is permanently barred to us—we can only know the world of appearances. In Sinclair's own Idealism, however, we can indeed access the world beyond by way of epiphanic moments such as the ones that Mary regularly experiences, whose signatures are the strange happiness that is denoted by the white light that she regularly sees (which I discuss below).

In Sinclair's Idealism, we can have glimpses of the world beyond and live off these epiphanies – they sustain us throughout our lives. Sinclair tries to bring the Real world into the material world in her fiction and lets Mary grab hold of it as much as she can. The problem is that such intermittent transcendence still isn't enough. She can glimpse it but cannot ever gain permanent access to it. Even this one, privileged desire for the Absolute, is not fully satisfied, however, as much as Mary insists on her transformative, empowering encounters with it. At the end of the novel, during the final epiphanic scene, Mary no longer feels her body, since the Ideal

realm is bodiless and without sense. But she must ultimately return to her unsated, constrained female body. As I have said, *Mary Olivier* is a novel that catalogues Mary's attempts to express and fulfill a wide range of desires. But that panoply of desires will never be fulfilled. It is little wonder, then, that Mary—herself an Idealist—would embrace a philosophy in which desire is absent in the beyond. Mary's last, preeminent desire in the novel is for this other realm that frees her from the material world, which is incompatible with women's fulfillment.

According to Sinclair, for materialists – like the New Realists – the Self, is an "illusory by-product of consciousness, which is itself an illusory by-product of the physical processes of the organism and the world it lives in" (5). In contrast, for idealist Sinclair, the Self is equivalent to a Soul and has, therefore, a mystical and spiritual nature. For Sinclair, the "one thing of interest and of value" that Freud and Jung have contributed to psychology is their theories of sublimation, in which the Self overcomes its sense of internal division and frustrated desire (7). Sinclair "roughly"—she admits—defines sublimation this way:

> the diversion of the Life-Force, of the Will-to-live, from ways that serve the purposes and interests of species, into ways that serve the purposes and interests of individuals. Roughly speaking, all religion, all morality, all art, all science, all civilization are its work. (7-8)

Sinclair goes on to say that the success of the individual over the species would not be possible if the Will-to-live were incapable of sublimation (8). Sublimation, to her, means privileging some desires over others – nourishing those that make for the greatest personal and communal well-being, whether or not they maximize survival and reproduction at the species level. For Sinclair, then, sublimation is a process by which the individual channels energy away from mere selfish desires (perhaps love interests, or casual sex—she doesn't enumerate these less-worthy pursuits)

and instead invests such "Life-Force" into cultural and societal goods such as poetry or spirituality (in Mary's particular case).

For Sinclair, repression and sublimation are the two actions available when it comes to dealing with less worthy desires. Repression entails stifling rather than sublimating desire and is therefore – in Sinclair's view – sublimation's dysfunctional alternative coping mechanism. Sinclair further defines sublimation as a culling of inferior desires and transferring one's energies to a more gratifying and worthy goal:

> At any age there is a limit to the desires the individual can satisfy and the pursuits he can follow with success. Sooner or later a selection must be made; and, other things equal, the beauty and worth of the individual will depend on the beauty and worth of the interests he chooses for his own. All sublimation is a turning and passing of desire from a less worthy or less fitting object to fix it on one more worthy or more fitting. (9)

For Sinclair, if one engages in sublimation, there is no repression involved, and vice versa. They cannot coexist. Repression, which is the suffocating of these "less worthy" desires rather than diverting that energy into the creation of cultural goods, leads to neurosis, whereas sublimation allows for a healthy and moral relationship to desire and one that is ultimately productive.

Here, Sinclair makes desire a moral issue, in that there are more "worthy" objects of one's desire on which one focuses by way of sublimating the less worthy objects. What she does not unpack, however, is how one goes about deciding what objects are worthy of desire; furthermore, she does not parse how one knows if that judgement is true, or whether it is the ideology one has been forced to swallow. However, what Sinclair does emphasize is that desire is ultimately "indestructible," so one must either repress it (if one is mentally ill) or sublimate it (if one is mentally well), rejecting inappropriate desires in favor of more beautiful and

worthwhile inclinations (9). Because of the way *Mary Olivier* ends, with its protagonist renouncing her earthly desires, it seems that through the process of writing the novel, Sinclair develops her understanding of the possibility of eliminating – or at least keeping at bay – worldly desire altogether, via sublimation of it into otherworldly hopes. In the end of *Mary Olivier*, Mary does not sublimate her desire by directing it at another more worthy material object. Instead, she desires the philosophical Absolute – that is, the cessation of all desire, a transcendence from earthly wanting.

Tragically, what Mary realizes at the end of the novel is that, for her, happiness and desire are mutually exclusive:

> All her life she had gone wrong about happiness. She had attached it to certain things and certain people: Mamma and Mark, Jenny, visits to Aunt Bella, the coming of Aunt Charlotte and Aunt Lavvy and Uncle Victor, the things people would say and do which they had not said and not done. (435)

Such desire for things and people, Mary concludes, is what stands between her and Reality, between her and gaining access to the world beyond. And to know Reality is to achieve happiness. Happiness is a feeling that she must find within herself, she determines, rather than its hinging on people and things around her.

When, in her early twenties, Mary is jilted by a much older and condescending love interest, Maurice Jourdain, she notes that this painful experience might actually have been beneficial for her, as Maurice always got in the way of her happiness: "If only he had left her alone. If only she could go back to her real life. But she couldn't. She couldn't feel any more her sudden, secret happiness. Maurice Jourdain had driven it away" (261). Mary goes on to realize that "She didn't want him. But she wanted Somebody. Somebody. Somebody. He had left her

with this ungovernable want" (262). Maurice has left Mary not only feeling profoundly unhappy and without access to the Real world, but has also created a longing within her for an ideal "Somebody" who will make her happy.

As Mary matures, she comes to find that no "Somebody" can make her happy. In the "Middle Age" section of the novel, Mary contemplates the fact that ending things with her boyfriend, Richard, was the ultimate act of love: "Loving him more than herself she had let him go. Letting go had somehow done the trick" (436). She liberates Richard and herself, in her thinking, from dependence on each other for happiness. Here, it is evident that, for Mary, renunciation is the ultimate good, the key to contentment and self-sufficiency, and is what allows her to know Reality and her "Real" self, cleansed of all that society puts upon her. This theory of knowing that she alone is responsible for her own happiness and that it is a fool's errand to attach happiness to people and things seems philosophically sound. There is a long tradition of Stoic thought in this vein: there is Schopenhauerian resignation and of course the Buddhist mantra of letting go of attachment and desires in order to achieve nirvana. However, is living by this creed of renouncing all worldly desire compatible with having human relationships? Does it require sublimating all other hopes into the ultimate one, for spiritual "Reality," itself an abstract metonym for release from perennially thwarted desire? For Mary, in her historical moment, it does. And this tells us a great deal about women's experience of that time and perhaps *any* time: that happiness and desire are incompatible, because women's desire will always butt up against the dams that patriarchy continuously builds to contain it.

Eventually, to compensate for the fact that she is not permitted to want, Mary sublimates her desire into abstract metonyms that are beyond the terrestrial plane. In a conversation with Mark, she proclaims:

> "I want *the* thing. Reality, Substance, the Thing-in-itself. Spinoza calls it God. Kant doesn't; but he seems to think it's all the God you'll ever get, and that, even then, you can't know it. Transcendental Idealism is just another sell." (281)

To cope with the fact of her desires in life being unfulfillable, Mary sets her sights on wanting what Kant says is unattainable: the Thing-in-itself. Mary is unsatisfied with Kant's theory that one can never know the Thing-in-itself, the true Reality. Mary wants to know the world beyond and is actually convinced that she accesses it in the brief moments in which she feels her "secret happiness" throughout the novel. Indeed, one of the most intriguing recurring scenes of the novel is the intermittent experience of a particular and peculiar sort of happiness that comes upon Mary without warning. The first time she feels it is in the "Childhood" section of the novel while she is on a walk with the family maid, Jenny:

> A queer white light everywhere, like water thin and clear. Wide fields, flat and still, like water, flooded with the thin, clear light; grey earth, shot delicately with green blades, shimmering. Ley Street, a grey road, whitening suddenly where it crossed open country, a hard causeway thrown over the flood. The high trees, the small, scattered cottages, the two taverns. The one tall house had the look of standing up in water.
>
> She saw the queer white light for the first time and drew in her breath with a sharp check. She knew that the fields were beautiful . . . .
>
> The drawing-room at the back was full of the queer white light . . . .
>
> Her happiness was sharp and still like the white light . . . .
>
> She looked and looked. Her happiness mixed itself up with the queer light and with the flat fields and the tall, bare trees (57-59).

The queer white light that suddenly appears "everywhere" affords Mary an altered perspective of the world. Here, the happiness, always associated with the "queer light," gets mixed up with the outdoor landscape: the flat fields and tall, bare trees. The landscape before Mary becomes awash in the light, "like water thin and clear." The world around Mary takes on an otherworldly appearance. These moments of sharp happiness in which the white light appears to her, are the glimpses she gets of the Real world shining through the material world of appearances. In such moments Mary experiences momentary relief from her unfulfilled desires. The white light is, I contend, Mary's earliest abstract metonym for the Real world of which she periodically gets glimpses throughout her life. "White light" is the only adequate means by which Mary can articulate her glimpses of the world beyond.

Corroborating my reading of these instances in which Mary experiences the white light, Laurel Forster argues that these are moments in which Mary experiences reality as it really is: as Reality—the ultimate Real world beyond. These moments, for Mary, cut through the world of appearances down to the Real world. Furthermore, writes Forster, this image of the white light of Reality is an "Imagist mode of expression" (101). As I argue, Sinclair's images increasingly metonymize an idealist Absolute. "It may well be," Forster continues, "that Sinclair saw an opportunity to proffer her own version of the image: an image of consciousness, a direct representation of the workings of the mind" (104). Sinclair, like Ezra Pound, aimed in her writing to "restore the reality of the moment" (Forster 107). In fact, Sinclair herself, in her essay "Two Notes" from 1915, demonstrates the way the Imagist approach is compatible with her own way of writing: "What the Imagists are 'out for' is direct contact with reality. You must get closer and closer. Imagery must go. Symbolism must go. There must be nothing between you and your object" (88). In *Mary Olivier*, reality proves less and less terrestrial and more

transcendent and relies on abstract metonyms to get as close as possible to this unearthly Reality. "Symbolism must go" because symbolism maintains a distance between language and meaning, whereas metonymy cuts closer to the bone by not relying on existing associations and allowing for more dynamic and direct treatment of ideas.

Mary experiences the white light and its accompanying happiness again in her adolescence when she is walking by herself along a country lane near her home:

> By the gate of the field her sudden, secret happiness came to her.
>
> She could never tell when it was coming, nor what it would come from. It had something to do with the trees standing up in the golden white light. It had come before with a certain sharp white light flooding the fields, flooding the room.
>
> It happened so often that she received it now with a shock of recognition; and when it was over she wanted it to happen again. (109)

Mary's secret happiness that comes from glimpsing Reality is metonymized by way of the white light in an effort to make it articulatable and real. Rather than attempting to explain what it feels like—an impossible task, but would perhaps be something akin to being free from the suffering that unfulfilled desire brings—she articulates it as a white light that floods over the scene in front of her, be it the field, the trees, or the drawing room. In these moments of secret happiness, Mary is free from the lack that permeates the material world—is free from longing for all that she cannot have. But there is no real way to describe what that experience would be *like*. Instead, the abstract metonym of the white light is employed not to describe what glimpsing Reality is *like* (since there is nothing *like* it), but rather to attempt to articulate how it *is* for Mary: it augments the way she sees the world: the world looks brighter to her in these moments and she feels happy and free.

For Mary, there is not a small set of locales in which the secret happiness and its queer luminous companion appear—it isn't confined to the fields, or the trees, or a room in her house. Indeed poetry, for Mary, offers another point of access to glimpsing the Real. She sees a kinship with Percy Shelley, for example, when she reads his poetry—she feels as though he too has glimpsed the world beyond:

> She read the "Ode to a Skylark," the "Ode to the West Wind" and "Adonais."
>
> All her secret happiness was there. Shelley knew about the queerness of the sharp white light, and the sudden stillness, when the grey of the fields turns to violet: the clear, hard stillness that covers the excited throb-throbbing of the light. (152)

First, the white light is described as sharp and still. Then, it is more animated and vital: it is "throb-throbbing," as though it is pulsing with energy. Here, the queer light is conceived of as a mixture of polarities: it is at once still and throbbing. Mary's glimpses of the world beyond come to her as this seemingly conflicted image of a pulsating placation, but one that occurs to Mary as accurate rather than confounding.

Furthermore, where Mary encounters the white light isn't limited to the material realm. As Mary's adolescence comes to a close, she begins to conceive of the white light as something related to the world beyond the terrestrial realm—as not confined to the world of appearances: "There were the five elm trees, and there was the happy white light on the fields. God was the trees. He was the happy light and he was your happiness" (167). Here, the light and the happiness it denotes is one of God's many iterations for Mary. God is the trees, but he is also the happy light. The light is therefore part of God. This positions the white light as having, for Mary, a spiritual dimension and for helping her articulate what lies beyond both the material world and the brand of God she has been fed by her family. As I recounted earlier, Mary's mother tells her

that God doesn't want her to have desires and that God punishes those who sin by desiring. But Mary sees God in herself and in her happiness, making it impossible that God could hate what she desires, as she sees God as part of her. But for Mary, the material world in which her desires remain unfulfilled and considered sinful cannot be the Real world. On the contrary, the world that shines through via the white light, the white light that is "your happiness," is what is Real.

Sinclair is wise to the fact that this Real world beyond the world of appearances, the place where one's Real self exists, is hard to believe in. In her "Conclusions" chapter of *A Defence of Idealism*, she admits that the idealist "is painfully aware that the very existence of his Absolute Spirit is problematical; that, outside certain extremely rare forms of mystical experience, it is not discoverable by any experimental method known to man" (345). One wonders whether the novel Sinclair would go on to write shortly after her first book of philosophy, *Mary Olivier,* could be rightly considered an attempt to render such "mystical experiences" that Sinclair claims are the only point of access to the Absolute. Was literary writing, for Sinclair, one such experimental method for creating these mystical experiences of the Absolute?

As if in response to this question, Sinclair points out that "a good half" of the problems that philosophy cannot solve are due to "the limitations of language" (346):

> But when it comes to discussing whether things are inside or outside of consciousness; whether consciousness is a part of a whole; whether, if it runs, it runs parallel with physical processes, or runs altogether in some other manner; whether, if it stands, it stands at the circumference or the center; and whether consciousness stands or runs at all, it seems almost obvious that we are being made the victims of our own metaphors. (346)

Sinclair identifies the limits of language as one of the barriers getting in the way of important philosophical conclusions. As she puts it, we are the "victims of our own *metaphors*." The insufficient metaphors we use prevent fresh meaning-making, as the comparisons they draw upon limit our ability to conceive of new meanings that have no known comparison. In *Mary Olivier,* Sinclair deploys abstract metonyms to escape the limits of metaphors or other symbolic language, to create new meanings that have no earthly comparison. Literary texts do afford one an almost mystical escape from the strictures of language.

At the end of *Mary Olivier*, Mary learns that people and objects in the material world can leave at any moment and so hanging her happiness on them is a mistake. In the final several pages of the novel, her mother passes away preceded by many family members, Richard gets married to another woman, and yet Mary believes she is the happiest she's been. Mary wonders why no one has ever told her that after the age of forty-five "life would have this exquisite clearness and intensity" (435). For Mary, the only guarantee of happiness is for it to come from another reality that is outside the material world:

> Why, since it *could* happen when you were young—reality breaking through, if only in flashes coming and going, going altogether and forgotten—why had you to wait so long before you could remember it and be aware of it as one continuous shining background? She had never been aware of it before; she had only thought about and about it, about Substance, the Thing-in- itself, Reality, God. Thinking was not being aware.
>
> She made it out more and more. For twenty-three years something had come between her and reality. She could see what it was now. She had gone through life wanting things, wanting people, clinging to the thought of them, not able to keep off them and let them go. (435)

Mary's epiphany is that the Real world has always been there—has always been shining through the material world in flashes that she sometimes glimpses. Mary realizes that what has been preventing her from accessing Reality is her hungering after people and things. What is tragic here is that from a young age Mary's experience of life has been desiring, more than anything, mutually deep and affectionate connection with those she loves and for those she loves to accept her for who she is. However, Mary has learned, through her failed familial and romantic relationships, that this desire will always end in disappointment—people either will not love her back or they will leave. She decides that letting go of wanting such relationships is her only shot at happiness. For Mary, the flashes of the Real world, in which thwarted desire is not a factor, are what will sustain her. Knowing that the Real world is shimmering behind all appearances allows her to look to that for happiness and to leave desire for human connection behind. In the world beyond, she alone is enough.

4.3 *Harriett Frean* and *The Dark Night*

Sinclair's other semiautobiographical novel, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), is, writes Francine Prose in her introduction to the book, "one of the more disturbing novels I have read or can imagine" (ix). But this disturbing aspect is not due to anything horrifying or violent. Rather, it is due to the sheer banality and predictability of Harriett's life—of its uneventful, quiet entirety. "What makes the book so frightening," writes Prose, "is how few compensations there are, how rare, minor, and misguided the pleasures and satisfactions that might have made it worth Harriett's while to endure the griefs and deprivations" (ibid.). Prose's characterization of *Harriett Frean* rings just as true for *Mary Olivier*: although it ends on what seems to be a transcendent note, the novel is still highly distressing in terms of what Mary *doesn't* experience or get. At the close of the novel, I am not as convinced of Mary's "freedom" from earthly

wanting and her resulting happiness, as Mary seems to be. Think of all that she was kept from while her mother lived: travel, romantic relationships, friendships, love from her parents, a good education – to name only a few.

As if in response to doubts regarding the genuineness of Mary's optimism, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* does away with any question as to the tragedy of renouncing one's desire. The novel is the life story of a woman who has no identity or will separate from her parents' and it traces her quiet, insular life and her slow, isolated decline into old age and death. Harriett's last utterance and the novel's ominous final line, "'Mamma—'" emphasizes Harriett's ultimate and fatal codependence with her mother, her total lack of selfhood. Where at least Mary is a critical and independent thinker and a poet and intellectual, Harriett has a total lack of identity beyond the one her parents curated for her. One striking example of this is a thought Harriett has at the conclusion of a conversation with her mother about a woman with a baby Harriett saw while shopping. Harriett's mother asks her whether, when she has a baby, she would rather have a boy or a girl. Harriett responds: "'I think—perhaps I'd rather have a little girl.' She would be like Mamma, and her little girl would be like herself. She couldn't think of it any other way" (8). Harriett's conception of the nature of children is that they are carbon copies of their parents—they are repetitions without differences. She cannot imagine it being any other way. To be a daughter is to mimic one's mother.

Harriett's parents' philosophy in raising their daughter is to train her to behave "beautifully," which means to not long for anything, or at the very least to not detectably want anything. An exemplary moment of *Harriett Frean* is when Harriett attends a children's tea party. Harriett gazes at the table's delectable spread and hungrily contemplates what she would like to eat:

> She knew what she would have. She would begin with a bun, and go on through two sorts of jam to Madeira cake, and end with raspberries and cream. Or perhaps it would be safer to begin with raspberries and cream. She kept her face very still, so as not to look greedy, and tried not to stare at the Madeira cake lest people should see she was thinking of it. Mrs. Hancock had given her somebody else's crumby plate. She thought: I'm not greedy. I'm really and truly hungry. She could draw herself in at the waist with a flat, exhausted feeling, like two ends of a concertina coming together. (8-9)

What begins with Harriett taking masked pleasure in wanting to devour the delicious items ends with an act of repression: she sucks in her stomach and renounces her desire for food. Her mother, thinking she's already eaten, motions to her to leave the table to make room for other children, a command with which Harriett complies.

Back at home, Harriett's mother asks her why she didn't explain to her in the moment that she hadn't eaten, to which Harriett replies: "Because I—I don't know" (9). Rather than asking Harriett to try to articulate this further, her mother says "Well, I'm glad my little girl didn't snatch and push. It's better to go without than to take from other people. That's ugly" (ibid). The clear message here is that what's most important is to remain disinterested and devoid of want, even when one is truly hungry. The extent to which Harriett buys into this and gets pleasure from her renunciation is evident in her subsequent thoughts: "Ugly. Being naughty was just that. Doing ugly things. Being good was being beautiful like Mamma. She wanted to be like her mother. Sitting up there and being good felt delicious" (9). In this way, Harriett's personality begins to form around a habit of behaving beautifully, which is to say, actively refusing herself what she wants. From this "delicious" renunciation of desires, Harriett learns to derive her only "pleasures" from life.

Harriett ultimately dies alone in shabby living conditions, having mostly alienated herself from her friends and community by having a one-dimensional self. Mary's and Harriett's endings are the two possible—equally lonely—options Sinclair sees for women who renounce their desires: sublimation and repression, respectively. Chillingly, Mary's story is over 400 pages and Harriett's is only 86. Harriett's novel feels, in the hand, terribly emaciated. There is something eerie about a slim novella with a title that denotes a lifespan. As Raitt astutely puts it, "*Harriett Frean* exemplifies a resistant, laconic form of modernity which uses linguistic sparsity and intensity to install femininity not as a site of enigma and fecundity, but as a state of deprivation and disappointment" (245). Through her story of Harriett, Sinclair renders hollow the mythologies of the bountiful life of a woman, exposing it for what it so often is: an emaciated existence. Harriett is unaccustomed to "articulating—or even to recognizing—her own desire unless it is emptied out by its mediation through her mother" (Raitt 251). In Raitt's view, *Harriett Frean* is a "cautionary tale about the dangers of a failure to sublimate and to escape from the somatic and emotional traps laid by one's parents" (255). When Harriett's parents die, she keeps herself isolated in the house, aside from a few visits from her three friends. She has no desire to go out into the world and have experiences—it is a quality that is entirely missing from her.

Harriett's emaciated selfhood is mirrored in Sinclair's use of imagism in the novel's form, which can again be readily seen in her economy of words: she attempts to get her point across as concisely and concretely as possible. Forster provides evidence for this paring down of language by comparing the original manuscript of *Harriett Frean* to the published edition. For example, "'portion' becomes 'part' and 'perished' changes to 'gone,'" demonstrating Sinclair's commitment to simplification in her revision process (117). The bare bones of the story are what

is left in the end, a fact that Forster attributes to Sinclair's commitment to the Imagistic technique. Furthermore, this formal choice fits well with the content of the story, as Harriett is, after all, a shell of a person: she has no substance or will of her own to convey. This formal technique lends itself to conveying a character who is entirely devoid of desire. As Forster puts it, in *Harriett Frean,* unlike in *Mary Olivier*, "Sinclair implements Imagist principles to achieve a brutal and direct communication of the image of impeded female maturation" (118). To be sure, this 1922 novel seems to be, for Sinclair, the epitome—almost to the point of caricature—of what becomes of women who are denied desire of their own. Harriett is the embodiment of Sinclair's theory of what repression of desire does to women and the form of the novel is Sinclair's attempt at mirroring such desiccation.

Although *Mary Olivier* and *Harriett Frean* are considered, together, the culmination of Sinclair's experiment with the novel's form, the apex of Sinclair's toying with the boundary between the novel and poetry is her book-length poem in free verse, *The Dark Night* (1924). Early readers were baffled by this genre bending text and some saw it as a wholly new form of literary expression. One 1924 reviewer in *The New York Times* wrote this of the poem:

> it resembles nothing with which the present reviewer has hitherto come into contact, and in view of Miss Sinclair's known individuality of mind he is willing to credit her with having originated a new literary mode, a mode in which narrative and lyric verse are skillfully blended and utilized to produce what is essentially a dramatic presentation, although the result could not on any extension of the term be classified as drama . . . . Miss Sinclair's "close-ups" are of the mind and the soul, not of the face. (Hutchinson BR6)

Sinclair's poem was unlike anything even avid readers had seen, even at the apex of literary modernism when boundary-breaking texts were being published at regular intervals. According to Jane Dowson, Sinclair used this nearly novel-like form for her poem in order to "realize the complex inner life of a woman" (139). Thematically, the poem is about—not unlike many of her prose fictions—a woman and her thwarted desires. The female protagonist denies herself the man she desires in a selfless act. As in *Mary Olivier* and *Harriett Frean,* Sinclair focuses on the way she sees women having the power to "achieve painful but fulfilling, sublimation" that allows them to escape their desires (Dowson 146).

In *The Dark Night,* there is a line that seems to articulate Sinclair's very broad conception of women's unfulfilled desire: "The hunger and the thirst for things that are not there / The sad dreams / The ache and the long dread" (73). Women's desire, for Sinclair, seems to be predicated necessarily on that which is not there. What women want is not available to them in matter or meaning. Dowson puts it well when she says that "although Sinclair tended to the theory that sublimation is completing, there is something unsatisfactory about her women's unrelenting self-abnegation" (150). Although Sinclair treats sublimation as a solution to women's continuously unfulfilled desires, that solution is entirely insufficient, especially to the twenty-first-century feminist reader of her work. However, Sinclair advocated for sublimation not as a perfect antidote, but as preferable to the repression sold by Victorianism.

As is evidenced by her philosophical and literary texts alike, Sinclair gave up on the material world's capacity to answer to women's desires and looked instead to the world beyond. It is precisely this aspect of Sinclair's worldview that displays her deep cynicism, but it is important to also see the mystical optimism that is this pessimism's other face: rather than harbor a defeatist or nihilistic attitude about the state of the material world, Sinclair holds out for a more

Real world and actually creates literary texts in which that world can be glimpsed. Dowson notes that "following Yung, then, Sinclair believed that release from parental control and the sublimation of libidinous desires together produced a psychic Reality that approximated to moments of mystical expansion" (152). This mystical expansion as a result of freedom from one's parents and sublimating desires can of course be seen at the end of *Mary Olivier*: Mary has let go of her boyfriend and has an epiphany about happiness being within reach if she relinquishes all other desires.

This sublimating of desire and its effect is exemplified well in a passage from *The Dark Night* in which the protagonist, Elizabeth, thinks:

> There,
> In the stillness of the dark night,
> Are the hushed peace and the unearthly ecstasy,
> And the divine desire,
> That shall hunger and thirst forever,
> And forever be stilled. (113)

It is important that Sinclair grasped for a new genre in this later experiment with attempting to convey the Real. Here, the poetic form allows her even greater linguistic flexibility—she is no longer constrained by the syntax demanded of prose. This abstract metonym, "the dark night," presents an interesting contrast to the earliest abstract metonym, the white light, Sinclair employed in *Mary Olivier.*

In *The Dark Night*, rather than the point of access to another, unearthly reality being found in the presence of light, it is instead located in the lack of light: in the dark night. In this poem, published several years after *Mary Olivier,* the metonym used to discuss the world beyond

has completely lost its tether to the earth and has taken on a quality of a cosmic space in which there are no identifiable objects. This dark night is metonymy for an otherworldly space in which the unearthly ecstasy—perhaps a freedom from earthly lack, disappointment, and pain—is the dominant quality.

However, the lonely deixis of the poem's first line, "There," establishes a distance between the speaker and the dark night. The speaker is not, for example, "Here," suspended in the dark night. The dark night is "There," which is necessarily at a remove from the speaker. This positions the dark night as an idea that the speaker can conceive of while still not being enveloped within it. It is striking that the desire in the poem is "divine"—imbuing it with an unearthly and spiritual quality—and is at once "stilled" while also hungering and thirsting eternally. This points to the fact that sublimating desire doesn't do away with it, but merely finds a momentary outlet or release for it. Meanwhile, the "stilled" desire continues to exist, unsatiated, forever. Such renounced desire is undead, restlessly haunting she who sublimates or represses it.

CONCLUSION

This project has sought to trouble the boundaries around what counts as modernist formal preoccupations, particularly regarding the conceit that modernist fiction is preoccupied with the internal world of characters while being less interested in the material world. This dissertation has shown that modernists are far more materialistic than we have assumed, and that German modernism makes this materialism explicit, in such a way that effectively pulls back the veil on the field of modernism more broadly. From the outset, this project asked whether German modernism's preoccupation with surfaces might be pointing to a gap in our considerations of the same in British modernism more specifically. Furthermore, the fiction of Irmgard Keun has showcased the way in which German modernism's surface culture renders visible and articulatable female aspiration by way of fashion. This contrasts with the more varied metonyms for female desire – a lighthouse, aloe plants, a fur stole, a diamond, a pear tree, a dress – of the British modernist texts I have discussed. What this contrast means and the extent of its implications for modernist studies is territory for a future investigation. Nevertheless, this project has identified that in interwar modernist fiction, female desire resorts to metonyms as its rhetorical device of choice, regardless of international boundaries.

What lies ahead for this investigation will inevitably involve further digging into the German side of the equation, with an aim toward a deeper understanding of the differences and similarities between German and British modernisms. German modernism, for example, is far more explicit about its preoccupation with the surface of things and is far more comfortable with drawing connections between the human and the nonhuman, between subjects and objects. The pervasive visual culture of the interwar Germany, for example, is a fertile avenue for exploring the ways in which Weimar Germany related to the material world, fashion, and to women's

desire in general. Fashion's function as a metonym for female desire deserves further investigation in both British and German modernisms of various media.

With these several directions in mind, an intriguing potential interlocuter for future considerations for this project is Jessica Burstein's 2012 *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art.* This study has interesting considerations about the differences between modernist aesthetics of various media that focus on the non-human object world (which she designates as "cold modernism") and those that focus on the inner world of characters (which she calls "hot modernism"). Burstein contends that there are hot and cold modernisms: works that center around the living human and those that focus on the mechanical and inhuman, respectively.

For Burstein, cold modernism has been missing from our understanding of what modernism is. Generally, we understand modernism to be focused on "making it new." But Burstein sees cold modernism as "[o]perating with little or no regard for the notion of selfhood, cold modernism is free to bank wholly on relational qualities . . .the copy is the currency of cold modernism" (55). This suggests that the German modernism might fit into the cold modernism category, since it was copy- and meme-obsessed: the explosion of visual culture eclipsed the allure of originality.

In cold modernism "the mind does not matter, or it matters purely as matter" (12). In cold modernism, rather than the mind having a spiritual and mysterious quality, it is more akin to a machine with moving parts. Burstein defines cold modernism further:

> By saying that cold modernism valorizes exteriority, I mean that the body is taken as the start and the finish of all explanation. What precisely cold modernism *explains*, however, is not the question of what it is to be human, but what it is simply or merely to be; the status of the human has no especial purchase, and thus the human form is on par with

> seemingly dissimilar entities in the world: clothing, cars, and curtains, for example . . . the body is a machine to be toyed with, one that toys or ticks, or tics. In its most extreme form, cold modernism offers an account of the human form in which the mind plays no role; or, in a slightly less extreme form, in which the mind is so physicalized as to have no more or less purchase than pure anatomy. (13)

Cold modernism, then, considers the human subject as more of a human object, or at least it brings objecthood and subjecthood onto the same plane – there is no hierarchy between object and subject. Consciousness, in cold modernism, is a purely physical one: the body and the environment in which it exists, whether natural or man-made, are equally conscious, are equally not conscious. In this account, then, the human spirit that Woolf – and other modernists – seeks to render in her fiction does not exist in cold modernism.

Fashion is central to cold modernism's aesthetics as well. As Burstein has it, a lynchpin of cold modernism is that there is no difference between style and substance: form and content are indistinguishable. Fashion, for Burstein, is one of modernism's "most salient facts" (19). As Burstein would have it, then, fashion needs to be considered and studied as a crucial facet of modernist history. *Mode* is at the core of modernism, a fact that rings true for Irmgard Keun and German modernism more generally, but that is also underexplored in British modernism as well.

In Burstein's account, then, modernists like Woolf, Mansfield, and Sinclair are hot modernists, as their fiction is focused on conveying the elusive and almost magical nature of the human mind, spirit, and consciousness. In hot modernism "[t]he body is resonant with meaning, beating it out like a pulsing heart . . .The body is at once porous, filtering melody, and resonant, expressing desire" (24). It is important to note Burstein's use of the word "desire" as one she associates with hot modernism; the body, in hot modernism, desires. In cold modernism, the

body is made up of a series of gears. Burstein's contention is that modernism is consistently—and wrongly—conceived of as hot modernism alone (D.H. Lawrence's fiction is another example), as being concerned with the very alive and tropical inner and bodily life of characters.

In Burstein's view of Woolf as a hot modernist, for example, Woolf is quite resistant to "the idea of the body as a thing." Burstein makes a point to "emphasize that the most material facts of the body's relation to the world are, in Woolf, restricted, even sanitized, by the preoccupations of the selfhood" (27). Ultimately, Burstein argues that Woolf is "irrevocably a hot modernist, for the self persists as a problem in her works, albeit one at times gladdened or maddened by the possibility that she or he need not be" (28). This anxiety in Woolf that Burstein highlights is important: Woolf is ambivalent about the idea that the self might be merely a body, merely mechanical.

An interesting future consideration, then, is the "coldness" from which Woolf flees (and, as Burstein would have it, which she "sanitizes") in her fiction. This has intriguing implications regarding Woolf's consistently ambivalent relationship to Berlin and Germanness more generally that we see in her personal writings. Woolf describes Berlin as "cold" and "ugly," but is unable to really articulate why it is so repugnant to her and whether its "coldness" is merely regarding its temperature. Cold modernism, for Burstein, is "stripped of affect" (30) and it proposes the chilling question of whether our selves are just our bodies. Such a proposition is the opposite of what Woolf's modernist project seeks to show, which is that our selves are deeply spiritual and that our consciousness might exist beyond our body.

One of Burstein's exemplary English cold modernists is Wyndham Lewis. Burstein quotes Lewis:

> I am not an anatomist. I enjoy the surface of life, if not for its own sake, at least not because it conceals the repulsive turpidness of the intestine. Give me the dimple in the cheek of the Gioconda or St. John the Baptist, and you can have all the Gothic skeletons or superrealist guts that you like! And what applies to the body applies likewise to the mind. I do not like all these doctors. Give me the surface of the mind, as well. Give me the *outside* of all things, I am a fanatic for the externality of things. (qtd. in Burstein 35)

This fanaticism about the externality of things that Lewis – a cold modernist – expresses applies to both hot and cold modernists, in my view, and deserves further investigation. Even hot modernists like Woolf were fanatics for the externality of things but as a means to get to the *internality* of things. Woolf was obsessed with outsides as a means of accessing insides.

For hot modernists, the self in all its ineffability is foundational to their project. In contrast, for cold modernists, like Lewis, the authentic self does not exist. The human as machine rather than spiritual creature, for example, is a preoccupation of the German avant-garde in particular and in British conceptions of Germans. For example, in Lewis's novel, *Tarr* (1918), Burstein notes that a German character, Kreisler, is referred to as a "machine" (48), a reminder that the British modernists associated the Germans of the interwar years with being machine-like.

In Britain after World War I, over 41,000 men had to have limbs amputated after experiencing new forms of mutilations from novel killing devices like "hand grenades, high-explosive shells, pointed bullets, and artillery fire" (Burstein 69). The particularly gruelingly unsanitary conditions that soldiers lived in, too, encouraged expedited infection of wounds, contributing to the greater potential for amputation. The widespread amputee population after the war emphasizes that art of the interwar years had good reason for beginning to consider the juxtaposition of the human and the machine: amputation often resulted in the adoption of

prosthetics: a hard and cold copy of the once soft and warm original. Prosthetics made the fleshy, vulnerable, and actively aging nature of human parts all the more obvious by comparison. As Burstein notes, "prothesis emerged in the culture formulated as a unifying principle for the modern body" (71). The prosthetic body, one step closer to the automaton or the cyborg, is, as Burstein would have it, the epitome of modernity.

But is this divide between hot and cold modernists really this distinct? Although Woolf's work attempts to plumb the mind, to render the private self, she does so by using the external world and its objects. So, although by Burstein's taxonomy Woolf is surely a hot modernist (since she is preoccupied with the self and human consciousness), she accomplishes such hotness by way of decidedly frigid objects such as lighthouses, houses, diamonds, trees, and so on. In this way, Woolf engages in what Burstein has considered a cold modernist activity, which is to – perhaps – put the human subject on par with the inanimate, cold world of the not-sentient. Although Woolf surely wants to render human consciousness in her fiction, she does so by conveying it in terms of objects in the external world, an act that lowers the human to the level of the lowly inanimate object, since it suggests that these objects can express one, can be one. Does this, then, complicate Burstein's categories? Burstein's designations could be useful to further my study of female desire in modernism, as her study takes seriously the way in which modernism relates to the object world, but not necessarily vis-à-vis female desire.

Within the scope of modernist studies, I see my project doing the feminist scholarship that Urmila Seshagiri calls for in her 2017 essay "Mind the Gap! Modernism and Feminist Praxis" on the *Modernism/Modernity* online forum. She requests that modernist studies makes a concerted point of paying attention to the gaps in female characters' and female modernists' lives and work. The writers on whom I focus in this project are acutely aware of the gaps in their

female character's lives, are tremendously cognizant of the holes in language. They mind these gaps very much, so much so that their innovation in prose form has been pushed to great lengths to take account of these gaps and to attempt to fill them. They contest the idea that female desire is a contaminating substance that must be eradicated, even in our very language. A gap for which further accounting is needed is a point I expressed in my introduction: to what extent was modernist formal innovation influenced by women's attempts to articulate their desires? This will require further excavating of modernist's personal papers to determine to what extent their writing form was affected and effected by their aspirations.

But the implications and stakes of my study intersect with other, more disparate fields, too. Even the small and underfunded scientific community that studies women's sex practices has identified a familiar and conspicuous barrier to female-bodied people having fulfilling sex. A scientific study, that was published in 2017 as a peer-reviewed article, titled "Women's Experiences with Genital Touching, Sexual Pleasure, and Orgasm" identified five major reasons why women's pleasure remains so mysterious to the general population. The fifth reason identified was that there aren't shared words available to discuss the details and nuances of women's pleasure.

The findings of this study have spurred the creation of a company called OMGYes, which sells courses that teach best practices for women's pleasure based on the study's findings. The company's website extrapolates on this lack of language for women's pleasure:

> One of the casualties of the taboo around women's pleasure is that there aren't words for the important ways touch can vary. There aren't specific words for the kinds of detailed techniques that matter so much. There are vague, clinical words like stimulate and vague, pop-culture words like fingering and rubbing.

> This lack of language makes it far harder to explore and find new things that work. Imagine trying a new recipe, but none of the ingredients or measurements have names. Or ordering from a menu but all of the dishes are called the same thing.
>
> Is talking about these details that important? It turns out yes, it is. Women who are able to talk specifically about what makes sex more pleasurable for them are 8x more likely to be happier in their relationships! ("Groundbreaking Researching . . .")

The fact of the creation of this study and its findings shows that a lack of language plagues not only discussions of women's desire in general, but also plagues what should be – but decidedly is not – the merely quotidian vocabulary about women's bodies and their pleasures. The study found that a nuanced and accurate vocabulary of women's sex practices, pleasure, and sexual desire has not existed. That the peer-reviewed article of the study's findings was just published in 2017, emphasizes the profound recentness of real efforts being undertaken to provide more language for such discourses.

In addition to issues of female desire figuring into scientific spaces, there are also real legal and political stakes in undertaking such studies. Even a century after the dawn of the Weimar Republic, public and private spheres still seek to muzzle what many see as the catastrophic potential of female desire: in the American political scene of 2021, for instance, the all-but complete ban on abortion in Texas has provoked urgent questions about women's autonomy; the tandem rise of the far right in Germany harkens back to the 1930s fascist discourse that blamed the collapse of the German home and state – among other factors – on the New Woman's genderbending. Such current global anxieties about identity remind us of the importance of studying how female desire was historically feared, represented, and controlled. My project, which analyzes the language of female desire composed during the interwar nexus of

conflict around the equality of the sexes, points to questions about female desire that we ought to ask ourselves now and to the repercussions of how we consider such desire presently and in the future.

REFERENCES

Aiken, Conrad. "A Short Story as Colour" (1922), *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories, Norton Critical Editions.* Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. pp. 339-342.

Ankum, Katharina von. "Material Girls: Consumer Culture and the 'New Woman' in Anita Loos' 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes' and Irmgard Keun's 'Das Kunstseidene Mädchen.'" *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1994, pp. 159–172.

Babylon Berlin. Directed by Henk Handloegten, Achim von Borries, and Tom Tykwer, Sky Deutschland, 2017.

Barrett, Eileen and Patricia Cramer. *Virginia Woolf : Lesbian Readings*. New York University Press, 1997.

Burstein, Jessica. *Cold Modernism.* Penn State University Press, 2012.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (1988), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Second Edition, Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Pp. 900-911.

Baum, Vicki. "People of Today," *Die Dame,* 1927, pp. 664-666.

Beachy, Robert. *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity.* Random House, 2014.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening* (1899). *Norton Critical Edition,* Edited by Margo Culley. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018.

Döblin, Alfred. *Berlin Alexanderplatz.* Translated by Michael Hofman, New York Review of Books, 2008.

Dowson, Jane. "*The Dark Night:* "The Novel into Some Other Form" *May Sinclair: Moving towards the Modern*. Edited by Andrew Kunka and Michele Troy. Ashgate, 2006. Pp.

139-157.

Durst, David C.. *Weimar Modernism: Philosophy, Politics, and Culture in Germany, 1918-1933*. Lexington Books, 2004.

Eliot, T.S. "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Essays*. Edited by Valerie Eliot, Faber and Faber Limited, 1932. Pp. 281-91.

Feldhaus, Julia. "Not without My Mommy: The New Woman's Mother Figure in Irmgard Keun's Novels Gilgi—Eine Von Uns (1931) and Das Kunstseidene Mädchen (1932)." *Monatshefte*, vol. 108, no. 4, 2016, pp. 510–534.

Forster, Laurel. "'Imagism . . . Is a State of Soul': May Sinclair's Imagist Writing and *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*," *May Sinclair: Moving towards the Modern*. Edited by Andrew Kunka and Michele Troy. Ashgate, 2006. Pp. 99-122.

Foucault, Michel. "The History of Sexuality." *Literary Theory: An Anthology, 2nd Edition,* Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Pp. 892-899.

Friedman, Vanessa. "Virginia Woolf is Trending: The author-as-muse at Givenchy, ikat-as-muse at Armani and upcycling at Margiela." *The New York Times,* January 22, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/style/givenchy-margiela-armani-couture-paris.html. Accessed 24 February 2022.

Fullbrook, Kate. *Katherine Mansfield.* Indiana University Press, 1986.

Ganeva, Mila. *Women in Weimar Fashion: Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918-1933*. Camden House, 2008.

Garrity, Jane. "Virginia Woolf and Fashion," *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, Edited by Maggie Humm, 2010, pp. 195-211.

"gay, adj., adv., and n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/77207. Accessed 3 February 2020.

Grant, Linda. "Foreword," *In a German Pension.* Hesperus, 2003. pp. vii-x.

Grand, Sarah. *"*The New Aspect of the Woman Question*," North American Review,* Mar. 1894: 270-76. Rpt*. In A New Woman Reader.* Ed. Carolyn Christensen Nelson. Broadview, 2001, Pp. 141-6.

"Groundbreaking Research into What Feels Good and Why." *OMGyes*, https://www.omgyes.com/en/about#/

Hau, Michael. *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany : a Social History, 1890-1930*. The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture : the Meaning of Style*. Methuen, 1979.

Heffernan, James. "Tracking the Reader: What did Virginia Woolf Really Think of *Ulysses*?" *Parallaxes: Virginia Woolf Meets James Joyce*. Edited by Marco Canani and Sara Sullam, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2014. Pp. 2-65.

Herbenick, Debby et al. "Women's Experiences With Genital Touching, Sexual Pleasure, and Orgasm: Results From a U.S. Probability Sample of Women Ages 18 to 94." *Journal of sex & marital therapy* vol. 44 (2), 2018. Pp. 201-212. doi:10.1080/0092623X.2017.1346530

Hutchison, Percy A. "May Sinclair Experiments With Souls and Poetry." *New York Times,* 1924, p. BR6.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Christopher and his Kind.* Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015.

---. *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). New Directions, 2012.

Jakobson, Roman. “Two Aspects of Language,” (1956) *Literary Theory: An Anthology,* Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Second Edition, Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Pp. 76-80.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Holt, 1910.

Johnson, Barbara. “Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God”* (1987), *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000,* Edited by Dorothy J. Hale, Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Pp. 257-270.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses.* Shakespeare and Company, 1922.

Keun, Irmgard. *The Artificial Silk Girl.* Translated by Kathie von Ankum. Other Press, 2002.

---. *Gilgi, One of Us.* Translated by Geoff Wilkes. Melville House Publishing, 1931.

Koppen, Randi. *Virginia Woolf, Fashion, and Literary Modernity*. Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

Kosta, Barbara. “Unruly Daughters And Modernity, Keun, Irmgard 'Gilgi, Eine Von Uns'.” *German Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 3, 1995, pp. 271–286.

Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1984.

Kupinse, William. “What plant’s in ‘Prelude’? Colonialism, Gender, and Speculative Botany,” *Katherine Mansfield: New Directions,* Edited by Aimée Gasston, Gerri Kimber and Janet Wilson, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. Pp. 77-91.

Leaska, Mitchell. *The Virginia Woolf Reader: An Anthology of Her Best Short Stories, Essays, Fiction, and Nonfiction.* Harcourt, 1985.

Lethen, Helmut. *Cool Conduct : The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, University of

California Press, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=223334.

Lewis, Pericles. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Linton, E. Lynn. "The Wild Women as Social Insurgents." *The Nineteenth Century (1877)*, vol. 30, no. 176, 1891, pp. 596–605.

Lukács, Georg. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism,* Merlin Press, 1958.

Mansfield, Katherine. "At the Bay" (1921), *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories, Norton Critical Editions.* Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006.

---. *The Aloe* (1930). Virago Press, 1985.

---. "Bliss" (1918), *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories, Norton Critical Editions.* Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. Pp. 145-155.

---. "Miss Brill" (1920), *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories, Norton Critical Editions.* Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. Pp. 204-208.

---. "Prelude" (1917), *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories, Norton Critical Editions.* Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. Pp. 79-115.

---. "To Dorothy Brett" (1917), *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories, Norton Critical Editions.* Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. pp. 321-322.

---. "To John Middleton Murray" (1915), *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories, Norton Critical Editions.* Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. pp. 319-320.

Mao, Douglas and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, editors. *Bad Modernisms,* Duke University Press, 2006.

Mao, Douglas. *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production.* Princeton University Press,

1999.

Marhoefer, Laurie. "“The Book Was a Revelation, I Recognized Myself in it”: Lesbian Sexuality, Censorship, and the Queer Press in Weimar-era Germany." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 27 no. 2, 2015, p. 62-86. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/jowh.2015.0016.

Marks, Patricia. *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers : The New Woman in the Popular Press,* University Press of Kentucky, 1990. *ProQuest Ebook Central,* https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=1915386.

Marshik, Celia. *British Modernism and Censorship*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

McBride, Patrizia. “Learning to See in Irmgard Keun's Das Kunstseidene Mädchen.” *German Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 2, 2011, pp. 220-IV.

McKeon, Lucy. “Virginia Woolf, Fashion Influencer? She Might Not Have Hated the Idea.” *Vanity Fair,* February 14, 2020, https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/02/virginia-woolf-fashion-influence. Accessed 24 February 2022.

Metropolis. Directed by Fritz Lang. Kino International, 1927.

Nelson, Carolyn Christensen, editor. *The New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s,* Broadview, 2001.

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. Edited by Alex Preminger, et al. Princeton University Press, 1993.

Norris, Margot. *Suspicious Readings of Joyce's Dubliners*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

Penner, Erin. “’Curse This War’: Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Profanity,” *Modernism/Modernity.* Vol. 26, No. 4. November 2019. Pp. 849-868.

Pickrem, Faye. "Disembodying Desire: Ontological Fantasy, Libidinal Anxiety and the Erotics of Renunciation in Mary Sinclair," *May Sinclair : Re-Thinking Bodies and Minds*. Edited by Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewery. EUP, 2017. PP. 119-138.

Plock, Vike Martina. *Modernism, Fashion and Interwar Women Writers.* EUP, 2017. *EBSCOhost*,search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1584923&site=ehost-live.

Politt, Katha. "Introducton," *Mary Olivier: a Life* (1919). New York Review of Books, 2002. Pp. vii-xv.

Pound, Ezra. "A Retrospect" (1918), *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound.* New Directions Publishing. 1968. pp. 3-14.

Radford, Jean. "Introduction" to Sinclair, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922). Virago, 1980. No page numbers.

Raitt, Suzanne. *May Sinclair: a Modern Victorian*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Richards, Jill. *The Fury Archives: Female Citizenship, Human Rights, and the International Avant-Gardes,* Columbia University Press, 2020.

Sheshagiri, Urmila. "Mind the Gap! Modernism and Feminist Praxis," *Modernism/Modernity.* Volume 2, Cycle 2, Johns Hopkins University Press, Aug. 7, 2017. https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0022

Scholes, Robert. *Paradoxy of Modernism*, Yale University Press, 2006.

Sex and the City. Directed by Darren Star. Darren Star Productions, 1998.

Sinclair, May. *Mary Olivier: a Life* (1919). New York Review of Books, 2002.

---. *The Dark Night.* Jonathan Cape, 1924.

---. *A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions.* Macmillan, 1917.

---. "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson," *The Little Review,* Vol 5, No. 12. 1918. Pp.

3-11.

---. *The New Idealism.* Macmillan, 1922.

---. *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922). Random House, 2003.

---. "Two Notes: I. on H.D. II. On Imagism," *The Egoist* 21 June 1915: 88-89.

Smith, Angela. "Writing the Secret Self" (2002), *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories, Norton Critical Editions.* Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. pp. 414-421.

Storer, Colin. "Weimar Republic as Seen by an English Woman: British Women Writers and the Weimar Republic," *German Studies Review.* Vol. 32 No. 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, pp. 129-147.

Tatar, Maria. *Lustmord : Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany*. Princeton University Press, 1995.

Tomalin, Claire. *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life.* Penguin, 1983.

Usborne, Cornelie. *Cultures of Abortion in Weimar Germany*. Berghahn Books, 2007.

Walkowitz, Rebecca L.."Virginia Woolf's Evasion: Critical Cosmopolitanism and British Modernism," *Bad Modernisms,* edited by Douglas Moa and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. Duke University Press, 2006. Pp. 119-144.

Ward, Janet. *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany.* University of California Press, 2001.

West, Rebecca. "The Garden Party" (1922), *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories, Norton Critical Editions.* Edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. pp. 337-338.

Wilson, Cheryl A. "*Mary Olivier*: New Women and Victorian Values". *May Sinclair: Moving*

towards the Modern. Edited by Andrew Kunka and Michele Troy. Ashgate, 2006. Pp. 221-236.

Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts.* Harcourt, 1941.

---. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, Harcourt, 1975.

---.*Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Harcourt, 1981.

---."The New Dress" (1924), *A Haunted House and Other Stories.* Harcourt, 1928. Pp. 47-57.

---."A Sketch of the Past," *Moments of Being*. Edited by Jeanne Schulkin, Harcourt, 1976. pp. 64–159.

---. "A Terribly Sensitive Mind" (1927), *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia* Woolf, edited by Leonard Woolf, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1958. Pp. 73-5.

---.*To the Lighthouse* (1927). Harcourt, 1981.

---.*Three Guineas.* Harcourt, 1938.

---.*The Voyage Out* (1915). Harcourt, 1920.